The Value of African Religious Beliefs and Practices for Christian Theology

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The "African" religious beliefs and practices referred to in this paper are specifically those of black Africa, that is Africa south of the Sahara, excluding the racist white minorities of the south and other immigrant groups. I am also excluding the beliefs and practices of Islam and nonindigenous religions like Hinduism and the Bahai faith. This is not to say that I am unaware of what Mbiti calls "contact religion." Most Africans, says Mbiti, do not see any contradiction in holding a mixture of beliefs and practices. Indeed it is this mixture that makes this paper possible.

Religious pluralism is found in Africa as elsewhere on the globe. The popular description of Africans as "notoriously" or "incurably" religious is belied by Africans who call themselves atheists or humanists. Secularization is a factor on the African scene. There are those who are to a greater or lesser degree Islamized or Christianized.

There is also a group that we may refer to as "traditionalists." Some of these are simply theorists, but there are masses of people in Africa who hold to the traditional religious beliefs and practices of their forebears to the exclusion of the missionary religions. Their religious customs blend with their social life and are at the base of all their institutions and festive celebrations. It is the traditionalists who will form the subject of this study. It is their religious beliefs and practices that we designate as "African."

Modernization has had a disruptive and weakening effect on African life and thus on African religion. At the same time it is evident that the missionary religions together with modern technology have proved inadequate to our needs. Since the old appears unable to stand on its own and the new by itself is proving inadequate, we should expect some creative syncretism to develop in Africa.

A living Christian faith in Africa cannot but interact with African culture. In fact there is being developed an interpretation of Christianity and specifically of Christian theology that one may describe as African. The intention of this paper is to draw attention to the fact that the process needs to be accelerated if African Christianity is to escape being a fossilized form of nineteenth-century European Christianity.

African Religious Beliefs and Practices

It is now accepted by most African Christians that it is time to study the religion of our forebears. This has arisen out of the recognition of the poverty of the liturgy and theology emanating from European and North American Christianity. They do not touch the African soul at its depths. Here we will consider various African traditional beliefs and practices, giving particular attention to those relevant to African Christian theology.

a. African belief in the divine origin of the universe is shared by Christianity. In African religion, as in Christianity, God leaves humankind in charge of the world as a steward. In both African and Christian myths of origins, humankind becomes the center of the universe. But human beings wantonly exploit the world's physical and human resources to an extent that even God cannot tolerate. The African recognition of the divine spirit in nature and of the community of spirit between human beings, other living creatures, and natural phenomena could reinforce the Christian doctrine of creation as well as contribute to Christian reflection on ecological problems.

b. Related to the belief that humankind is the custodian of the earth is Africa's conviction that the past, present, and future generations form one community. Africans therefore try to hold in tension the demands of the traditions of the elders and the necessity to build for the future. This communal sense has far-reaching implications, for example, in attitudes toward land rights. In Africa there is nothing so difficult to alienate as land; it has to be preserved for the coming generations. "I conceive that land belongs to a vast family of which many are dead, few are living, and countless members are unborn." If immigrant European exploiters of Africa had understood and respected this we would not today have the horrible Bantustans in South Africa. If Africans themselves had remembered that land is the gift of God to
the people, and thus in modern times to the nation, development projects involving land use would have had a better chance of success.

Africans recognize life as life-in-community. We can truly know ourselves if we remain true to our community, past and present. The concept of individual success or failure is secondary. The ethnic group, the village, the locality, are crucial in one's estimation of oneself. Our nature as beings-in-relation is a two-way relation: with God and with our fellow human beings. Expand the communal ideology of clans and ethnic groups to nations and you have a societal system in which none is left in want of basic needs. It is an extension of this belief that has led some African politicians to declare that the independence of their own countries means nothing as long as there remains on African soil one state that is still under colonial rule. This is one of the underlying principles of Pan-Africanism. We prosper or perish together as a people.

Nkrumah, in concluding his autobiography, said, "Our task is not done and our own safety is not assured until the last vestige of colonialism has been swept from Africa."

The world is in need of religious tolerance, based on a recognition of one God from whom all movements of the spirit take their origin. A belief in one God who is the source of one human race renders all racism and other types of ethniccentricity and exploitation of persons heretical and blasphemous. With its mythology based on African traditional beliefs, African Christianity may be the vanguard of this movement. Can African Christians contribute new symbols and myths for promoting justice and reconciliation? Can covenant meals, symbols of sharing and of the acceptance of communal responsibility, begin to happen more meaningfully in the church? Can more people “break bread” together not only on their knees but in their homes, sharing in the utilization of national resources?

The role of ancestors in the life of Africans becomes important in enabling them to remember their source and history. To deny history is to deny one's roots and source of self-identity. It is to deny also the fact that we embody in ourselves both the past and the future. Ancestral cults serve the purpose of keeping people from becoming rootless and purposeless, blown about by every fickle fashion and ideology. The ancestral cults have been the custodians of the African spirit, personality, and vivid sense of community demonstrated in socioreligious festivals.

