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TANGAZA COLLEGE
The Catholic University of Eastern Africa

**AN ENCOUNTER WITH THE
SPIRIT OF GOD IN AFRICAN
RELIGION**

A change of attitude towards African Traditional Religion

AN ESSAY SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF ARTS AND
SOCIAL SCIENCES IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS IN
RELIGIOUS STUDIES

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FEBRUARY 2002
Nairobi, Kenya

DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, declare that this long essay is my original work achieved through my personal reading, scientific research method and critical reflection.

It is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Religious Studies. It has never been submitted to any other college or university for academic credits. All sources have been cited in full and acknowledged.

Signed..........

Bartholomew, F. MROSSO M. Afr.

Date..... 05 . 02 . 04

This long essay has been submitted for examination with my approval as the
College supervisor.

Signed..........

Fr. Fernando Domingues, S. T. D.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to the African Traditional Believers of Upper West Ghana. They have taught me how God communicates to us through His Spirit. I also dedicate this work to all who have positive attitude towards African Traditional Religion.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to my family (Mrosso Family) and to all those who have in one way or another, assisted me in my missionary vocation. I am grateful to the Society of the Missionaries of Africa for giving me an opportunity to experience life with the African Traditional Believers of Ghana.

I sincerely thank my Supervisor Father Fernando, Domingues, S.T.D., I am greatly indebted to him for his patience and dedicated guidance that enabled me to write this work. In the same way I express my gratitude to Fr. Wolfgang Schonecke for his moral and spiritual encouragement.

Lastly my thanks go to all confreres of the Society of the Missionaries of Africa and benefactors who helped and supported in many ways.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Declaration.....	i
Dedication.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
Table of contents.....	iv
General Introduction.....	viii

CHAPTER ONE

TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF AFRICAN RELIGION....	1
Introduction.....	1
1. Definition.....	1
1.1 Religion.....	1
1.2 Religion and Meaning.....	3
2. Religious Pluralism.....	4
2.1 African Religion.....	6
2.2 The Common Fundamental beliefs in African Religion.....	7
2.2.1 Belief in God.....	7
2.2.2 Spiritual World.....	9
2.2.3 Human condition.....	11
2.2.4 Life here After.....	12
2.2.5 Community.....	13
2.2.6 Unity in the African Ontology.....	13
3. The Importance of Spirit World in African Religion.....	14
3.1 Spirits.....	14
3.2 Types of Spirits.....	15
3.2.1 Human Spirits.....	15

3.2.2 Ancestral Spirits.....	16
3.2.3 Nature Spirits.....	16
Conclusion.....	18

CHAPTER TWO

EARLY ENCOUNTER BETWEEN CHRISTIANITY AND AFRICAN RELIGION.....	19
Introduction.....	19
1. Early Missionaries and African Religion.....	19
1.1 Missionaries as Agents of Christianity/ Colonialism.....	20
1.2 Missionaries brought God to Africa?.....	24
2. African Religion in the life of African Christians.....	27
2.1 Psychological factors for the persistence.....	28
2.2 Theological Reasons for the persistence.....	29
2.3 Impure motivations and mass conversion factor.....	30
3. Theological Implications.....	31
3.1 God’s Presence in African Religion?.....	31
3.2 Shema Israel.....	32
Conclusion.....	33

CHAPTER THREE

SPIRIT IN THE BIBLE.....	34
Introduction.....	34
1. Spirit in the Old Testament.....	34
1.1 Definition of Spirit.....	34

1.2 Charismatic Spirit of God.....	36
1.3 Holy Spirit and evil Spirit.....	36
1.4 Spirit and the Prophets.....	37
1.5 Isaiah and the Spirit.....	38
1.6 Ezekiel and the Spirit.....	38
1.7 Joel and God's faithfulness.	39
1.8 Spirit and Wisdom.....	39
Conclusion.....	40
2 Spirit in the New Testament.....	41
2.1 Spirit as <i>Ruah</i>	41
2.2 Spirit and Jesus.....	41
2.3 The Holy Spirit and the evil spirit.....	42
2.4 The Spirit at the Pentecost.....	43
Conclusion.....	43

CHAPTER FOUR

THE PRESENCE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT IN THE AFRICAN RELIGION.....	45
Introduction.....	45
1 .The Spirit of God in African Prayers.....	45
2. The Spirit of God in Creation.....	47
3. The Spirit of God in African Hospitality.....	48
4. The Spirit of God in African Wisdom.....	50
Conclusion.....	52
GENERAL CONCLUSION.....	54

BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	59
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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

On 1996, my superiors appointed me to Ghana for two years of pastoral training. From 1996 to 1998 I was doing my pastoral formation among the Sisaala people of the Upper West region of Ghana. The Sisaala people are mainly traditionalists. By this I mean the majority of them if not all are followers of African Traditional Religion. Any one who approaches any village easily notices the predominance of the African Religion among the Sisaala. As you enter in any village the first thing to see is a shrine. Each extended family has a shrine. Among the Sisaala each extended family forms a compound. Then a number of compounds form a village. So the number of compounds in the village determines the number of shrines in it. Coming from East Africa where the phenomenon of shrines is not very dominant, I was very much fascinated by it. I was curious to know what are those shrines for. I was told that those are places of prayer and sacrifice. I witnessed that, if the day of prayers in the shrine, happened to be on Sunday, very few people would attend mass on that Sunday. This experience made me think that prayers in the shrines seem to be more meaningful to the people than our Christian prayers. I thought it was my task as a young missionary to make our Christian prayers more meaningful and appealing to these people so

as they could abandon their traditional beliefs and embrace Christian faith. My plan as a future missionary was to convert these traditional believers into Christianity. I never thought of a possibility of dialogue with the African Traditional believers.

Another fascinating phenomenon was, the Sisaala firm belief in the presence of the Spirits. For them everything has its spiritual dimension. Every living and non-living creature has a spirit. My first attitude towards the phenomenon of spirits was very negative. To me these traditional believers were simply superstitious. But slowly I started changing my attitude from negative one to a positive approach. I started asking myself about the possibility of God communicating something to us Christians through the traditional believers.

In 1998 I left Ghana with a positive view of the traditional believers. It was in that same year I started my theological studies. From the beginning of my theological formation, I thought it is necessary for modern theologians to search for a theological foundation that can sustain a positive approach towards African Traditional Religion. During the course of my theological studies, I had an opportunity to take an elective on Christian theology of other faiths. This course has helped me to re-examine my attitude towards African Traditional Religion. It has also opened my theological mind to see the possibility of dialogue between African Religion and Christianity.

So it is out of my past experiences with the traditional African believers in Ghana that I chose this topic for my long essay. I am aware that my essay is limited in several ways; first, African religion has not yet been recognized as one of the world religion. Nevertheless it is in the process of being recognized and a world religion. Second there is only now a fully recognized Christian theology of other faiths. Despite positive attitude of the church fathers towards non- Christian religions¹, it had taken some times to develop a Christian theology of other faiths. Third limitation of my essay is that it is very hypothetical. When I propose an encounter with the Spirit of God in African Religion what I have in mind is the possibility of meeting or experiencing the presence of God in the lives of the Traditional Africans. God is a mystery and so his Spirit is also a mysterious phenomenon. Even after the revelation brought by Christ God still remains a mystery. Having said that, an encounter with the Spirit of God in African Religion is just a theological hypothesis. This hypothesis is aimed at helping to change negative attitudes towards African Religion.

I have divided this essay into four chapters. Chapter one is on the understanding of African Religion. The aim of this chapter is to help us conceive African Religion as one of the authentic religious traditions of

¹ "The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. She has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct the precepts and doctrine which although differing in many ways from her own teaching, nevertheless, often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men" (NA # 2).

humanity. In this chapter we will examine common fundamental beliefs in African Traditional Religion. These fundamental beliefs will help us to see African Religion as one religion expressed in different ways. My aim is to alter any negative attitude towards African Religion. That is why Chapter two will trace the origin of the negative attitude towards African Religion. This attitude can be traced back to the early encounter between Christianity and African Religion that will be examined in chapter two. Chapter three is on the Spirit in the Bible. Our aim in this chapter is build a biblical foundation for encountering the Spirit of God in African Religion. Once we are able to affirm the possibility of the presence of the Spirit of God in African Religion, then it would be easy for us to change our negative attitude towards it. Therefore in chapter three we will examine the understanding of the Spirit in the Old Testament and in the New Testament. Chapter four is on the presence of the Holy Spirit in African Religion. In this chapter we will attempt to show that all the religious and social good values in African Religion could be attributed to the work of the Spirit of God.

We will end with a general conclusion by proposing some required attitudes for dialogue between Christianity and African Religion.

CHAPTER ONE

TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF AFRICAN RELIGION

Introduction

In this chapter we will attempt to define Religion. Then we will examine the reality of religious pluralism. After giving an account of religious pluralism, we will define African Religion. After which we will tackle the question of unity and diversity in African Religion. To show the unity in African Religion we shall highlight the common fundamental beliefs in African Religion. The diversity in African Religion will be shown in the way these fundamental beliefs are diversely expressed by the African tribes. This analysis will enable us to speak of one African Religion, which is expressed in a diversity of religious practices. After this, we will examine the significance of spirit world in African Religion. We will also show how this phenomenon of spirits contributed to misconception of African Religion. We will conclude this chapter with an emphasis on respect for African Traditional Religion.

1. Definition

1.1. Religion

The term religion comes from the *latin* word *religio* that is derived from the word *re-ligere* that means to be attentive. It can also mean to ponder, to observe or to keep

together. That which is pondered or paid attention to is the spiritual power¹. The human person by nature is a spiritual being. It means that a human person consists of mind and intelligence and body. The mind and intelligence are the spiritual faculties within the human person. The human being uses these spiritual faculties to become conscious of oneself and the surrounding world. The human person as a spiritual being is able to transcend the material reality to an encounter with the spiritual entities. The spiritual capacity within the human person accounts for the human ability not only to transcend their limitation but also to be present to the other. The essence of human religious consciousness lies in this ability to transcend oneself. In the process of self-transcendence the person is moved towards the "other", in the sense of material world. Self-transcendence also enables a person to move towards the "Other" in the sense of God. A German theologian Rudolf Otto argues that the essence of religion is the human experience of spiritual power. This experience is marked by a sense of awe at the encounter with the mysterious reality that transcends human limitations². It implies that sense of religiosity is part of the human nature. Therefore an ability to experience divine reality belongs to the essence of the human person just as self-consciousness and the consciousness of the material world³. Religion can be understood as human efforts to put into words and action that inner experience of divine. Ritual performance and religious obligations is the result of this human effort to express his religiosity. It is in this line that we see Religion as a human earnest observance of ritual obligations and an

¹ Latourelle, R., & Fisichella, R., (eds.), Dictionary of Fundamental Theology, (New York, Crossroad, 1990) pp. 819-820.

² Cf. Paden, W., "Religion" In Encarta Encyclopedia, Microsoft, 1998.

³ Pannenberg, W., Anthropology in Theological Perspective, (Edinburgh, T&TCLark, 1999) pp.43-67.

inward spirit of reverence⁴. Inward spirit of reverence is expressed through prayer and worship. Prayers are means through which humans express their communion with God.

In the encounter between humans and God through religious experiences, Humans experience divine intervention. This intervention is experienced as a force superior to humanity. Religion is not projection of human psychological needs for a father figure as Freud saw it neither is religion opium of the people as Marx conceived it⁵. God truly exists and intervenes into human life. Humans have been created in such a way that they are capable of responding to God's intervention. Religion is an expression of human's response to God's intervention.

