

# Role and Function of Religion in Africa: An Adventist Response

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By Gilbert Wari

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John S. Mbiti, an African scholar in the area of African religions and culture, has rightly observed that “religion permeates into all departments of [African] life so fully that it is not easy or possible always to isolate it” (Mbiti 1969:1). This statement summarizes the role and function of religion in Africa very well; however, there is a need for elaboration, particularly concerning the sharing of salvation as it is found in Christ Jesus and as expressed in the Word of God on the African continent. This will be the primary focus of this article after a brief summary of African cultures, worldview, and religion.



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## African Cultures

Since religion is such a vital part of a people’s culture, it is important to review some key elements of African cultures that impact the focus of this article.

### *The African Concept of Community*

The African cultures are *community-based* cultures. The group is more important than the individual person in the community for “the interests of the community have always been put above those of the individual” (Thomson 2004:38). This has great meaning for the African, for the individual is never alone. Whenever there is a crisis or calamity or any problem or even a situation of great joy, the individual is never left alone. The community stands by the individual to help and assist, leaving little room for loneliness. The individual’s problems are the community’s problems. However, this type of social structure does not allow for much individual freedom or personal choice. One can see that such a social structure brings about a challenge to the Christian faith which is exercised on an individual basis.

### *The African Worldview*

The basic assumptions about reality which lie behind the beliefs and behavior of a culture are sometimes called a world view. Because these assumptions are taken for granted, they are generally unexamined and therefore largely implicit. But they are reinforced by the deepest feelings, and anyone who challenges them becomes the object of vehement attack. (Hiebert 1985:45)

Paul Hiebert, Daniel Shaw, and Tite Tiénou consider worldview to be “the most powerful and influential aspect of culture. . . . It is the most difficult to perceive and analyze. . . . [It is] almost irresistible [and] persuasive, even in the face of contradictory evidence” (Hiebert, Shaw, and Tiénou 2001:44, 45).

Perhaps the best way to see the role and function of religion in Africa is to look at the comparison Paul Hiebert has made between the worldview of the Western world and that of Africa.

The worldview of the West has an “excluded middle” (Hiebert 1982:43), while the worldview of Africa does not. Thus the Western worldview sees the world through the eyes of a scientist, who only deals with the empirical world in naturalistic terms. Hence, belief in the activities of spirits in this world is considered mere superstition. To the Western mind, “the basis of the world is lifeless matter controlled by impersonal forces” (Hiebert 1982:43).

On the other hand, the African holistic concept of life makes

no distinction between the sacred and the secular (Hiebert 1982:43). Adherents of African Traditional Religion (ATR) “see the world as alive” (Hiebert 1982:43). Spirits and ancestors, for instance, are very active in this world; and not being in harmony with them can spell doom for an individual. This is why the first response of a traditional African to any calamity is not to do a physical analysis of the situation, but a spiritual diagnosis of the spirit powers that have been offended. Conversely, success in any endeavor is not attributed to a person’s acumen but the special favor of the ancestors or spirit powers.

Another important aspect of African religion is what Cyril C. Okorocha calls “dynamism or power-centeredness” (Okorocha 1992:169). The effectiveness of a religion is determined by how much power it makes available to its adherents. This power is needed not only for success in life, but also for protection against hostile forces. The African traditionalist has a disinterested love of the gods. When a religious system becomes ineffective in terms of its power, it is soon abandoned for a more powerful one (Okorocha 1992:169).

It is worth noticing that what is said in this respect concerning Christians can also be said about Muslims coming out of an ATR background. While some African converts are able to break completely away from

their traditional background, more frequently the adoption of the new faith produces Christians (or Muslims) with a foot in each of two worlds. They find it difficult to reconcile their sense of belonging to their African heritage with a Western form of Christianity. Former President Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia is said to have given expression to this difficulty when he confessed that he felt within him “a tension created by [the] collision of two world-views, which I have never completely reconciled” (Parrat 1996:6). Archbishop Desmond Tutu states the same point when he speaks of Africans “suf-

1991:11). Mbiti mentions five key areas that are included in this view of life.

