

PNEUMATOLOGY IN AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY CHRISTIANS

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Abstract

African Traditional Religion asserts that the world is permeated with divinities and spirits who can have positive or negative effects on every aspect of life. It is believed that the bad spirits inflict injury and cause accidents and sufferings. Spirits are also said to possess and influence human beings for their own purposes. These beliefs still exert a powerful influence on the 21st Century Christians. In fact, strong beliefs in the spirit world and morbid fear have led many African Christians and Churches into unbiblical doctrine and practices. The descriptive and analytical methods were used. The paper discovers that although the spiritual world plays such an important role in African life, the spirits in general belong to the ontological mode of existence between God and man. To sum it all, spirits are not bad as people think; they have many roles to play. They are invisible and can be either malevolent or benevolent depending on how people experience the forces of nature and how they act towards human beings. Biblical and Africa views on the problems of evil are so close. Although certain aspects of the African views are surpassed and need to be modified or perfected by the biblical message, other aspects could be retained as very useful means of planting Christianity firmly in the African soil.

Keywords: Pneumatology, African, Christianity, Implications, Perspective, Ancestors

Introduction

According to Karl and Wilfred, Most African Christians have grown up in cultures that are intricately intertwined with the traditional religion of that ethnic group. These indigenous African Religions vary in detail but they agree in essentials such as, the spiritual nature of the world, the existence and remoteness of God, the role of spirits and mystical powers, and the way man relates to his world and to God. Furthermore, ethnographic studies have shown that in all cases the religion of African peoples is at the very heart of their cultures. It controls much of their social systems, is the main source of power, and regulates matters relating to their land and the weather on which the most Africans depend for their survival.¹ In African Traditional Religion, the concept of spirits is well defined. This is because Africans believe in, recognize and accept the fact of the existence of spirits, who may use material objects as temporary residences and manifestations of their presence and actions through natural objects and phenomena. The spiritual world of Africa people is very densely populated with spiritual beings, spirits

and the living dead. Their insight of spiritual realities, whether absolute or apparent is extremely sharp. To understand their religious ethos and philosophical perception, it is essential to consider their concepts of the spiritual world in addition to concepts of God. The spiritual universe is a unit with the physical, and that these two intermingle and dovetail into each other so much that it is not easy, or even necessary, at times to draw the distinction or separate them. Although the spiritual world plays such an important role in African life, the spirits in general belong to the ontological mode of existence between God and man.²

The Spiritual Nature of African Traditional Religion

The world in Africa is alive with a variety of spirit beings. Karl and Wilfred opine that, "In the everyday life of our African cultures we are constantly aware of various spiritual forces. These unseen powers are part of the world we see and are the ultimate cause of all that happens, especially of unusual and disturbing events. There is no clear dividing line between the living and the dead." They are said to have been created by God himself either as spirits or as human beings of the distant past. There are native spirits, which are personified in line with natural objects or forces. They are also invisible. There are sky spirits which are believed to possess powers that cannot be measured. These are categorized into the long dead and the living dead. The long dead are regarded as the ones who died long ago but might have been forgotten. The living dead are those who died recently but are still being remembered.³ All Africans believe in the ancestors, as ever-living and watchful. The ancestors were human, but they have acquired additional powers and men seek to obtain their blessing or avert their anger by due offerings.⁴ According to Shishima, they are believed to be around the family watching over them, remembered by their friends for up to four or five generations and sacrifices are made to them so that they can avert any evil. Aside from God the father almighty, spirits occupy the universe but people often speak about them as though they are human beings and are treated as if they have human characteristics. They can speak, think and are endowed with great powers which they use at will. God is the creator of the whole universe including the spirits; so they are his subordinates.⁵ Kunhiyop equally opines that:

African Traditional Religion asserts that the world is permeated with divinities and spirits who can have positive or negative effects on every aspect of life. It is believed that the bad spirits inflict injury and cause accidents and suffering. Spirits are also said to possess and influence human beings for their own purposes. These beliefs still exert a powerful influence today. In fact, strong beliefs in the spirit world and morbid fear have led many African Christians and churches into unbiblical doctrine and practices.⁶

When we refer to spirits in African religious ontology, we are not referring to divinities or to ancestors, but to "those apparitional entities which form separate category of beings from those described as divinities." They are considered as "powers which are almost abstract, as shades or vapors which take on human shape; they are immaterial and

incorporeal beings.” As immaterial and incorporeal, it is possible for them to assume various dimensions whenever they wish to be seen. These spirits are created by God but differ from God and man. Man has in various occasions addressed these spirits anthropomorphically by attributing human characteristics such as thinking, speaking, intelligence and the possession of power which they use whenever they wish. Spirits are the “‘common’ spiritual beings beneath the status of divinities and above the status of men. They are the ‘common populace’ of spiritual beings.”⁷