1.2 Religion and Meaning

“All men form but one community. This is because all stem from the one stock which God created to people the entire earth...and also because all share in a common destiny, namely God. His providence, evident goodness, and saving designs extend to all men...Men look to their different religions for an answer to the unsolved riddles of human existence”⁶.

We can describe religion as a system of beliefs and practices by means of which a group of people strive to search for meaning in their lives. The true meaning of human existence can only be attained beyond human limitations. This means that when humans use their spiritual faculties to transcend their material reality they come into contact with God as the source of their lives and hence the foundation of meaning. If we take meaning as the object of Religion, then the authenticity of any religion is determined by the effect

⁴ Paden, W., “Religion” In Microsoft, Encarta Encyclopedia, 1998.

⁵ Cf. Gehman, R., African Traditional Religion In Biblical Perspective, (Nairobi, East African Educational Publishers, 2000) pp.34-37.

⁶ Vatican II Council, Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, 1.

it has on the people. If a religion helps people to find meaning to their lives then that religion is authentic. The genuineness of religion is not determined by whether the religious beliefs are expressed in a written form or oral. Some religions have their system of beliefs logically organized and written. Other religious beliefs are orally transmitted. One form of transmission does not make one religion superior to the other. To use other words we can say that it is faith that makes the substance of religion. By faith humans enters into dialogue with God. Faith comes from God. After receiving the faith, intelligent human beings use their intelligence to express their faith. The result of this process of intellectualization of faith is the system of beliefs. These beliefs are expressed in various religious traditions⁷. Hence we experience religious pluralism throughout the history of humanity.

2. RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

After examining religion as an expression of human response to divine intervention, now we will analyze the reality of religious plurality. It is an obvious fact that humanity has always experienced the multiplicity of religions. At present there are at least more than six recognized world religions; Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Taoism, then we have Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Other Religions are what are termed as “primal religions” such as African religion, Australian indigenous religion, South East Asia religions and traditional religions among the Indians of South and North America⁸. Admitting the presence of religious pluralism, we are now urged to search for a theological explanation.

⁷Cf. Heim, Mark, S., Salvation, Truth and Difference in Religions, (Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 1995) p. 45.

⁸ Cf. Smith, H., The World's Religions, (New York, Harper Collins Publishers 1991) pp. 365-390.

Human beings despite being the same in nature are different in the way they respond to realities. Differences in response to reality, are due to the fact that human beings are situated in a different social contexts. Social contexts influence humans' behavior and their perception of reality. When God communicates to people he does in such a way that people in their social context can understand him. God uses human ways to communicate to human beings. The fact that humanity is made of a diversity of races, brings God to use diverse means to communicate to the diversity of human races. This is to say that God communicates to Africans in an African way, to the Jews in a Jewish way and to the Greeks in a Greek way. As Clement of Alexandria observes: God gave the law to the Jews and philosophy to the Greeks⁹. The reason that made God use different ways is that he intends to enter into personal relationship with his people. If personal relationship is to succeed common language or terms are to be used. When God enters into personal encounter with African he uses African terms and language¹⁰.

The first theological explanation for religious pluralism is that God communicates in a pluralistic way. The second explanation is that, human beings respond to God's self-communication in different ways. The outcome of God's self-communication and human response is the phenomenon of religious pluralism.

This analysis of religious pluralism should not make us think that all religions are of the same value and importance. Our task is not to pass any value judgment on religions, but rather we aim at giving a theological explanation for the reality of religious pluralism.

⁹ " To the ones he (the Lord) gave the commandments, to the others philosophy... for by two different processes of advancement, both Greek and Barbarian, he leads them to perfection which is by faith... In: Dupuis, J., Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism, (Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 1999) p.67.

¹⁰ "...Revelation to Israel for example had to be God's offer of relationship in terms that made sense to men and women who shared Israel's culture... In the same way God's revelation to men and women of Africa... has to be in terms of categories, language and forms that really speak to... Africans" Bevans, S., Models of Contextual Theology, (Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 1992) pp. 8-9.

We can sum up with the statements from the ecumenical consultation that took place in Switzerland 1990:

" We see the plurality of religious traditions as both a result of the manifold ways in which God has related to peoples and nations as well as a manifestation of the richness and diversity of humankind"¹¹

2.1 AFRICAN RELIGION

Religion is a human expression to God's self-communication. Every human society responds to God's self-communication in its own ways. African Religion therefore, is an African way of responding to God's revelation. God communicates to the whole of humanity ¹². Africans being part of that humanity, they do express their responses to God's intervention in their own ways. There are several ways that Africans expresses their religious beliefs. The Igbo from Nigeria conceive God as a Great Spirit while the Akan from Ghana perceive God as a Grand father. The Tonga and Tumbuka from Zambia see God as Great Bow in Heaven¹³. The multiplicity of religious expressions does not imply many religions. The manifold ways of religious expressions is due to the fact that Africa is comprised of the multiplicity of social contexts. Each social context differs from another. God communicates to people in their social contexts, and the people respond to God's self-communication in their own terms. It is out of these different ways of God's communication, and the different ways of people's responses that we have diversity of religious expressions in Africa. Some scholars have taken these diverse ways of religious expressions to imply many religions. Hence they conclude that,

¹¹ In: Dupuis, J., Towards a Christian Theology Of Religious Pluralism, p.200.

¹² "Divine self-communication means that God can communicate himself in his own reality to what is not divine..." Rahner, K., Foundations of Christian Faith, (London, Darton Longman & Todd, 1978) p.119.

¹³ Cf. Smith E., African Ideas of God, (London, Edinburgh House press, 1966) pp.62-259.

in African we cannot speak of one African Religion but rather African Religions¹⁴. As observed by Magesa, those authors who maintained the multiplicity of African religions began to change their views. They came to see African religion as one but expressed in different ways. Just as there is one Christianity but expressed in diversity of ways; we have, Catholics, Protestants, Anglicans. In Islam though shares in one religion it is expressed in various ways hence there are Shia, Suni and Sufi¹⁵. As Magesa puts it:

"...varieties (of religious expressions) in African Religion must not be taken to mean a diversity in fundamental belief"¹⁶.

Therefore we can affirm that despite multiplicity of religious practices in African religion, there are common fundamental beliefs. These fundamental beliefs show that the diversity in religious practices in African Religion does not imply multiplicity of Religions

2.2 The Common Fundamental Beliefs in African Religion

2.2.1 Belief in God

" The belief of invisible, intelligent power has been very generally diffused over the human race, in all places and in all ages"¹⁷

John Mbiti shows that more than three hundred peoples from all over Africa have a notion of God as a supreme being¹⁸. God is perceived as the origin and the sustenance

¹⁴ " We speak of African Traditional religions in the plural because there are about one thousand African peoples (tribes) and each has its own religious system" Mbiti, J., African religions and philosophy, (Nairobi, East African Educational Publishers, 1999) p.1.

¹⁵Magesa, L., African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life, (Mary knoll, Orbis books, 1997) pp.14-18.

¹⁶ Ibid.p.17.

¹⁷ Hume, D., "The Natural History of Religion" In [http://: www, Hume Archive](http://www.HumeArchive). 15.09.01.

¹⁸Cf. Mbiti J., African Religions and Philosophy, p. 29.

of reality. According to the Shona and Ndebele of Zimbabwe, God is believed to be the Supreme Being, the creator and the sustainer of the universe. The Shona calls God *Mwari* that means "**He who is**". Ndebele calls God "**UMLIMU**". Both tribes believe that God is active in everyday lives of the people including politics¹⁹. God is therefore omnipotent and omniscient. Nothing can escape his influence. For the Zulu of South Africa God is perceived as the wise one. For the Akan of West Africa God is the one who knows and sees all²⁰. The Yoruba of Nigeria God is the one who has the power to see the inner secrets of human hearts. The Baganda calls God the Great eye. The Ila from Zambia sees God as the one who has neither place nor beginning. This implies that God is omnipresence. God is like the wind can be met everywhere. The Kamba of Kenya believes that it is God's presence that protects people. While the Yoruba of Nigeria maintain that the wrong doers cannot escape the judgment of God²¹. From these few examples we can affirm that Africans do experience the immanent presence of God in their lives. The immanence of God is also expressed by the fact that people can establish contact with through prayers and sacrifices.

Another way of showing God's immanence is the Africans' belief on God's omnipresence. Many Africans believe that God is present everywhere. Therefore people can meet God wherever they want. Many Africans experience the immanent presence of God in form of spirits. Among those who express the immanent presence of God are the Burundians, the Yoruba, and the Kono²². The way some tribes describe God shows how immanent God is in their day- to- day experience of life. For instance the Ganda conceive

¹⁹ Cf. Arntsen, H, "Shona and Ndebele Religions," In : [http:// www. Religions of the World, African Religions and Their Derivatives](http://www.Religions of the World, African Religions and Their Derivatives), 30.5.01.

²⁰ Cf. Fisher, R, West African Religious Traditions, (Marykoll, Orbis Books, 1998) pp.138-140.

²¹ Cf. Mbiti J., Concepts of God in Africa, (London, S.P.C.K., 1970) pp.40-56.

²² Cf. Mbiti, J., African Religions and Philosophy, pp. 29-33.

God as a pastor. This shows that the Ganda experience God as the one who cares and protects his people. The Chagga believe that God has a special preference for the poor and the orphans. For the Chagga God is very near to the people to point of showing concern for the afflicted. The Kiga describes God as the one who carries people on his back. Being carried on the back of God shows how intimate God is to the people. It also shows that peoples are completely dependent on God. According to the Nuba God is the Great Mother. This shows that they do experience the motherly care of God in their lives.²³

What we have shown so far is the unity and diversity in the fundamental belief in God.

2.2.2 Spiritual World

Another aspect that testifies unity in African Religion is common belief in a spiritual world. African cosmology is made up of two worlds: the material and the spiritual world. These two worlds are distinct but united. The two worlds influence each other. The principles that govern the material world come from the spiritual world. We can say that the physical world is dependent on the spiritual world. The spiritual world is superior to the physical world²⁴. What differentiates the spiritual world from the physical is the form. That is spiritual world is immaterial and invisible. The physical world is material and visible. In the physical world we find material beings while in spiritual world comprised of spiritual beings. There is no spatial separation between these two

²³ Cf. Mbiti, J., Concepts of God in Africa, p.67.

²⁴ "...what is certain is that the spiritual world is an immaterial reality, configured as a superior and transcendent entity as a divine and incorruptible place" Nkemnkia, M., African Vitalogy; A step forward in African Thinking, (Nairobi, Paulines Publication, 1999) p. 137.

worlds. The spiritual beings are together with the material beings. Most Africans believe in the existence of spirits. Spirits are immaterial beings exist with human beings. Human beings are not purely material beings. The human person is the unity of spirit soul and body²⁵. The fact that there is a spiritual element in the human person, then it becomes possible for people to interact with the spirits.

According to the Akan of Ghana the human person consists of spirit (*Sunsum*) soul (*Kra*) and blood. One receives the spirit from his father. Here spirit is understood as that spiritual aspect that determines one's personality. Besides spirit one receives the soul from God. The soul is the life giving force in the person. This life force is understood as a spiritual being within the person. That is why the soul is regarded as the guiding spirit of the person. It determines the destiny of the person²⁶. The soul though being in the person comes from the spiritual world. This shows how interrelated these two worlds are. In other words we can say that the physical world can be seen as a reflection of the spiritual world. Whatever happens in the physical world originates in the spiritual world. When someone gets sick, the sickness indicates that something wrong has occurred in line with the relationship with the spiritual world. To re-establish the relationship rituals are to be performed. Through rituals humans are able to approach the spiritual world²⁷

The Baganda of East Africa believes that in one God, the supreme creator called *Katonda*. Under *Katonda* there are spirits. There are several spirits more than two -dozen. These spirits are called *Lubaale*. Spirits are responsible for the day-to-day life of the people. They are the guardians of people and places. For example the spirit called

²⁵ Cf. Appiah-Kubi, K., "The Akan concept of human personality" In: Adegbola, E., Traditional Religion in West Africa, (Nairobi, Uzima Press Ltd., 1983) pp.259-260.