1. *Beliefs*. This area includes the idea of God, the spirits, human life, magic, and the hereafter.

2. *Practices*. This involves ceremonies and festivals. For in the African context, religion is expressed in practical terms such as rituals, sacrifice, ceremonies, and many other visible manifestations. Moreover, African Religion functions more on a communal basis than on an individual one. “African Religion belongs to the people, [and] no individual can stand apart and reject the whole of his people’s religion. To do so

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fering from a form of religious schizophrenia” because of “the struggle between their Christianity and their African-ness” (Parrat 1996:6). In this context, syncretism and dual allegiance become the natural results of this phenomenon.

### *The African Religion*

In this article, *African Religions* and *African Religion* are used interchangeably, and refer to African Traditional Religion(s)—ATR. Therefore, as Mbiti has pointed out so well, the African religion “affects the [entire] African way of life” (Mbiti

would mean to cut himself off from the total life of his people” (Mbiti 1991:11). John Mbiti adds a very significant statement full of meaning by saying, “Even if they [Africans] are converted to another religion like Christianity or Islam, they do not completely abandon their traditional religion immediately; it remains with them for several generations and sometimes centuries” (Mbiti 1991:11).

3. *Religious Objects and Places*. These include all those things used to perform religious rites in specific places, perhaps under a tree, on a hill, in a cave, etc.

4. *Values*. Values and morals

cover topics such as truth, justice, right, and wrong.

*5. Religious Officials and Leaders.* These are the trained men and women priests, rain-makers, ritual elders, diviners, etc. (Mbiti 1991:11-13).

As seen in the above list of areas covered by ATR, religion does not deal only with the cognitive aspect of human beings; it covers and involves the entire being, offering a holistic approach to life, and this is also what the religion of the Bible advocates. This is what was exemplified in the life of the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob/Israel), the

## **Rethinking and Repackaging the Adventist Approach to Sharing the Gospel in Africa**

In view of the above, it is no exaggeration that the Seventh-day Adventist Church, in its mission to Africa, as well as most other Christian churches on the continent, did not take into consideration the key elements mentioned above that characterize the African culture and worldview. Most churches have not considered the impact of (1) the African concept of community where the individual person counts less than the group, (2) the African worldview, and

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prophets (Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel), the Lord Jesus himself, and the apostles.

Since the traditional African way of looking at life is holistic, when Christianity offers mainly information and little comfort and help with everyday issues and problems, some Christians go looking for help and answers in the wrong place. Jack Partain, commenting on this African way of believing, says, "When face to face with death or famine or infertility, many African Christians resort to traditional rites and beliefs" (Partain).

(3) the fact that African religion is holistic and covers all aspects of human life on a daily basis. Because of these key factors, the Christian faith is often relegated to play a dualistic role in the life of African believers for it has only answered some of the questions the typical African asks. Notice how Okorocha expresses this:

Religious conversion in Africa is best understood in terms of an encounter between two systems of salvation, resulting in a movement on the part of the people in the direction of power or *mana*. . . . Therefore, a new religious system that does not

penetrate into all aspects of life or proves itself disinterested in certain aspects of the people's life is soon discarded as irrelevant and unhelpful [useless]. . . . Facts of life are thus always viewed holistically and interpreted religiously. . . . Hardly anyone believes that anybody can make progress in life without some sort of *ogwu* [power]. . . . In short, power and justice, holiness or moral rectitude, go together as far as the Igbo [in Nigeria] and other African peoples are concerned. (Okorocha 1992:168-171)

Perhaps it is due to this reality that Christianity (including Adventism) has not impacted the African culture and worldview as it should. This perhaps explains why Christian values did not easily take root in African societies, and why social ills such as corruption, dishonesty, injustice, witchcraft, and many other problems have not disappeared, but rather are found in the so called Christian communities and even in Christian churches.