The teaching that God is the Originator of all humanity and, as a corollary, that there is one human family, is held by Christianity, but it stands in dire need of reinforcement. The movement from nationalism toward universalism will be promoted by making available to the world Africa's vision of the unity of the individual person and of humanity. Africa's contribution can enable us to utilize creatively the tension between the universal and the particular and to develop the theology of the unity of humankind.

A sense of wholeness of the person is manifested in the African attitude to life. Just as there is no separation between the sacred and the secular in communal life, neither is there a separation between the soul and the body in a person. Spiritual needs are as important for the body as bodily needs are for the soul. This is basic to African medicine and psychiatry. Moreover, for a wholesome life people not only have to be at peace with themselves, but also must be fully integrated into the community. The African contribution can help purge the Christian religion of the separation of the human being into body, soul, and spirit.

The International Women's Year stimulated a lot of discussion which to me was basically an inquiry into whether women are an integral part of humanity or merely appendages to the male. The present freedom of African women to express dissatisfaction with their secondary roles and often non-roles is said to have been brought by Christianity and Westernization. I agree that there has been some progress in economic activity and politics. But as far as the cultic aspect of religion goes, women now as before are relegated to the background. The cultic events in which women take complete charge are few and far between. The fact that women do the dancing and cooking for festivals does not, to my mind, compensate for their exclusion from the "holy of holies" in the festivals. The limitations placed on women's participation in religious practices is further aggravated by the irrational fear of blood. It is an area wide open for study. Further work on women in African religion will be a great contribution to global women's issues.

African women have a traditional belief in the benefits of sacrifice for the community. Sacrifice, taken seriously, can lead to social reforms and to lifestyles that are less wasteful and more mindful of humanity's stewardship of life and ultimate dependence on the Source-Being. But I have difficulty in understanding why it is the prerogative of only one sex to sacrifice for the well-being of the community.

c. Christianity will have to take seriously the African belief that God delegates authority to intermediary beings. In Africa there is a widespread belief in the "divine right of kings," which is often sanctioned by African religions. The ruler is almost invariably a cultic person, and his or her person is considered sacred. Against this background, certain modern political leaders have instituted what have come to be known as "benevolent dictatorships." Without the sanctions that provided the checks and balances in the traditional system, these have always ended in chaos. African organization had its own constitutional processes for removing rulers who abused tradition. The divine rights of rulers worked in traditional Africa when belief in the Supreme Being was taken seriously and decision by consensus was actively pursued. The people's role in their own development is slowly being recognized by current African politicians. The days when the ruler took a unilateral decision to declare what the people needed are slowly passing—one must say rather too slowly.

d. Covenant-making is a characteristic of African life. A ruler, for example, is always a covenanted or constitutional monarch. There is always a reciprocal oath-taking between the ruler and the ruled, who are often represented in the associated ceremonies by the elders of the community. There are also oaths
and covenants between friends and others that bind members of exclusive clubs within the community.

When these oaths are taken seriously they are more binding than any signature made on legal documents. A person who flouts *Nsamansew* (the last will and testament of a person) is sure to be called quickly to the spirit-world to render an explanation. The process of oath-taking always contains a religious element; one always swears by a divinity who thus becomes the chief witness to the transaction. Covenantal meals seal reconciliation and purification ceremonies, since one cannot conceivably work to the disadvantage of another with whom a kolanut has been shared. We should investigate what makes African traditional oaths and covenants more binding than the Lord's Supper.

g. Africa has a realistic attitude toward the power of evil. If we recognize that the collective evil produced by humanity is strong enough to "materialize" into a force to reckon with, then we shall see racism and other kinds of exploitation for what they are and be able to develop the appropriate weapons to fight them. Certain humanistic claims that humanity may be educated into eschewing evil leads us down a very long road to the humanization of our societies. What is evil is to be exorcized. Here again is a possible meeting point of Christian theology and African belief.

h. Reconciliation has a central role in African religion and practice. Broken relations are never allowed to go unhealed. Sacrifices are performed and communal meals held to restore normalcy. In both African religion and Christianity, when life is sacrificed, when it is given back to God, it is made sacred and harmony is restored. This belief is embodied in the Christian doctrine of atonement. A fresh statement of this belief, which makes use of African ideas of sacrifice and covenants, will enable African religion to make another contribution to the religious development of humankind. Here again, by analyzing the theological elements of Christianity and of African religion, one can indicate areas where African religion will be supportive of Christian theology and contribute to its restatement in terms relevant to the African context.

i. Most rites of passage performed by Christians in Africa have been enriched by African culture. Marriage, naming ceremonies, and burials are good examples. Yearly festivals involving cleansing and the driving away of misfortune are current in Africa. There are sacrifices to cleanse or to bless the individual or group after a trauma—birth, death, disease, plague, accident, etc. These have been woven into liturgies of Christians in the form of thanksgiving services for almost any situation. On the other hand, Christians have shied away from puberty rites and other rites of initiation into adulthood because they have misgivings as to whether a Christian's allegiance to the church (and Christ) does not conflict with age-group allegiance and membership in secret societies. Initiation to adulthood, however, is initiation into full responsibility in one's community; it is the culmination of a long process of sociopolitical education. There should be further discussion about

the relationship of these initiation rites to confirmation and recognition rites prevalent in some Christian denominations.