²⁶ *Ibid.*p.259.

²⁷ Cf. Some', M., The Healing Wisdom of Africa, (London, Thorsons, 1998) p.23.

Mukasa was the guardian of the Lake. Besides being guardians spirits can inspire priests to pronounce an oracle²⁸. According to the Akan of West Africa the physical world is a reflection of the spiritual world. This implies whatever is perceived in the physical world is the incarnation of the spirits²⁹

The Shona from Zimbabwe believe that people communicate with God (*Mwari*) through the spirit (*Vadzimu*). The Ndebele from Zimbabwe believe in the presence of spirits that are called "*amadhlozi*". The spirits are invisible beings existing within the community of the living. They are intermediaries between God and the people. The Shona and Ndebele do not worship the spirits. They respect them due to their roles they in the society³⁰.

Acknowledging the existence of Spiritual world is the second common fundamental belief in African Religion.

2.2.3 Human condition

Many Africans believe that human condition is imperfect. Sickness, suffering and death are vivid indications of the imperfect nature of human beings. Suffering is the consequences of sin and human misconducts³¹. Human immorality offends God and the ancestors. It is believed that any sort of affliction is a consequence of wrongdoing³². To appease God and the ancestors' ritual action are to be performed. In the ritual people are

²⁸ Cf. Buganda's Indigenous Religion, In: [http:// Religions of the World, African Religions and Their Derivatives](http://Religions of the World, African Religions and Their Derivatives), 30.5.01

²⁹ Cf. Fisher, R., *West African Religious Traditions*, p.91

³⁰ Cf. Arntsen, H., "Shona and Ndebele Religions" In: [http:// Religions of the World, African Religions and their Derivatives](http://Religions of the World, African Religions and their Derivatives), 30.5.01

³¹ Cf. Mbiti J., *Concepts of God in Africa*, p.81

³² Cf. Magesa, L., *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of abundant life*, pp. 172-175

reminded of their sinfulness and urged to change. All Africans believe that sacrifices, prayers and invocation do help to relieve sufferings.

2.2.4 Life Here After

Majority of Africans believe that death is not the end of life. When one dies he goes to join the spiritual world. In the Spiritual world the living dead continue to interact with those in the physical world. The Akamba from East Africa conceive death as a passage to life beyond the physical world. The Nandi from Kenya believe that when someone dies the soul goes to the spiritual world³³. According to the Urhoro and the Yoruba of West Africa, death is taken as a change of form. That is from a physical, bodily form to a spiritual form³⁴. The Barotse perceive death as a calling from God which none can refuse. So death is not the end of life but it is journey as a response to God's invitation³⁵.

Death came into the world as a result of some mischievous deeds done either by humans or animals. It is believed that from the beginning God planned that, human beings should live forever. But when a tragic event occurred death came into the world. And a harmonious co-existence between God and human beings was disrupted³⁶. Nevertheless death is not the end of life there is a spiritual life after the physical life. When someone dies is transformed into a spiritual being. As a spiritual being still has influence on the living members of the family.

³³ Cf. Bahemuka, J., Our Religious Heritage, (Nairobi, Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1982) pp.50-54.

³⁴ Cf. Adegbola, E., Traditional Religion In West Africa, pp. 297-316.

³⁵ Cf. Mbiti, J., Concepts of God in Africa, p.85.

³⁶ Cf. Gordon, A., & Gordon, D., Understanding Contemporary Africa, (London, Lynne Rienner, 1996) p.279.

2.2.5 Community

Africans are communitarian people. They believe that human society is communal. It comprised of the living and the living dead. Those are to be born yet are also part of the human family. It is community that determines the identity of an individual. This should not be seen as if an individual does not exist as such, but rather it is a question of complementarity. That is the community needs an individual and an individual needs a community. Africans believe that each person has a purpose of being in this physical world. The community has the role of helping each individual to fulfill his or her purpose. The purpose of the existence of the community comes from the sum total of the purposes of the individuals³⁷.

2.2.6 Unity in the African Ontology

Unity is an essential element in the African ontology. Africans believe that everything in the universe is part and parcel of a whole. There is no distinction between sacred and non-sacred. Religion therefore has to embrace whole aspects of human life³⁸. This means that you cannot speak of religion without cosmology philosophy and politics. Africans perceive reality is a synthesis of various elements. Spiritual and material elements in unity and harmony comprise the African ontology. In other words God embraces the whole of reality, nothing can escape His influence.

³⁷ Cf. Some, M., The Healing Wisdom of Africa: Finding Life purpose through Nature, Ritual and community, pp.34-35.

³⁸ "...Because traditional religion(s) permeate all the departments of life there is no formal distinction between the sacred and the secular, between the religious and non-religious, between the spiritual and the material areas of life" Mbiti, J., African religions and Philosophy, p.2.

Lugira has illustrated all the major aspect. that count for the unity in African Religion³⁹. Having shown the unity in the African Religion now we can affirm with certainty that in Africa there is one African Religion expressed in different ways. The Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue has admitted the unity in African Religion in the following statement:

"We can begin by admitting that there is in the black world a certain unity of Conception of a spiritual character. But it is a unity in a great diversity of forms"⁴⁰

3 The Importance of Spirit World in African Religion

3.1 Spirits

Belief in a spiritual world is one of the common beliefs in African Religion. Many Africans believe that spiritual beings exist in the spiritual world. Spirits are not gods, but rather are God's creatures⁴¹. Before creation of human God first created the spirits. Then after creating human God sends a spirit to each human. When one receive the spirit, the spirit becomes part of that person. When one dies the spirit goes to the spiritual world. While in the spiritual world, the spirit continues to have influence in the material world. Besides the spirits created by God and sent to humans, God also creates spirits of natural phenomenon like trees, water, mountains, sun, moon, the land and the sky. Therefore there are major types of spirits: human spirits and nature spirits.

³⁹ Cf. Lugira, A., African Religion: World Religions, (New York, Facts on File Inc, 1999) pp. 11-12.

⁴⁰ In: Isizoh, C., The Attitude of the Catholic Church Towards African Traditional Religion and Culture, (Lagos, Ceedee Publications, 1998) p.79.

⁴¹ "... This spirit realm is the result of the divine creative nature of the world and it reveals itself on the daily experience of any individual" Nkemkia , M., African Vitalogy, (Nairobi, Paulines Publications, 1999) p.136.

Types of Spirits

3.2.1 Human spirits

There are two kinds of human spirits. First is the personal spirit. Each person has his or her own spirit. This personal spirit can be conceived as one's soul. It is the life principle within the human person. Africans believe that one's soul can leave the body temporarily. The Akan believe that in the human person there are two spiritual entities. One is the soul (Kra) and the spirit (sunsum). Kra is the life principle in the human person. While the Sunsum is the principle of ones' personality. It is the spirit that is able to leave the body temporarily. When the soul leaves the body permanently the person is declared to have joined the spiritual world. The soul is a spiritual being within the human being. The fact that the soul has its own existence, it can also function as a personal guardian. Among the *Dagara* of northern Ghana it is believed that, each person comes to this world from the spirit world. A person is sent to the physical world for a special purpose. To fulfill this purpose one has to seek help from the spirit world. The spirit will be given to help this person to fulfill his purpose. Before a person is being born he or she has to ask permission from the spirit world. Then once the council of elders approves, then the person will be born into a physical world⁴².

3.2.2 Ancestral spirits

When an elderly person dies, he joins the spiritual world. If this person had live a good life and productive life, she or he will become an ancestor. As an ancestor he as to be remembered by the members of his family. Being remembered means receiving

⁴² Cf. Some', M., The Healing Wisdom of Africa, p.33.

sacrifices. They also act as the protectors of the family. They are the intermediaries between the living and the spiritual world⁴³. As long as they are still remembered, they become alive in the life of the people. They speak the language of their people. They are part of the family, or clan, or even tribe. Mbiti calls the ancestors' spirit the living-dead⁴⁴, to show that their influence is concretely experienced in the life of the people.

3.2.3 Nature Spirits

These are the spirits associated with objects in the sky or on earth. Under this category we can have two types of spirits: Nature spirit of sky and nature spirit of the earth. Nature spirits of the sky are associated with, the moon, the sun the stars, the rain bows and storms. The objects are not spirits in themselves but rather the spirit governs each of them.

Nature spirits of the earth are related to rocks, trees, metals, waters, mountains animals and insects. Not all spirits have the same status. The spirits of the Sea and forests have higher value than other spirits. The reason behind this is that it is from the sea and forest that the basic necessities for life are obtained. Therefore the spirits of these areas have to be highly respected⁴⁵.

The significance of the spirits in the created world is a common belief that there is a spiritual power that animates the material world. It means Creation is not independent from the divine influence. Human beings have a religious duty to respect creation.

⁴³ Cf.Mbiti,J., Concepts of God in Africa, p. 231.

⁴⁴ Cf.Mbiti, J., Introduction to African Religion, (Nairobi, East African Educational Publishers Ltd., 1991) pp. 70-71

⁴⁵Cf. Ibid. pp.72-74.

A great number of Africans believe that there are good spirits and bad ones. The bad spirits are the spirits of those who had been living a bad life. Also those who had experience bad deaths like committing suicide are believed to turn into bad spirits. Those who did not have proper burials also becomes bad spirits.

Bad spirits cause disharmony among the living. Good spirits keep harmony and prosperity among the people⁴⁶.

Therefore spirits in the African Religion play a significance role. It shapes the African ontology. Most Africans perceive reality as an immanent presence of spirits. It is this phenomenon of spirits in the material world that has led many people to regard African Religion as *fetishism* and *animism*. Fetishism can be defined as worship of inanimate things and animals. It is grounded on the belief that all physical object are animated by life similar to the human life. Animism is term used to explain a belief that non-living objects have life, personality and even souls. The terms *fetishism* and *animism* were formulated by sociologists who were attempting to explain the natural origin of religion. In their naturalistic theories God is completely excluded as he origin of human religious consciousness⁴⁷. Accepting these naturalistic theories means denying the reality of God's intervention in human history. We Christians believe that God throughout the history of humanity has been communicating to people. For Christians the significance of beliefs in spirits in African Religion does not make the Africans fetishists or animists.

⁴⁶ Cf. Mbiti, J., African Religions and Philosophy, pp.75-91.

⁴⁷ " In Tylor's opinion the belief in spirits and gods arose from man's experience of dreams, visions, disease and death...but people believed that after death the soul left the body and became an ancestral spirit. Finally early man decided that even material non-living objects had souls. From this idea of souls arose the idea of non- human spirits and eventually a belief in gods" Gehman, R., African Religion, in Biblical Perspective, p.33.

But rather it is an invitation to listen to the way God has been communicating to the Africans. Pope John Paul II urges us to treat African Religion with respect:

"The adherents of African traditional religion should therefore be treated with great respect and esteem, and all inaccurate and disrespectful language [*fetishism* and *animism*] should be avoided⁴⁸".