Joseph Healey and Donald Sybertz, talking about the same issue, declare:

There is an on-going dualism in many African Christians' religious beliefs. They keep one foot in the beliefs of their African Traditional Religion and one foot in Christianity. . . . Most Africans tend to uphold two faiths—they maintain the Christian faith when life is gay and happy, but hold to the indigenous faith when the fundamentals of life are at stake. . . . Christianity remains for many Africans 'a stranger religion,' there being some part of their very selves and lives that stays outside the gospel. This is the source of a certain

double quality in living their beliefs, holding them divided between their faith in Jesus Christ and custom's traditional practices. (Healey and Sybertz 2002:294)

This is also probably the reason why Africa is experiencing the challenge of dual allegiance. This persistent problem on the African continent calls for a re-thinking and a repackaging of the Adventist approach (not the message) on how to convey the gospel to Africa. I suggest that this be carried out around four principles, namely, (1) holistic Christianity, (2) critical contextualization, (3) biblical and theological functional substitutes, and (4) a balance between formalism and emotionalism.

### *Holistic Christianity*

When we read the Bible from Genesis to Revelation, it is clear that the Christian faith is holistic. Jesus redeems holistically though life still continues in this sinful world. Moreover, in reading the Gospels and the Epistles, it is suggested that eternal life starts here on earth. Jesus says, "Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life (John 5:24 NKJV). Jesus adds,

Assuredly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My sake and the gospel's, who shall not receive a hundredfold now in this time—houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and

lands, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. (Mark 10:29, 30 NJKV)

In view of the fact that the African worldview and religion are holistic because they cover all areas of human life and since this is also what biblical religion teaches as pictured in the life of the patriarchs and also during New Testament times, it is urgent that Christians also return to biblical holism in presenting the gospel. If this holism remains lacking, Pentecostalism will keep on gathering members from other Christian denominations. Pentecostalism is often ATR resurrected. Christian churches will either have to give a true holistic gospel to the African continent or ATR will come back in force and retake Christians in powerless churches (see Onongha 2010:141, 142). Pentecostalism, in spite of many problems and non-biblical practices, is attracting millions of people because it speaks to the daily needs of the people. How much more should Adventists, who have a special message for this end-time period, present this holistic gospel to the African communities? This holistic approach was Jesus' method that is beautifully described by Ellen G. White when she says,

Christ's method alone will give true success in reaching the people. The Savior mingled with men as one who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them, "Follow

Me." . . . So it should be with us. Wherever we are, we should watch for opportunities of speaking to others of the Saviour. If we follow Christ's example in doing good, hearts will open to us as they did to Him. (White 1944:119)

Jesus' method could be summarized in seven words which can easily be called, Ellen White's seven Cs for successful ministry: *contact* (encounter), *conversation* (communication), *concern*, *compassion*, *care*, *confidence*, and *conversion*. Jesus mingled with people. Whenever he met people he engaged in conversation with them, raised a concern, showed compassion or ministered to their needs. In so doing he was able to win their confidence. Ultimately those people were ready to accept and follow him (become disciples) and be baptized. Jesus' method can be listed as the seven Cs for witnessing and evangelism.

1. Meeting with the individual or people—*contact* (encounter)
2. Mingling with them—*conversation* (communication)
3. Interacting/fellowshipping—*concern*
4. Comforting/counseling—*compassion*
5. Healing—*care*
6. Preaching/teaching—*confidence*
7. Inviting people to follow him through the ministry of the gospel and his disciples—*conversion*.

These steps are all necessary if the church is to understand the deep needs and worldview issues of Africa in a way that allows it

to respond to people in biblical ways. Too much mission and evangelistic work has been done without taking the time to understand the cultural context. When people's questions and deeply felt needs are not met by Christianity they return to the old ways and dual allegiance is the result.