j. Other traditional African liturgical practices are most apparent among the African independent churches. These are the churches that have been founded by African Christians and that, not being bound by the stately liturgies and theological sensitivities of the West, have developed lively liturgies with music and prayer forms that are authentically African. Some of the older Christian congregations, both Roman Catholic and Protestant, have awakened to this and are fast renewing their liturgies along the lines that are relevant to African religiosity. Drumming, dancing, extemporaneous prayer, dramatic methods of conveying the word of God, and stunning cultic robes are being observed among African Christian congregations. More use is being made of symbols and of spiritual healing and exorcism. There is a strong sense of community among members of the independent churches, and in the urban situation they become the new "extended family." The songs that Western Christians developed in their nationalist spirit and racial pride are dropping out of the repertoire of African Christians as they become aware of the songs' non-Christian character. For example:

Can we, whose souls are lighted with wisdom from on high: Can we to the benighted the Lamp of life deny?

Such hymns are rarely heard in African congregations today; they are being replaced by African tunes with words that come out of the depths of the African soul or from the common source of Christianity—the Bible.

THE AFRICAN THEOLOGICAL TASK: SOTERIOLOGY

The word "syncretism" has become a bogey word, used to frighten all who would venture to do Christian theology in the context of other worldviews and religions. But is syncretism not in fact a positive and unavoidable process? Christian theology and practice have always interacted with the religious and philosophical presuppositions of the various periods. Practices like the observance of Sunday, distribution of Easter eggs, and the festival of the Nile in the medieval Coptic church are instances of the acculturation of Christianity. Evidence of this process is increasing in Africa.

Since the theme of salvation features so prominently in African religion, I would like to offer some reflections on the question of salvation for African Christianity. Both in the New Testament and in the early church, the way people interpreted the significance of Christ was closely related to what they saw as their greatest need. Christ was all things to all men, to quote Paul. The names given to Jesus of Nazareth in the Bible were all titles that held significant salvific content. He was the Son of Man who came to take up the elect of God.
He was the Son of God, the Logos who was at God's right hand in bringing order out of chaos. He was Lord but, unlike our Caesars, he was the suffering servant. To some he was a Zealot, a nationalistic, but one who forgave his enemies and prayed for them. To the sick he was a doctor and to the sinful he spoke as God.

These and other titles were the responses of those who had faith in his uniqueness or at least in his significance for the development of human history.

He attracted a wide variety of people, from simple manual workers to the intellectuals of the Jewish world. It was from soteriology that Christology developed. I believe that for theology to be relevant to African culture it has to speak of salvation.

Our salvation theology has to feature the questions of racism and liberation from material need. It has to emphasize the need for communal decisions as against totalitarianism. Above all, salvation is to be seen as salvation from evil, both individual and structural. At several points our Christian theology can be aided by African religious beliefs and practices.

THE AFRICAN CONTRIBUTION

Africa's approach to the basic religious problems facing humankind—creation, survival, human relations, the existence of a spirit-world, etc.—was as meaningful and relevant to the prescientific age in Africa as were similar approaches all over the world. These approaches, which we designate primal worldviews, are at the base of all religions and effectively continue to influence the ordering of society and of individual life. African religious beliefs and practices have provided, and continue to provide, Africa with a philosophical fountainhead for the individual's life and for the ordering of society. African traditional religion emphasizes the common origin of all humanity. It is the source from which a person's sense of dignity and responsibility flow. The search for security invariably begins here and for many it is also the last resort. Far from being redundant or anachronistic, African religious beliefs and practices have shown such a remarkable ability for staying relevant that Africans have a responsibility to share their basic tenets with the rest of humanity. This will be a task of recalling the peoples of the whole world to basic principles of human community and the religious basis of life even though some think these principles have become outdated or are a hindrance to the advancement of humanity.

We must note that since "traditional" life was permeated in all its aspects by religion, any appeal we make to traditional values and practices is ultimately religious. Also we must bear in mind that the basic element in religion does not consist of practices of cultic places and persons but the beliefs that are manifested through them. So that even when modernization has modified ceremonies and other cultic practices, human beings will continue to depend on the beliefs as a rock on which to build. So, for example, the belief in the living-dead, in the existence of spirits, and in magic and witchcraft are a part of the

Africans' recognition that life is not entirely materialistic. These beliefs are an expression of the yearning for life after life. Since the Supreme Being is believed to be the Source of Life, the search after the life-force is itself a groping for a closer and more personal relationship with Being Itself.

To contribute more effectively to the religious development of people, African Christian theologians have a duty to theologize from this context and incorporate the authentic African idiom into Christian theology. Utilizing African religious beliefs in Christian theology is not an attempt to assist Christianity to capture and domesticate the African spirit; rather it is an attempt to ensure that the African spirit revolutionizes Christianity to the benefit of all who adhere to it.

NOTES

2. Ibid., p. 240.