Conclusion

Religion is a human response to God's self-communication. Humanity is comprised of a diversity of human beings. It is due to the diversity of humanity that we encounter a variety of Religious traditions in the history of humankind. African Traditional Religion is one of these religious traditions. Despite diversity in African religion there are common fundamental beliefs. These common beliefs enabled us to speak of one African Religion practiced in different ways. The spirit world played a significant role not only in the African religious conceptions but in the ways African perceive reality. The dominance prevalence of spirits in African religion has contributed to misconception of African religion as an authentic religion.

The following chapter will examine the first encounter between Christianity and African Religion. It was at that encounter that the missionaries failed to understand the way God has been communicating to Africans.

⁴⁸ In: Isizoh, C., The attitude of the Catholic Church towards African Traditional Religion and culture, p.62.

CHAPTER TWO

EARLY ENCOUNTER BETWEEN CHRISTIANITY AND AFRICAN RELIGION

Introduction

What was the attitude of the early missionaries towards African Religion? This is the question we will try to answer in this chapter. Although not all missionaries had negative attitude towards African Religion, many early missionaries had a very negative attitude towards African Traditional Religion. Our task in this chapter therefore, is to examine these negative attitudes and their consequences in the life of the African Christians.

1. Early Missionaries' attitudes towards African Religion

Missionary activity in Africa began with the conquest of Morocco in 1415 by the Portuguese. From that time onwards Morocco became the colony of Portugal. Colonial influence went hand in hand with Christian influence. The conquest of Morocco opened the door for explorers and Missionaries to the African continent⁴⁹. From 1446 to 1490 the Portuguese had gone as far as the west coast of Africa. They occupied river Congo and the Cape of Good Hope. Portugal and Spain were the first European powers that pioneered in missionary's activities in Africa. The church and state work in collaboration

⁴⁹ "The conquest of Ceuta and other strongholds in Morocco and the movement towards Africa that culminated in the voyage of Vasco da gama to India mark not only the spreading of the influence of the Portuguese but especially the opening of new frontiers for the expansion of aggressive European power...Portuguese influence was synonymous with Christian influence" Malishi, L., Christianity in Africa, (Tabora, T.M.P Book Department, 1987), p.71.

for the spread of Christianity. For example Pope Nicholas V(1447-1455) urged King Alfonso to work tirelessly for the spreading of Christianity. Secular rulers were major organizers of missionary activities⁵⁰. Therefore many missionaries were to work according to the orders of their masters. This explains why some missionaries worked as agents of colonialism. Some missionaries were genuine. They came to Africa purposely to spread the Gospel. But there were other missionaries who used Christianity as a means of spreading colonialism. These are the ones who despised anything that was African. Disregarding the African values was a means of making Africans inferior so as to rule them easily. Their major aim was to establish their culture as superior to that of the Africans. It is this second group of missionaries who had a very negative attitudes towards African Religion. So in this section we will deal with those missionaries whose aims were to spread colonialism but under the name of Christianity.

1.1 Missionaries as Agents of Christianity/ Colonialism?

Many Missionaries came as agents of evangelization of Africa. Their major task was to evangelize Africans. Evangelization meant to bring the message of the Gospel to the Africans. This group of missionaries presumed that the word of God had not yet reached the Africans. Their vocation was to implant the word of God into the hearts of Africans.

When these Missionaries came they found Africans practicing their Religion. Africans had places of worship like family shrines sacred trees and mountains. Sacrifices

⁵⁰ Cf. Ibid. pp.73-75.

were offered to God. Some sacrifices were offered to the ancestors and spirits⁵¹. There are no churches as such. In some instances family houses were used as places of worship. For instance during childbirth rite, the family house is turned into a place of worship. Prayers for the newborn child and the mother are said in the family house. The same applied to the naming ceremony of a child that was celebrated within the family⁵². These missionaries also found sacred scriptures of African religion. For example the Mende of Sierra Leon had their religious writings in glyph system, the Loma of Liberia and Bamum from Cameroon also had their religious writings. The Akan from Ghana and Ivory Coast had their religious writings known as *Andinkra* system. The Kikuyu had their religious writings called *Gicandi*⁵³.

To these Missionaries the ways Africans were practicing their religion seemed to be incompatible with Christianity. For the missionaries there is no religion without sacred scripture and churches. For them sacred scripture meant only the bible. The African religious writings were not at all considered as sacred rather superstitious. African religious practices in general were considered to be superstition and fetishism. In 1560 a Jesuit missionary began to study the customs and culture of the Tonga. His conclusion was that; "the Watonga were superstitious, materialistic and lacking all spiritual values⁵⁴". The task of the missionaries was to convert Africans to Christianity. Conversion means to get rid of superstitious practices. Some missionaries misunderstood the ancestral veneration as ancestral worship. That is Africans were perceived as people

⁵¹ "Missionary teaching encountered a world of cultural values and practices of which religion was a part. Traditional religious values were implicit in myth and ritual rather than explicit". Isichei, E., A history of Christianity in Africa, (London, Cromwell Press, 1995) p.95.

⁵² Cf. Bahemuka J., Our Religious Heritage, pp.62-63.

⁵³ Cf. Biko F., "African Foundations of World religions" New African, 395, 2001, pp. 28-32.

⁵⁴ Malishi, L., Christianity in Africa, p.89.

who cannot worship God. Rather they worship their ancestors. Africans were primitive and savage beings who have not rationally developed to be able to reflect on the conception of God⁵⁵. To these Missionaries the African were irreligious. They had no religion of their own. The fact that there were no churches or sacred scriptures in African Religion that was a clear evidence that there was no religion in Africa⁵⁶. Africans were pagans, and so they were to be introduced to a true religion that was Christianity.

The first converts to Christianity were African chiefs and kings. An African chief represents the people whom he rules. So converting the chief meant converting the whole clan. This was the strategy used by the early missionaries to get many converts to Christianity⁵⁷. The converts were taught on how to believe in the true God, the God of Jesus. They were also taught that the God they had believed in before was not a true God. The Africans were instructed to believe that before the coming of the missionaries they were idolatrous and superstitious. That is why before baptism one has to renounce all of his past superstitious practices. He or she had to swear that he or she would never practice them again. All the past religious practices were seen as satanic. During baptismal rite one had to renounce Satan and all his works. To the Africans renouncing Satan meant denying all of their traditional religious practices. This attitude can be seen from the section of the letter written by King Nzinga Nkuwu of the BaKongo:

"We received the Christian doctrine so well...we definitely renounced all errors

⁵⁵ "...The savage not only venerate his ancestor as a ritual of respect...he worships them as the ultimate reality of existence since he is incapable of conceptualizing the idea of spirit or God" Biko F., "African Foundations of World religions" New African, 395, 2001, 28-32.

⁵⁶ "Early travellers, explorers and even missionaries despised ATR and considered that they were of the devil...The explorer Samuel White Baker...remarked that they[*the Nuer and Ndinka*] had no religion and that...not even faintest ray of superstition enlightened the darkness of their mind" Shorter, A., "New Attitudes To African Culture and African Religions" In_ Shorter, A., J.M. Waliggo, A. Bellagamba, D. Kyeyune, S. Kabazzi-Kisirinya, J. Kariuki, A. Ndeukoya, Towards African Christian Maturity, (Kampala, St. Paul Publications, 1987) pp. 27-28.

⁵⁷ Cf. Malishi, L., Christianity in Africa, p.78.

and idolatries which our ancestors thus far had believed"⁵⁸.

At the time of baptism traditional names were to be replaced with western names. King Nzinga Nkwu of the Bakongo became Afonso the name of the king of Portugal. His example was followed by a big crowd of the king's subjects. The baptism of the king implies that the country becomes officially Christian. So the king opened his country for evangelization⁵⁹.

Mwene Mutapa king of Zimbabwe was called Sebastiao. Sebastiao was the name of the king of Portugal. His mother took the name of Maria and his sister became Isebella⁶⁰. All these names had no any meaning to the converts. For an African a name represents a person. Changing of one's name means changing of one's identity. Being a Christian meant becoming a westerner. Some missionaries saw that turning Africans into westerners is one way of civilizing them. Evangelization went hand in hand with civilization. The information sent to Europe by the explorers showed that Africans were uncivilized, barbaric and cannibalists⁶¹. So it was the task of the missionaries not only to spread the Gospel but also to bring civilization to the backward cultures⁶².

At the baptism of king Mwene Mutapa about three hundred people became Christians. This was one way of showing solidarity with the king⁶³. It had nothing to do with Christian faith. In the mass conversion like this one should not expect the converts

⁵⁸ In: Baur, J., 2000 Years of Christianity in Africa: An African Church History, (Nairobi, Pauline Publications, 1998, p. 57.

⁵⁹ Cf. Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid. p.81.

⁶¹ "Kings and chiefs were depicted as tyrants wallowing in blood and burning down villages, despots without whose command none might dare to move hand or foot, sunk in the vices of Sodom and Gomorrah" In: Malishi, L., Christianity in Africa, p. 109

⁶² "Missionaries have played an important role in the transformation of Africa. Their activity did not only consist in transmitting the Christian faith. It also implied the necessity of converting the so called backward cultures and inserting them into human history, which is identical with the history of the so called civilized West..." In: Stenger, F., White Fathers in Colonial Central Africa, (London, Lit verlag Muster, 2001) p.15

⁶³ Cf. Baur, J. 2000 Years of Christianity in Africa, p.81.

to know the significance of baptism or Christian faith. Many converts continue to practice their traditional religion. As Baur puts it:

"Unfortunately, Afonso's personal testimony cannot be extended to his father and the large majority of those baptized with them. Most of them returned to the errors and idolatries of their ancestors, that is to polygamy and the veneration of fetishes"⁶⁴.

If all that Africans had believed in before the coming the missionaries were errors and idolatries, this suggests that God was not present before the coming of the missionaries. This was one of the mistakes some of the early missionaries made. That is they failed to recognize the presence of God in the African context. We as modern missionaries can learn from the past mistakes of our predecessors.

1.2 Missionaries brought God to Africa?

Some missionaries see themselves as the ones who brought God to the Africans. To them Africans were "*pagans*", who had no slight idea of who God is. To some missionaries Africans were superstitious and idolatrous. So these missionaries saw that it was their mission to bring God to the Africans. This was wrong and a misleading attitude. God can never be restricted within a certain geographical sphere. Neither can he be limited within a certain race nor within a particular period of time. African religious practices are clear indications that Africans were conscious of the presence of God in their lives. But unfortunately early missionaries and even some modern missionaries are not yet convinced of the presence of God in the African traditional religious practices. So God was already there before the coming of the missionaries

⁶⁴ Ibid. p.57.

Some of the early missionaries considered everything in the African traditional religious practices as devilish: Ancestral veneration a practice common to many African Christians was considered as ancestral worship⁶⁵. This makes African Christians idolatrous. Belief in the presence of spirits makes African Christians animists. The practice of poly gamy was also seen as devilish practice. All these traditional practices were to be abandoned if one is to become a Christian. Of course not all African traditional practices were positive. At the same time not all aspects of traditional practices were negative. Some of the missionaries lacked openness to the African traditional religious practices. It is unjust and uncritical to think that all missionaries were not open to the African customs. As I indicated in the introduction that genuine missionaries respected the Africans and their customs. They never intended to convert Africans to westerners. For example Cardinal Lavigerie instructed his missionaries to respect the local natives and their customs. The genuine missionaries were to live like the local natives. They were to eat their food and learn their languages⁶⁶. However a large number of missionaries were not prepared to dialogue with the African religion. Their approach was generally one of confrontation and conversion. Their task was to bring people to the church. The theology of the time was that one cannot be saved outside the church. Hence conversion was an appropriate approach to mission. The outcome of this attitude is a split religious consciousness among the African Christians. African Christians live in two distinct religious consciousness. One that is dominant is the African traditional religious consciousness. The second one is the Christian religious consciousness. Many African

⁶⁵ "Traditional Budjga religion incorporates a belief in the continued existence of the personality after death, a system of ancestor worship directly linked to the lineage system..." Barret, D., African Initiatives in Religion, (Nairobi, East African Publishing House, 1971) p. 173.