#### *Critical Contextualization*

Another principle that will help overcome the challenges of dual allegiance is the practice of critical contextualization. Critical contextualization is a four-step process developed by Paul Hiebert that begins with a deep

What aspects are neutral? What aspects are opposed to biblical principles?

The fourth step is the hardest for most church leaders to practice—to let the local people, under the leadership of the Holy Spirit, join in the decision of what they can do and what they cannot do in the light of their understanding of biblical principles and the leading of the Spirit. This is an interactive process where local people are often challenged by the missionary or church leader to look at local issues in new ways and to see things they had never seen in their culture

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appreciation for the Word of God. People who are coming to Christ must be brought to a position where they are willing to deal biblically with all areas of their lives. The second step is to lead the group in looking carefully at the cultural item or practice. This step involves gathering information about the context and purpose of the cultural practice.

The third step involves applying biblical passages and principles to the cultural item in question. What aspects of the practice are incompatible with principles of the Word?

before. When Adventist leaders are unwilling to let local groups of Christians have an interactive part in deciding such issues the church perpetuates a system that produces weak and dependent Christians who can only accept the rules and practices given them. Those who only live by the rules handed down will never become a full part of a community that reads and discerns the principles of God's Word for themselves (Hiebert 1985:186-7).

Critical contextualization must be (1) *biblically and theo-*

*logically faithful* to the message of God's Word, (2) *culturally relevant* to the people's culture so that they may easily identify with the gospel message and own it, and (3) *spiritually powerful* and *true*, transforming lives into the likeness of Christ Jesus. The disciples, after they had been with Jesus for three and a half years, were transformed to the point that even the leaders in the Sanhedrin were somehow compelled to admit this fact. "Now when they [the Sanhedrin] saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated and untrained men, they marveled. And they realized that they had been with Jesus" (Acts 4:13).

Practically speaking, for instance, one does not need to preach in a Western suit in hot, humid West Africa or Central Africa to have the boldness of Peter and John to preach the gospel with power and authority. A decent *Agbada* or *Kente* cloth or *Gandhourah* (traditional clothes in West and Central Africa) would do well in such an environment. In 1983 I was prevented from performing my duties on the platform on a Sabbath because I did not have a suit to wear—not because I did not want to wear one, but because I did not own one. In spite of anything I said I was denied the privilege of serving my Lord that day. One does not need to travel all the way to Jerusalem to experience the transforming power of God's grace, though

such a trip can be helpful to make the land of Jesus more vivid in one's memory. One does not need to sing with an organ or a piano before one's music can be approved by heaven. Local instruments are appropriate for praising God.

### *Biblical and Theological Functional Substitutes*

The idea of *functional substitutes* also seems helpful in order to address the issue of dual allegiance. For, as Tippet says,

If [true] conversion (like any other major social change) is to be accepted by a communal group [for instance the West-Central African believers], some adequate substitute or substitutes are essential, otherwise a cultural *void* of some kind will most certainly emerge due to the felt but unmet needs. (Tippett 1987:185)

However, the substitution should always be biblically and theologically sound, otherwise, all kinds of misinterpretation and misrepresentation can take place. That is perhaps what is happening in parts of Africa with regards to what Tippett calls nativism (Tippett 1987:185), which in reality is syncretism because worldview values have not been transformed by the Word as people return to their native ways of doing things. Others talk of indigenization, enculturation, Africanization, and so forth. Functional substitutes replace non-biblical practices or ceremonies with biblically appropriate substitutes.