⁶⁶Cf. Stenger, F., White fathers in Colonial Central Africa, pp.52-53.

Christians practice Christianity on Sundays, and on week -days and in time of crisis the practice African religion. One someone dies in a family the first thing to be done is look for the cause of death. To find out the cause of death many Africans consult diviners.

In many parts of Africa there is an increase number of Christian independent churches. One of the contributing factors is the African traditional value on community. In these churches most Africans experience a sense of belonging. These churches act a family to most African Christians⁶⁷

According to Magesa, African Christians live in two distinct system of thought. One system is official and the other one is popular. The official one is that taught by the church. The popular system of thought comes from African Religion. Magesa does not see any tension between these two systems of thoughts. For him the fact that African Christians continue practicing African religion is an attempt by Africans to use traditional symbols to express their Christian beliefs⁶⁸.

However the fact that most of the aspects of African traditional religion have not yet been integrated in Christianity brings tension between African traditional religion and Christianity. African Christians are not free to express their faith using the traditional religious expressions. For example ancestral veneration could be a meaningful way of expressing one's communion with the saints. Sacrifices to the ancestors could be integrated as a commemoration of the sacrifice of Christ. Diviners in African religion are the most important religious figures. Many African Christians pay more attention to them

⁶⁷ Cf. Oosthuizen G., "The Place of Traditional Religion in Contemporary South Africa" In: Olupona J., African Traditional Religions in Contemporary Society, (New York, Paragon House, 1991) p. 41.

⁶⁸ Cf. Magesa, L., African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant life p. 9.

than to most pastors. Christian pastors can learn much from the diviners if the pastors are humble and open to learn from them⁶⁹.

Any African Christian who dares to express his faith by using African traditional religion expressions openly will be regarded as not a genuine Christians. Is it correct to practice both African Religion and Christianity at the same time? The answer is no. We cannot practice two religions at the same time. What is to be done is an encounter between African Religion and Christianity. When Christianity is open to learn from African Religion and at the same times African Religion is open to Christianity, then both Christianity and African Religion will attain a common point. A common point is necessary for elimination of tension within African Christians who attempt to practice two religion at the same time. A vivid case that shows the tension that exists in the life of many African Christians is in the daily nation of October 2001. The conflict is on the burial of the Anglican bishop either in the church or in his ancestral home. The family member insists on the burial to be at his ancestral home while the church leaders maintain the burial to be in the church⁷⁰

2. African Religion in the life of African Christians

The preceding section has shown that in most cases some missionaries did not regard African religion as an authentic religion. The result is that Africans continue to practice both their indigenous religion and the new religion brought by the missionaries. It is very hard for the Africans to abandon all aspects of traditional religion. This is due to the fact that African traditional religion is the foundation of African religious

⁶⁹ Cf. Ela J., My faith as an African, (London, Geoffrey Chapman, 1988) pp.13-31.

⁷⁰ Cf. Nation Correspondent, "Family opposes bishop's proposed burial at Church" Daily Nation, October 26, 2001, p.7 .

consciousness. As we have shown above that the converts to Christianity did not stop practicing their traditional religious practices.

2.1 Psychological factors for the persistence

There are several factors that account for this phenomenon. First is that the African traditional religion is the foundation of the African religious consciousness. This consciousness is so rooted in the life and the psyche of the Africans to the point of being impossible to be eradicated. As we have shown in the first chapter that African ontology is a spiritual. This means that religion shapes the Africans' ways of perceiving reality. The religious beliefs affect the whole system of thought and imagination of the Africans. This being the case it is not so easy to alter this religious mental set up of the Africans. For example it is quite impossible to convince an African Christian that the spirits of the ancestors do not exist. By the way there is no need of trying to convince the Africans that the spirits of the ancestors do not exist, while we believe that spiritual beings like angels do exist. It is impossible to attempt to eradicate a belief that ancestors act as intermediaries between God and the human beings. There is no need of telling the Africans that the ancestors are not intermediaries, while as Christians do believe that sometimes saints do act as intermediaries between God and human beings.

Proper burial is an essential element to most African Christians. If someone is not well buried it is believed that the spirit of that person may come and disturb the people. Failure to attend a burial of a close relative is a very hard thing to be accepted by many Christian Africans. The cases of an African criminal lawyer and that of the Anglican bishop mentioned above show how the traditional religious values still influence the life

of African educated Christians. After the death of Mr. Otieno his relatives wanted to corpse to be buried at his ancestral home. But the wife wanted the corpse to be buried at Nairobi. It became a crucial issue between the family of the husband and that of the wife. One would ask: does it really matter where someone is to be buried? Yes for most Africans it matters a lot. The fundamental belief is that the place of burial is the residence of the spirit. Hence burying one at his or her ancestral home means bringing the spirit home⁷¹. Burying someone away from his ancestral home means separating the living dead from the members of their family. The belief in the existence of the spirits is still part of the life experience of most African Christians.

African religion still plays a major role in the life of the African Christians. As Shorter comments: conversion to Christianity did not do away with the practices of traditional religion. But rather Christianity was received as an additional religion to the already existing religion⁷². The African traditional religion is deeply rooted in the African consciousness.

2.2 Theological Reasons for the persistence

Theologically the persistence of African religion can be seen as part of God's plan. That is God intends to show that he has been communicating with Africans before the coming of the missionaries. It is an opportunity to see how God has been revealing himself in an African way. The persistence of African religion teaches us that as humans it is quite impossible for us to work against God. The early missionaries unknowingly

⁷¹Cf. Gehman, R., African Traditional Religion, pp. 15-18.

⁷²In: Magesa, L., African Religion :The Moral Traditions of Abundance life, p. 7.

they were attempting to work against the plan of God. I said unknowingly because most of the early missionaries were not theologians in a strict sense. Some they became missionaries so as to travel and discover the world. Some of them became missionaries with the motivations of propagating colonial interests. Disregarding African religion was one way of making Africans feel inferior so as to be able to rule them. In some cases Christianity therefore was used as a means of making Africans submissive to the colonial masters.

Therefore the persistence of African religion in the life of the African Christians should not be seen as a curse. It could be seen as a blessing in the sense that it invites Christians to a new way in which God has been communicating to the Africans. In the preceding chapter we saw that God communicates to humanity in different ways. So African traditional religion is one of the several ways of which God has been communicating to humanity. I am convinced that from the beginning of humanity God has been communicating to humans and the whole of creation. Religious consciousness is a characteristic unique to humans. It is through religious beliefs that humans express their relationship with the absolute (God). Evolutionary theory postulates that humanity began in Africa. If we assume this to be true then the first moment of encounter between God and humanity was in Africa. Therefore African religious consciousness is the foundation of the religious consciousness of humanity⁷³.

⁷³ "... for thousands of years of prehistoric and recorded history Africa led humanity in the art of group cohesion and social organization. The spiritual matrix devised by African societies provided the earliest substance of social and psychological cohesion known to man..." Biko, F., "African Foundations of World Religions" *New African*, , 395, 2001, p.18.

2.3 Impure Motivations and mass conversion factor

Another factor which is secondary is that most Africans became Christians simply because they wanted the things brought by the missionaries. Some missionaries used to provide material things as a means of getting converts. Mission schools and hospitals were some of the means used to bring people to Christianity. So many Africans became Christians so as to get the services from the missionaries.

Some African Kings were baptized simply because they wanted support from the colonial powers. We should keep in mind that missionaries often worked in collaboration with the colonial powers. In some cases when a king was baptized then most of his subjects were also baptized⁷⁴. This being often the way Christianity was spread one can understand why Africans continued to practice their traditional religion together with Christianity. In mass conversion many people did not understand the value of Christianity. So their traditional religion was more meaningful than Christianity.

3 Theological Implications

3.1 God's Presence in African Religion?

Some of the early missionaries failed to recognize the presence of the one God in African Religion. It was as if Africans had their God and the missionaries had theirs. Since two Gods cannot coexist one has to give in to the other. The Africans were to denounce their God so as to allow the Christian God to reign. This can be seen as a

⁷⁴ "On January 20 the feast day of king Sebastiao ... Mwene Mutapa was baptized and given the name of Sebastiao...in addition all the royal men at the court were baptized, to be followed by many more subchiefs, until some three hundred people had become Christians". Baur, J., 2000 Years of Christianity in Africa, (1998) p. 81.

failure to see the reign of one God in the African Religion. Some of the early missionaries thought that God was not present among the Africans. That conception itself disqualifies our understanding of the universality of God. Denying the presence of God among the Africans means that God's sovereignty had limitations. God was accessible to some people and was not to others. This understanding therefore contradicts our conception of God as an absolute being whose reign is universal. God is always absolute and holy mystery⁷⁵.

3.2 Shema Israel

There is only one God, the God of Jesus Christ. The God the Africans believed in before the coming of the missionaries is the same God, the father of Jesus Christ. The only difference is that, the Africans express their faith in this one God in their African ways. The missionaries express their faith in this same God in their western ways. Christianity brought by the early missionaries had very much been influenced by the western cultures. They used western symbols and pictures to convey Christianity to Africans.

Our faith in one God for both Africans and the missionaries originated from the *Shema* of the Israelites; "Hear O Israel the Lord our God, the Lord is one, God is one and there is no other (Deut. 6:4)". According to Dupuis, it is the same God, the one God of the Israelites who is active in affecting salvation in human history. He is the very one who speaks in the hearts of people. He is the one who calls people into personal

⁷⁵ The magisterium always speaks of a God who is absolute and Holy mystery- transcendent and personal, incomprehensible and ineffable both in the divine reality itself and in its salvific self-communication. Latourelle, R., & Fisichella, R., (eds.) Dictionary of Fundamental Theology, p. 361.

relationship with him⁷⁶. In the preceding chapter we saw how Africans expressed their personal relationship with God.

The oneness and the universality of God is the paradigm that can help us to alter our attitudes towards African Religions and other Religions. We also can alter our attitudes towards African religion and other religions when we are convinced that it is God's own initiative that moves humans towards an absolute. This God is no other God than the God of our lord Jesus Christ⁷⁷.

Conclusion

Some of the early missionaries often despised and disregarded African religious practices. The consequence is that Africans tends to live in an ambiguous religious consciousness. This has created tensions among the African Christians. The solution to this situation could be found in the affirmation of the oneness and universality of God. God is one, and he is the same who is present in the African Religion. This open attitude calls for respect for African religious practices. An attitude of respect towards another religion is a prerequisite for dialogue. From the biblical and Christian traditions God has been experienced as Spirit. This being the case, we shall now attempt to highlight the presence of the spirit of God in African Religion. We will do this by investigating the understanding of the term Spirit of God from the Bible.

⁷⁶Cf. Dupuis J., Towards a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism p 241.

⁷⁷Cf. Ibid. p.241.

CHAPTER THREE

SPIRIT IN THE BIBLE

1. Spirit in the Old Testament

Introduction

This chapter deals with the understanding of Spirit in the Bible. We shall start by defining the term Spirit according to the Scripture. We will examine how the prophets understood the phenomenon of Spirit. In the New Testament we will try to see the way Spirit has been understood. The relationship between Spirit and Jesus will be dealt in details. We shall highlight the experience of Spirit at the Pentecost. We will end the chapter with a conclusion.

1.1 Definition of Spirit

The term “Spirit” is known in Hebrew as “*ruah*”. The term *ruah* is translated in Greek as *pneuma*. Both in Hebrew and Greek *ruah-pneuma* means breath, air wind or soul. The word *ruah* occurs 378 times in the Old Testament. It is used in the Old Testament to denote three meanings. First it is used to mean wind, breath or air. When the term *Ruah* refers to wind it can either mean natural wind or divine wind. Divine wind means the Spirit of God (Gen.1: 2). Second it is to imply the force that animates the human person. *Ruah* in the human person is seen as the principle of life (Gen.2:7, 7:22-23, Ps.104:29-30). *Ruah* as the spirit of God can mean the source of all being and life. *Ruah* in the human person signifies breath and the seat of knowledge and feelings (Deut.31:3, 34:9) It can also mean the breath of God that communicates life to all

(Ex.15: 8-10, Ps.33: 6) The third meaning of the term *ruah* is the life of God himself. *Ruah* is the force by which God acts and causes actions to occur both for physical and spiritual spheres⁷⁸.

The term *ruah* therefore expresses the force of life that is defused in both animals and plants. It is the dynamic principle in the living beings. In the Hebrew sense the opposite of spirit is not matter but rather the flesh. Flesh means the absence of that divine life principle. Flesh is not the same as body it is a purely earthly reality of the human person. The characteristics of the bodily existence are weakness and corruptibility (Isa.31: 3). In Gen. 6:3 God declares that his Spirit cannot be indefinitely responsible for human beings who are only flesh. They became only flesh because they have turned away from the will of God. They live only according to their bodily principle. They followed the desires of their bodies. In other words those who have the spirit of God live according to the will of God. Therefore one of the functions of the spirit of God is to move and direct people in fulfilling the plan of God (Ex.31: 3ff)⁷⁹.

Sometimes in the Bible the Spirit of God (*Ruah*) is used to refer to God himself. Spirit of God does not only reveal the work of God but also manifests the presence of God among the living beings. When people rebelled against the Spirit of God, they not only rebelled against the will of God but also against God himself (Isa.40: 13, 63: 10, Ps.51: 11). The Spirit of God (*Ruah*) is holy because it comes from God. When it is infused into the living beings it animates them and becomes the source of life (Gen.2:7). Besides being the principle of life, the Spirit of God helps people to accomplish the will

⁷⁸ Cf. Congar, Yves J., I Believe in the Holy Spirit Vol.1 ,(NewYork, Geoffrey Chapman, 1983) pp. 1-6.

⁷⁹ Ibid. p. 5.

of God. Whenever humanity is capable of doing the will of God it does so by the assistance of the Spirit of God.

1.2 Charismatic Spirit of God

The Spirit of God is termed as charismatic Spirit when it is infused into the leaders (Jdgs.3: 10; 11: 29; 6:34; 13:25:14:6). Kings were also to receive the Spirit of God (1Sam. 11:6; 16: 13ff). In the eschatological time the Spirit will be given in a special way to the messianic King and the Servant of the Lord (Isa.11:2; 42:1;48:16) Then the messianic king will dispense the Spirit of God to the whole of humanity (Isa.32:15; Ezk.39:29; Zc.12:10). The Spirit once given to the leaders does not only help the leaders in their mission, but also inspires them to deeds beyond their human expectations⁸⁰. Christ is the fulfillment of all the prophecies of the Old Testament. He will receive the fullness of the Spirit. He will perform deeds beyond human expectations. He will dispense the Spirit of God to the whole of humanity.

1.3 Holy Spirit and Evil Spirit

Old Testament makes a clear distinction between good Spirit and bad or evil spirit. The good Spirit is the Spirit of Yahweh. The good Spirit helps those who receive it to accomplish the work of Yahweh. The evil Spirit is normally sent to punish those who have committed evil against Yahweh. Saul was afflicted by such evil Spirit (1Sam.16:14-16;23: 18; 10, 19:9). The evil Spirit is sometimes identified with Elohim. The evil spirit in certain instances is identified with Yahweh. But it is termed as the Spirit from Yahweh

⁸⁰ Cf. Mckenzie, J., Dictionary of the Bible, (London, Geoffrey Chapman ,1972) pp.840-844.

and not of Yahweh⁸¹. This is to show that although the evil Spirit might be sent by Yahweh it is not identical with Yahweh. The difference between the Holy Spirit and the evil Spirit is that: the former signifies the presence of God. The latter either signifies the anger of God or the power of the evil one. In the first book of Kings we see that God sends a lying spirit to false prophets (1Kgs. 22: 21) Yahweh sends an evil spirit between Abimelech and the men of Shechem (Jgs. 9:23).

As we have seen in the first chapter, in African Religion we find both good and evil spirits. We can say that all good values in the African Religion come from the Spirit of God. While all bad aspects can be attributed to the evil spirit. This implies that the presence of the Spirit of God in the African Religion does not exclude the presence of the evil spirit. In other words negative elements in African religious expressions are not justification of the absence of the Spirit of God.

1.4 Spirit and the Prophets

As we have shown above, the Spirit of God is a force that has effects on humans. It is in this way that the Spirit of God acts as a force that inspires the prophets (Nm. 11:17ff 24:2 Sam 23:2, 1Chr.12:18, Isa. 61:1, Mi. 3: 8, Ezk.2:2, 3:12). Being inspired by the Spirit of God the prophet becomes a man of Spirit (Ho.9: 7).

The role of the Spirit is explicitly expressed in the three prophets. They are Joel, Isaiah and Ezekiel. In the book of Isaiah the word Spirit (*Ruah*) appears fifty times. From the Prophet Ezekiel the term Spirit occurs forty six times.

⁸¹ Ibid. p.841.

1.5 Isaiah and the Spirit

Isaiah's understanding of the Spirit is the same as in the rest of the Bible. That is the Spirit is the breath of life from God. Anything that exists comes from the breath of God. According to Isaiah it is God who communicates life (Isa.28: 5-6; 31:3). After prophesying the fall of Samaria, Isaiah foretells the coming prosperity for the remnant of his people. The leader of the new people will be infused with the Spirit of justice. God will grant him the Spirit of wisdom, understanding and fear of the lord (Isa.7: 10; 37:21-35). The message of Isaiah is that God will appoint the messiah for his chosen people. The mission of the messiah will be universal. The chosen will remain special to God. However God will extend his mission to the all nations. The outpouring of the Spirit of God to all nations will be the manifestation of the universal mission of the messiah (Isa.60: 61; 61:1)⁸².

1.6 Ezekiel and the Spirit

Ezekiel witnessed the destruction of Jerusalem and the deportation of the Israelites to Babylon. The cult and the people are dead, but according to the prophet God is more present than ever. The Spirit of God has never been crushed by the disaster. The Spirit of God being the force of life will animate the dead bones. Out of the dead bones the breath of God will make living beings. God is the source of life and so he will raise the dead bones by communicating himself within peoples' hearts (Ezk. 36; 37; 39: 29). God through his Spirit will transform the heart of his people⁸³.

⁸² Cf. Congar, Yves, J., I Believe in the Holy Spirit, p 7

⁸³ Cf. McKeating H., Ezekiel,(Sheffield , JSOT Press, 1993) pp 62-65.

1.7 Joel and God's faithfulness

God chose Israel to be his special people. The condition for election was that both parties would be faithful to the covenant. The chosen people did not remain faithful. They broke the covenant and so they brought punishment upon themselves. The punishment awakens a new consciousness within the chosen people. They came to realize that the God who chose them is the God of all nations (Joe.2: 12-17) He chose them so that they could be his witnesses to the rest of humanity⁸⁴. Despite Israel's failure to remain faithful, God, through his Spirit, will reveal his faithfulness to his chosen people. Then He will extend His faithfulness to all nations (Joe.3: 1-2)⁸⁵.

The three prophets have helped us in our understanding of the nature of the Spirit. That is Spirit is a dynamic force from God. It is infused into humans so as to enable them to do the will of God. The prophets also have helped us to understand that the Spirit of God is a gift to the whole humanity. In other words God is mysteriously present and active throughout the history of humanity.

1.8 Spirit and Wisdom

In the Bible, the books of: Job, Wisdom, Proverbs, Psalms, Qoheleth and Sirach, belong to the category of Wisdom books. From these books we find that Wisdom is associated with the Spirit. Wisdom is seen as divine element in the life of human beings. Wisdom as the Spirit is a reality that comes from God. Wisdom is the action of God for the benefit of his creatures. Wisdom leads people to long for God. The fact that Wisdom

⁸⁴ "Israel's recognition that the Lord who had chosen her was also the God of all the world made her see her position in another light...He[God] intended that Israel 's existence should be a witness to himself before the peoples and nations" Watts, J., The Cambridge Bible Commentary, the Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah, (London, Cambridge University Press, 1975) pp 29-30.

⁸⁵ Cf. Congar, Y., I Believe in the Holy Spirit, , pp.6-8.

comes from God, suggests that there is an inclination in God for what is good. In the books of Wisdom, Wisdom is personified. It is identified with a feminine entity (Prov.8: 22-31, Sir.1:1-10, 4:11-19, 15:1-10) The personification of Wisdom stresses the closeness of wisdom to humans (Wis.1: 6, Job.32:8). Wisdom as the Spirit has a universal function (Wis.1:7;8:8). Her major function is to guide people in doing God's will. Wisdom, as the Spirit of God has filled the whole world. The Spirit of God permeates the whole of creation. In a similar way whole of creation is guided by the wisdom of God (Wis.1: 6, 7; 7:22-25, 27: 8:1)⁸⁶.

The relationship between Wisdom and the Spirit has widened our understanding of the Spirit of God, in the sense that we understand Spirit as a divine reality in creation. It represents the presence of God but at the same time the spirit of God is not identical to God. God's immanent presence in creation does not turn realities into divinities. God can be present in the creation without turning creation into God. Another contribution of wisdom literature to our understanding of Spirit is its universality. As Congar puts it:

“Wisdom also provides us with a very interesting reflection on the very idea of Spirit. The Spirit is characterized by its subtlety and purity which enable it to enter everything and everyone and while remaining unique to be in everything and everyone as the principle of life newness and holy conduct”⁸⁷.

Conclusion

The Old Testament presents the idea of Spirit as a dynamic work of God in creation. Through the Spirit God manifests himself as active and the principle of life. God is the animator and the giver of life to all the living beings. The order and harmony in creation is sustained by the Wisdom of God. The concept of the Word of God as applied to Jesus

⁸⁶Ibid. pp 9-10.

⁸⁷Ibid. p.11.

is rooted in this understanding of the immanent presence of the Wisdom of God in the universe. Christ in the New Testament will be seen as the incarnation of the Wisdom of God (Joh.1: 1-3)⁸⁸.

2 Spirit in the New Testament

2.1 Spirit as *Ruah*

In the New Testament the term *pneuma* means Spirit. It is used with the same sense as *Ruah* in the Old Testament. That is the Greek term *pneuma* refers to the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit, the breath of God, the wind. It also refers to the power from God that animates nature⁸⁹. Spirit is the divine life in creation it is the principle that maintains order and harmony in the universe. Spirit of God is also identified as a creative power of as the Word of God.

2.2 Spirit and Jesus

The New Testament presents Jesus as the fulfillment of the promises of the prophets. Jesus is the expected Messiah who will be given the fullness of the Spirit of God. He is the one who will dispense the Spirit of God to all nations⁹⁰. The Spirit will be given to him so as a source of power for the mission. Christ's mission is to inaugurate and proclaim of the kingdom of God. To stress the fullness of the Spirit, Jesus is not

⁸⁸ ...John insists that God created all things through his Word...the Word of God has been throughout salvation history the true light that ...enlightens everyone...the coming into the world of the Word of God does not here refer to the mystery of Incarnation but to the coming into the world of the Word as the Lady Wisdom of which the first or Jewish Testament spoke, Dupuis, J., "God is always greater" The Tablet, 27October, 2001, 1520.