The doctrine of the Holy Spirit and angels is a very good biblical and theological functional substitute for traditional belief in ancestors, spirits, and invisible powers (Hiebert 1982:47). One reason why Pentecostal churches are growing so rapidly is because “they provide some forms of Christian answers to middle level questions” (Hiebert 1982:47). For instance, the practice of Pentecostals to share divine revelations that they receive by means of dreams and visions finds resonance with that aspect of African spirituality that seek to hear from the world of the spirits”

they heeded him because he had astonished them with his sorceries for a long time. But when they believed Philip as he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptized. Then Simon himself also believed; and when he was baptized he continued with Philip, and was amazed, seeing the miracles and signs which were done. (Acts 8:9-13)

Power is one of the greatest challenges to Christianity today. Christians (and Adventists in particular, the people of the Book) must give the world the *Christianity of Christ Jesus*, a holistic Christianity that has

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(Hiebert 1982:47). There needs to be a substitute that is better, greater, and more powerful than what Africans can receive through their traditional religion or in their social setting, much like what Simon the magician/sorcerer experienced in Samaria that caused him to turn to the true source of power.

But there was a certain man called Simon, who previously practiced sorcery in the city and astonished the people of Samaria, claiming that he was someone great, to whom they all gave heed, from the least to the greatest, saying, “This man is the great power of God.” And

that transforming power as well as truth. If Adventists preach a powerless message ATR and Pentecostalism will make life very difficult for the Adventist Church on the continent of Africa. Christian witnessing and evangelism involve *power encounters* and *power displays* whether we like it or not.

### *Balance Between Formalism and Emotionalism*

A balanced attitude with an adequate biblical worldview will guard against both a cold legalistic formalism and a hot fanatical emotionalism. The first leads to

presumption, and it is seen more and more among high class, well educated African Christians (Westernized), whereas the latter is found among typical superstitious (traditional) people who tend to develop a Pentecostal or Pentecostal-like Christianity. A balance between the two can produce genuine biblical and theological Christians, full of love and joy, who have experienced the power of God in their lives and are truly committed to the will of God in keeping his commandments and the entire teaching of the Word of God.

There are moral icebergs in our churches. There are plenty of formalists who can make an imposing display, but cannot shine as lights in the world. (White 1947:40)

White adds with regard to fanaticism,

In every age Satan has sought to impair the efforts of God's servants by introducing into the church a spirit of fanaticism. Thus it was in Paul's day, and thus it was in later centuries during the time of the Reformation. Wycliffe, Luther, and many others who blessed the world by their influence and their faith, encountered the wiles by which the

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Adventists have been warned against both formalism and fanaticism.

Satan is now working with all his insinuating, deceiving power, to lead men away from the work of the third angel's message, which is to be proclaimed with mighty power. When the enemy sees that the Lord is blessing His people, and preparing them to discern his delusions, he will work with his masterly power to bring in fanaticism on one hand and cold formalism on the other, that he may gather in a harvest of souls. Now is the time to watch unceasingly. Watch for the first step of advance that Satan may make among us.

enemy seeks to lead into fanaticism overzealous, unbalanced, and unsanctified minds. (White 1911:348)

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### **Conclusions**

Africa is a religious continent. Religion in Africa plays a key, vital role and covers all aspects of life. It functions on a community basis, thus making things difficult for the Christian message when it is presented in a foreign manner. One of the reasons why African Christianity has not had a greater

impact on African society is due to the fact that only some aspects of human life have been addressed. The gospel has not met its holistic goal and purpose as expected by Africans. Too much preaching focuses on areas that are not meaningful or relevant or that merely scratches the surface on issues of great concern to the people. Too much preaching emphasizes the cognitive aspects of Adventism (speaking to the mind), but there are many other parts of human life that still need a lot of attention. Considering the fact that human beings are complex and holistic in their makeup, if the Christian church (including the Adventist Church) wants to present the gospel in its meaningful, saving, transforming way, it must be holistic; the presentation of that gospel must be critically contextualized, and it must develop biblical and theologically sound functional substitutes in order to avoid creating unnecessary cultural vacuums. This process is not against a “thus says the Lord,” so proceeding in this way in order to make the gospel more relevant, more meaningful, and more attractive to the people in Africa is the challenging and compelling task for modern Christianity in this enquiring, challenging, exacting post-modern setting.

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