⁸⁹ Cf. Dunn, J., The Christ and the Spirit, Edinburg, T&T Clark, 1998 p. 12.

⁹⁰ "The Gospel is the communication of the fact that God's promises of salvation are fulfilled in Jesus... This is the beginning of the eschatological period characterized by the gift of the Spirit to a people of God with a universal vocation". Congar, Yves, J., I Believe in the Holy Spirit Vol.1 p 15.

receiving the spirit as the prophets did. To Jesus the Spirit is the very source of his life. He is conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit (Lk.1: 35) At his baptism the Spirit empowers him for his mission (Lk.3: 21-22) The Holy Spirit leads him into the desert to confront the evil spirit (Matt. 4:1; Mk.1: 12; Lk. 4:1) The defeat of the Satan by Jesus shows that the Holy Spirit is stronger than the evil spirit.

According to Luke, Jesus' mission begins with the assurance of the Spirit of God being upon him (Lk. 4:18-19). Jesus will not use his power for his own mission only, but He will dispense the Spirit to his followers and later to the whole of human race (Joh. 14: 12-18, 19:30).

2.3 The Holy Spirit and the evil spirit

As in the Old Testament, the New Testament makes a clear distinction between the Holy Spirit and the evil spirit. The Holy Spirit originated from God, and it is given to Jesus for his mission. The Holy Spirit is so much identified with Jesus to the point that Jesus becomes the dispenser of the Holy Spirit. For Paul the Spirit is the Lord (2Co.3: 17). The evil spirit on the contrary comes from the devil and not from God. Jesus has the fullness of the Spirit of God. He will fight and overcome the power of evil throughout his ministry (Lk.10: 14-23). It is by the power of the Holy Spirit that Christ overcomes the evil spirit. There is a strong bond between the Spirit of God and Jesus Christ who is the Word of God. This unity is the same as the unity between Spirit and Wisdom in the Old Testament. Jesus as the Word of God is the creative power of God, and as the Wisdom of God, Jesus is the principle order and harmony of creation. In other word Christ is the summit of creation (Col.1: 15-20). Having said this, the church believes that God created

the whole of universe through Christ in his Spirit. This means that God created through his word, and he animated the creation by his Spirit. In Christ the Word and the Spirit are one though not identical⁹¹. We can understand the Word as the universal creative power of God and the Spirit as the universal animating power of God.

2.4 The Spirit at the Pentecost

Pentecost is an experience of outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit experienced in the Pentecost is the Spirit of the risen Christ. Because before his ascension he promised them the Holy Spirit (Joh.14: 12-18) This Spirit is given first to the first disciples and later to the nations. Both the Jews and the Gentiles receive the Holy Spirit (Acts.2: 1-13). The effects of the risen Lord is no longer conditioned by time and space. By his resurrection and the sending of the Spirit the universal salvific value of Christ is revealed⁹². The experience of Pentecost therefore, is the fulfillment of the Old Testament's prophecy of the outpouring of the Spirit of God to all nations (Acts. 2: 17-21)

Conclusion

The Christ event marked the fulfillment of God's plan for humanity. God's plan from the beginning was to dwell among his people. Jesus Christ is Emmanuel that is God among us (Matt.1: 23). Humanity experiences the presence of God by the help of the Spirit of God. God has granted the fullness of his Spirit to Jesus Christ. Therefore in Christ we encounter the fullness of revelation of God to humanity. In Christ we

⁹¹ Cf. The Theological Historical Commission for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, Your Spirit Lord Fills the Earth, Pulines Publications, 1997, p 24.

⁹²Cf. Dupuis, J. "God is always greater" Tablet, 27 October 2001, 1520.

experience God the Father. Christ in whom we experience God is the risen Lord who dispensed his Spirit to all nations. Now the presence of the Spirit of God in humanity is the Spirit of the risen Lord⁹³. It could be said that Christ is mysteriously present in humanity by the power of his Spirit.

The work of the Spirit of God is universal (Joh.3: 8) We should also keep in mind that God enters into personal relationship with human beings through the Spirit⁹⁴. Therefore the universality of the Spirit of God is the paradigm that will allow us to discern the presence of the Holy Spirit in the African Traditional Religion.

⁹³ "The Christ event is at the center of the historical unfolding of the divine economy but the punctual event of Jesus Christ is actuated and becomes operative throughout time and space in the work of the spirit"

Dupui, J., Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism, p 198.

⁹⁴Cf. Ibid. pp. 196-197.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE PRESENCE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT IN THE AFRICAN RELIGION

“The Spirit manifests himself in a special way in the Church and in her members. Nevertheless his presence and activity are universal, limited neither by space or time”⁹⁵

Introduction

Chapter three has shown us that the work of the Spirit of God is universal. Our task now is to show how this Spirit of God has been working in the African religion. In the Old Testament we saw that one of the works of the Spirit of God was to guide people in the way of God (Ex.31: 3ff). Through his Spirit God reveals himself and His plan for humanity. By the same power of the Spirit humanity is enabled to respond to God’s self-communication. The religious traditions of humanity are expressions of human response to God’s revelation. Therefore it could be said that all positive religious values of humanity are the work of the Spirit of God. African Religion is one of the religious traditions of humanity. Our task now is to examine in brief some of the positive religious values in African Religion. Some of the values that we will examine are: prayers, creation, hospitality, wisdom and unity.

⁹⁵ In John Paul II, Pope, Redemptoris Missio, 28.

1. The Spirit of God in African Prayers

“ We must acknowledge that many women and men living under the dispensation of the cosmic covenant have encountered the true God in an authentic religious experience. For example, prayer, of its very nature entails a personal relationship between “I” and an infinite “Thou”⁹⁶.

Prayer is a means by which humanity enters into communion with God. Given the limitation of human nature, God has to help human beings to enter into this communion with him. It is through his Spirit that God helps human beings communicate with him in prayer. Therefore “every authentic prayer is prompted by the Holy Spirit”⁹⁷

John Mbiti says that about ninety percent of African prayers are addressed to God. The God to whom the African prayers are addressed is a personal God. He is a God who cares for the well being of his people. He is a God who cares for the hungry and the afflicted. God is a helper to those in need. He is the protector of his people:

“God of my needfulness, grant me something to eat, give me milk
Give me sons give me great herds, give me meat, Oh my Father.

We rise up in the morning before the day
To betake ourselves to our labour
To prepare our harvest.
Protect us from the dangerous animals
And from the serpent
And from every stumbling block

Now that evening has fallen,
To God, the Creator I will turn in prayer
Knowing that he will help me
I know the Father will help me”⁹⁸.

⁹⁶ Dupuis, J., Towards a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism, p. 240.

⁹⁷ In John Paul II Pope. Redemptoris Missio, p. 49.

⁹⁸ Mbiti, J., The Prayers of African Religion, (London, S PCK, 1975) p32

The above three prayers express clearly a personal communion between God and the African people. These prayers express peoples' belief that God is the source of life. He supports and produces life. This is the meaning of approaching God as Father. We can say that it is the universal Spirit of God that has enabled these people to experience God as the Father and Creator. The above prayers express the experience of God as father and creator. Addressing God as Father means that people are conscious of being children of God. It is by the help of the spirit of God that human beings are enabled to experience a sense of belonging to God as his children. In the letter to the Romans Paul remind us that only those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. And it is by the help of the Spirit of God that people are made capable of addressing God as Father (Rom. 8:14-16).

So we can conclude that prayer in the African Religion can be seen as one way of encountering the Spirit of God in the African Religion.

2. The Spirit of God in Creation

The essence of African Religion is the integration of the supernatural with the natural. We have seen in the preceding chapters that African's traditional perception of reality is focused on the unity between spiritual world and the physical world. The physical reality is a symbol of the spiritual. This is to say that creation is sacred because it is permeated by the life principle that was from God. The well being of the human person is determined by a harmonious relationship with nature. The fact that creation reflects the immanent presence of the Spirit of God shows that, proper relationship with creation

implicitly reflects a proper relationship with God⁹⁹. Many Africans believe that there is healing power in nature. That is why traditional doctors use grass and roots as medicine for healing. This healing power of nature comes from God. In other word what heals is not the roots or grass but the Spirit of God in creation. The *Dagaare* of West Africa are one of the African tribes that believe in the healing power of creation¹⁰⁰.

Therefore creation in African perspective is sacred. Hence it has to be respected by all. The presence of the Spirit of God in creation does not turn creation into a deity. We have see in the previous chapter that the Spirit of God can be present in creation and that at the same time it is distinct from creation itself.

The immanent presence of the Spirit of God in creation shows that creation belongs to God. It has to be used for the benefit of all¹⁰¹. The African attitude towards creation shows that nature is another area where we can discern the presence of the Spirit of God in African Religion. African Traditional Religious has profound respect for creation. It can be said that it is the Spirit of God that has instilled this sense of respect for creation. The ecological crisis in the world today is due to the fact that humanity to a certain extent has lost respect for creation. Creation is no longer seen as sacred, but rather as something to be exploited.

3. The Spirit of God in the African Hospitality

In the first chapter we saw that community is one of the fundamental values in the African religion. It is the spirit of hospitality that governs the life in the community. Each member of a community has to share with others not only his life but also his material

⁹⁹ Some', M., The Healing Wisdom of Africa, pp 164-168.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. pp 37-50.

¹⁰¹ Magesa, L., African Traditional Religion, pp. 60-64.

well-being. To most Africans giving is not a loss but a gain. The ability to share is determined by one's spirit of sharing and not the amount of material things one has. There is a proverb in *swahili*¹⁰² that says “ *Kutoa ni Moyo wala si Utajiri*” It means that one gives because he has the spirit of giving and not because one has plenty. Another proverb from Uganda says “ One mouth can not drink from two calabashes”. This means that if one has two calabashes he or she has to share with others. Another proverb says “ To eat much leaves you with swollen stomach”. This means that the one who refuses to share harms himself or herself. Among the Nyakyusa of Tanzania, the father becomes very proud when his son brings many friends home for meals.¹⁰³

As Christians we can say that this spirit of hospitality is inspired by the Spirit of God. One cannot be charitable unless he or she is moved by the Spirit of God. One cannot love unless the love of God has been poured in him by the Spirit of God (Rom. 5:5). As stated in the Council of Trent that the human salvation begins with faith. Through faith in God one is enabled to enter into personal union with God. The disciple of Emmaus can be cited as a good example (Lk.24: 13-35). The ultimate goal of union with God is love of charity¹⁰⁴. One cannot say he has faith in God unless that faith is revealed in charity and generosity. Prayers in African Religion express faith in God and hospitality expresses charity. It is the Spirit of God that initiates faith and love in the hearts of human beings.¹⁰⁵

Therefore the practice of generosity and hospitality in the African traditional religious consciousness can be seen as a sign of the presence of the Spirit of God.

¹⁰² *Swahili* is a Bantu language spoken by many people from East and Central Africa

¹⁰³ Cf. Magesa L., *African Traditional Religion*, p. 64.

¹⁰⁴ In: Paul John II, *The Spirit Giver of life and Love*, pp.407-408.

¹⁰⁵ “ Faith is the fundamental gift given by the Holy Spirit for the supernatural life...The love of God...has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit... Ibid. pp. 401-407.

4. The Spirit of God in African Wisdom

Wisdom plays a significant role in the life of many Africans. To be wise means to have the capacity to deal with life's problems. As we saw in the first chapter unity and harmony are some of the major values in the African lives. Any conflict in the community disturbs peace and harmony in the society. The major tasks of wise men in the community are to insure peace and harmony prevail and also to make sure that the socio-religious values of the community are kept. The wise people have also the task of insuring transmission of these values to other generations. In many African societies elders are regarded as wise people of the community. The reason to consider elders as wise men is based on the fact that wisdom has to do with life experiences. Elders who have lived a good life are considered to have enough experiences as far as life problems are concerned.¹⁰⁶

Conflict in the community disrupts harmony and unity. Once peace and unity no longer prevail in the community, all other problems follow. For example sickness, death, drought, floods, wars, can be attributed to the lack of unity or proper relationship in the community. Community in the African sense is the larger family of all the living, the living dead and the not yet born. Once conflict arises in the community elders have to call for reconciliation rites. Rituals are the powerful means of restoring peace and harmony in the society. Rituals are aimed at increasing or expanding ones' awareness of his existence. Through Ritual an individual becomes aware that he exists in a relationships

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Bujo, B., The Ethical Dimension of Community, (Nairobi, Paulines Publications, 1998) pp.25-27.

with a larger community. Through performance of Ritual one becomes conscious of the reality beyond the physical world.¹⁰⁷

Proverbs are one of the means used by the wise people for transmission of traditional values. For instance to stress the value of unity and togetherness, a wise person can cite this proverb "Life is when you are together, alone you are an animal". Human being is human when he is in a proper relationship with others. To express total dependence on God, the following proverb can be used "The creature is not greater than its creator" Also, "the one whom God clothes will not go naked". To warn people against hurting each other, a wise person can say: "It is not difficult to hurt, but it is difficult to repair". To discourage procrastination, one can say: "The clan of 'I will do it' was overtaken without having done". To stress the spirit of communal sharing of the natural resources of the earth, a wise person will use the proverb like "The earth is the mother of all".¹⁰⁸

From the above illustration we can say that African wisdom is focused on the two dimensions of human life: proper relationship that insures harmony in the larger community, and proper relationship with God, that has to be shown by total trust in him. As Christians we say, the desire for peace and harmony in the African traditional religious consciousness can be seen as the work of the Spirit of God. This is to say that any human desire for true peace and harmony is motivated by the Spirit of God. Paul reminds us that the fruit of the Spirit is love joy and peace (Gal.5: 20). The desire for

¹⁰⁷ Cf. Some', M., The Healing Wisdom of Africa, p 30.

¹⁰⁸ For these and more other examples of proverbs and wise sayings from African tribes Cf. Mbiti, J., Introduction to African Religion, pp 208-212.

peace is a reality that is rooted in the heart of humanity. The source of that desire is the Spirit of God. That is, the Spirit of God is the one who brings peace to humanity¹⁰⁹.

Conclusion

We have affirmed the positive values in African traditional religious consciousness as the work of the Spirit of God. The question one might ask is this: are we trying to attempt syncretism.¹¹⁰ Are we borrowing some concepts from African Religion and apply them to our Christian faith? We are not borrowing African Religious concepts and apply them to Christianity. What we have done rather is to affirm the universality of God in the Christian understanding. This God enters into communion with humanity. He does his work by the power of his Spirit. As Christians we believe that every personal encounter of God and human beings and of the human beings with God is attained in the Holy Spirit. Any experience of God that human beings might have comes as a result of God's initiative in his Spirit. Our universal God, the God of Jesus Christ has entered into the history of humanity. Through his Spirit God leads people to accomplish his divine plan. As Christians we believe that there is no other god but the God of Jesus Christ. On the relationship between God of other religions and the God of Jesus Christ, Walbert

¹⁰⁹ John Paul II, Pope, The Spirit Giver of Life and Love , p. 412.

¹¹⁰ Syncretism has been interpreted as an epiphenomenon linked with the cultural development of man in line with the stoic, neo Platonist and humanistic view of the equality of all religions; or as a deliberate fusion of godheads due to a profound change in religious ideas... Maraldo, John, C., "Syncretism" In Rahner, K.,(ed.) Encyclopedia of Theology, (Freiburg, Burns & Oates, 1993) p. 1660.

Buhmann affirms that: “All have the God” this God is the God of our Lord Jesus Christ. Any genuine religious experience comes from God¹¹¹.

Therefore the universality of God and his active presence in the life of people and in creation are the major reasons that allow us to encounter with the Spirit of God in the African Traditional Religious consciousness.

¹¹¹ “ wherever there is genuine religious experience, it is surely the God revealed in Jesus who thus enters into the lives of men and women in a hidden secret fashion” In Dupuis, J., Towards a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism, p. 256.

GENERAL CONCLUSION

PROPOSALS FOR THE REQUIRED ATTITUDES FOR DIALOGUE BETWEEN CHRISTIANITY AND AFRICAN RELIGION

The recent pronouncements of the Catholic teaching authority have stressed the universal presence of God's Spirit. The Spirit has influenced not only individuals but also the society, human history, cultures and religions. The source of positive values in religions and cultures is the Spirit of God.¹¹² If the Holy Spirit is present in the religions and cultures of humanity, the fact that the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the risen Lord¹¹³, leads us to affirm that, the Risen Lord by the power of his Spirit is present in the religious traditions of humanity. In other words the Holy Spirit is present in each person. As Pope John Paul II shows that this Spirit affects not only the individual but also the religious traditions of humanity.¹¹⁴

On affirming the dignity of the human person, the Church fathers maintain that, through the mystery of Incarnation Christ has mysteriously united with every human person¹¹⁵. It is out of respect for the human person and his or her religious tradition that urges us to examine our attitudes towards African Traditional Religion.

1.1 Change of attitude towards African Religion

Before we enter into dialogue with African Religion, we need first of all to examine our attitudes towards African Religion. Do we see African Religion as an

¹¹² Cf. John Paul II, Pope, *Redemptoris Missio*, 28.

¹¹³ Cf. *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ Cf. *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ Cf. Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 22.

authentic Religion or are we perceiving it as superstitions and fetishism?. We need to purify our theological perception towards African Religion. We should not regard it as paganism or witchcraft, but rather as an authentic religious tradition of the Africans. Further more, it is the religious foundation of many African Christians.

The conviction that God is mysteriously present in the life of the African traditional believers, urges us to approach African Traditional Religion with respect and a sense of awe. We need to have an attitude of listening to what God is conveying to us through African Traditional Religion. The African traditional belief in the spirits could be a reminder to us that the Spirit of God is actively present in humanity and in creation. The African traditional communal life could be a message from God to humanity that is divided by the spirit of individualism and materialism. That community is the essence of humanity. God by nature is a communitarian God. As God the Father he relates to the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Humanity is the image of God. Therefore it has to reflect the communitarian God, by living a communal life.

Through the traditional African's spirit of hospitality, God might be reminding us that the natural resources of the world are to be shared by all. Then the gap that exists between the poor and the rich will be narrowed if not eliminated.

We cannot deny that Christianity throughout the centuries has maintained mostly negative attitudes toward other religions, African religion included. So if the dialogue is to succeed there is a need of a conversion of our attitude. We need to respect the Risen Lord who is present in the heart of each person.

2. *A purification of memories*¹¹⁶

As we saw in the second chapter, African religion suffered a great blow from the first missionaries. The past traumatic religious experiences have marked the attitudes of many Africans not only of the past but also of the modern times. Due to the past experiences some Africans have a negative attitude towards Christianity. They see Christianity as just a conglomeration of western cultures. The past religious and cultural destruction, made some Africans think that there is nothing genuine and universal in Christianity. For them Christianity is an imposition by the western colonialists¹¹⁷. This negative attitude can be traced back to the way Christianity was introduced in Africa.

As Dupuis contends, people who have suffered religious and cultural destruction cannot be asked simply to forget.¹¹⁸ There is a need on the side of the church of asking forgiveness for her past mistakes. Pope John Paul II responded to that need by asking pardon for all the errors of the past centuries. One of the sins of the past is the violent method sometimes used by the church in the service of truth.¹¹⁹ All these show that purification of memories is required both inside and outside the church.

3. *A purification of theological Language and Thinking*¹²⁰

By the power of the Spirit the Risen Lord is universally present in the history of humanity. It follows that Christ is mysteriously present in the African Traditional

¹¹⁶Cf. Dupuis, J., "The Storm of the Spirit" *Tablet*, 20 October 2001, 1484.

¹¹⁷ "Christianity is nothing but a conglomeration of Western cultures... Christian living is not universal but an imposition by the Western colonialists. All Africans passed through a tumultuous history of cultural destruction by both Christianity and Islam... People will understand the deity better if left to operate within cultural set up they are most familiar with" Amoke, O., "There is nothing universal about Christianity, Pastor" *Daily Nation*, 22 November 2001, p. 10.

¹¹⁸ Cf. Dupuis, J., "The Storm of the Spirit" *The Tablet*, 20 October, 2001, p. 1484.

¹¹⁹ "Church people also in the name of faith and morals, have sometimes had recourse to methods contrary to the Gospel on the pretext of defending truth" In *Ibid*.

¹²⁰ *Ibid*.

Religion. By affirming the presence of the Risen Lord in the African Religion we do not mean that Christ is present in the religious structures. But we affirm the mysterious presence of the Risen Lord in the life of the followers of the African Traditional Religion. Therefore if the Risen Lord is universally present, we can no longer use the terms; pagans, non-believers or even non-Christians, to those who do not adhere to our Christian faith. If Christ has united himself with each human being, then the whole of the human race is mysteriously Christian. The African traditional believers are in a certain sense Christians, whether they are conscious of it or not. Because a traditional believer being a human person is united with Christ: "By his Incarnation, he the Son of God, in a certain way united himself with each human being".¹²¹

4. New understanding of the term "Conversion"

The term conversion had been used in the past to mean changing one's religion. That is to be converted implies that one leaves his religion and embrace another religion. It was in this sense that the first missionaries applied it when they encountered the African traditional believers. They were urged to leave aside their religious practices so as to embrace Christianity. In the context of religious pluralism we need to examine the way we use the term conversion.

If Christ by the power of the Spirit is mysteriously present in the hearts of the African Traditional believers, then proclamation of conversion does not necessarily mean urging the African believers turn away from their religious practices. Conversion now means urging the African Traditional believers become aware of the presence of the Spirit of the risen Lord in their lives. The task of the missionary is to help the traditional

¹²¹ In John Paul II, Pope, Redemptor Hominis, (Nairobi, St. Paul Publications, 1979) p. 32.

believer to see that all of the positive values in the religion he or she believes in comes from the Spirit of the Risen Lord. When the African traditional believers become fully conscious of the active presence of the Spirit of the Risen Lord, by the power of the same Spirit they will be enabled to respond as an individual and in the communitarian ways to the promptings of the Spirit of the Risen Lord. When the traditional believer opens up to the Spirit, he or she will be converted. As Christians we should keep in mind that it is the Spirit of God that converts peoples' hearts. The Holy Spirit is the principal agent of mission."²²

For any interreligious dialogue to succeed there is a need of a radical change in our attitude towards other religions. We need to change from an attitude of confrontation to that of an encounter. An attitude of encounter demands an ability to listen to the other person who belongs to another religion. Christians therefore, are called to listen to what the traditional African believers say about themselves. We need to be humble and learn from them.

The continual presence of African traditional religious practices should not be seen as a threat to Christianity. But rather it is an occasion for Christians to learn and dialogue with African Religion.

²²Cf. John Paul II Pope, Redemptor Hominis, p.50.

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