Kinds of Spirits

J.S Mbiti states that: Spirits are nondescript, immortal and invisible entities. This is because they do not possess material body through which they could be seen but they may incarnate into any material thing in order to make themselves seen for any reason or purpose.⁸ ontologically, spirits are depersonalized and not a completion or maturation mode of existence. The spirit mode of existence according to Mbiti is “the withering of the individual, so that this personality evaporates; his name disappears and he becomes less and not more of a person: a thing, a spirit and not a man anymore.” He posits that, in general we may say that there are two different kinds of spirits: the ghost of those who were born as human beings and those spirits which were created as spirits.⁹

Ghost of Human Beings

The majority of spirits are thought by most people to be the spirits of departed human beings. These ancestral spirits are divided into two groups by John Mbiti: those ancestors who have died recently, up to five generations ago, and those ancestors whose names have been forgotten because they died more than five generations ago. Even though these types of spirit are not remembered, they can be recollected through myths, clan founders and legends. Naturally, people dislike the spirits of those who are long dead (ghosts) and feared by everyone because people think that they can possess human beings with or without an individual’s permission or approval. Illnesses like lunacy and meningitis are ascribed to these types of spirits in most societies. Most diviners and medicine men acquire their knowledge from spirits. To sum it all, spirits are not bad as people think. They can be of benefit to people but sometimes act in an unpleasant manner, depending on the situation they find themselves.¹⁰

Those ghosts of people who died recently and whose names are remembered are called “the living dead”. This term refers to the living relationship between the living and their dead ancestors. Though the person is “dead” physically, they are “living” in their continued communication with the living. These spirits show a lot of care to their families and are remembered by pouring out drinks and food for their consumption. They are benevolent to their families as long as they are well treated. When people fall sick and face calamities, the cause may be ascribed to these spirits except if magic, sorcery and witchcraft are held responsible. For this reason, (for peace to reign), these spirits have to be appeased by performing rituals. The belief in spirits provides people with concrete explanation of the universe. They fill up the gap between God and man and are an

integral part of the religious heritage of Africa.¹¹ German observed that other scholars of African Traditional Religion, however, continue to refer to these ghosts as “ancestors,” “ancestral spirits,” or “dead ancestors.”¹²

Created Spirits

Gehman opines that: many people believe in spirits which are not the ghosts of former human beings. They may be spirits which bring disease, like the plague or small pox. Other spirits are associated with the forces of nature. The natural objects and forces associated with these types of spirits are the moon, sun, stars, rainbows, rain, storms, wind, thunder and lightning, trees, mountains or rivers and so on. Many people have a belief that such objects and forces are spirits themselves or there are spirits controlling them.¹³ Shishima further states that: These spirits are close to human life; they have a link with the earth, hills, mountains, rocks, trees, forests, metals, rivers, ponds, lakes, waterfalls, lagoons, animal, insects, and certain diseases. They are spoken of in human forms as if they can be pleased, offended or informed. Some nature spirits of the earth are rated higher than others and may be viewed as divinities; these can be spirits of the sea, lake and forest. Earth spirits also explain many things concerning the world. There is a connection between the Africans, the inanimate things, forces of nature and the living things. Spirits are sometimes at the mercy of people; they often ignore them and look beyond to God for help and answers to the mysteries that surround the world.¹⁴

Evil Spirits

Africans tend to attribute diseases and mental ailments to Satan and evil spirits. While it is true that some diseases and mental states can be caused by demonic activities (Luke 13:32), this is not true in every case. In Matthew 4:24 for example, a distinction is drawn between epilepsy and demon possession, which may have similar symptoms (see Matt. 17:15-18). It is thus wrong to claim that all diseases are attributable to demons. To a large extent, evil in African world view is seen mainly as physical evil rather than moral evil. However, many African myths like the Genesis narratives would trace the origin of physical evils to some moral evil. African worldviews still share the belief that the roots of many physical evils lie in some moral evils. When God allows evil, it is believed to be for some purposes; a punitive or corrective purpose.¹⁵ The Dinkas for example, would say that Nhialic (God) is like one's earthly father; “he brings you up and looks after you. And if he injures you, is it not his affair.” According to some societies, especially Africa; all the affairs of life are supposed to be under the control of spirits, each ruling a certain “elements” or even object, and themselves in subjection to a greater spirit. For example, the Inuits are said to believe in spirits of the sea, earth and sky, the winds, the clouds and everything in nature. Every cove of the seashore, every point, every island and prominent rock has its guardian spirits. All these are potentially of the malignant type and are to be propitiated by an appeal to knowledge of the supernatural.¹⁶

The Doctrine of Satan

The primary witness to the reality and existence of Satan is not experience or sensational stories but the testimony of the Scripture. Both the Old and New Testaments affirm the reality and existence of Satan. When Genesis 3 discusses the serpent, it is recognized that the serpent was Satan and that the judgment pronounced (Gen. 3:15) must be a reference to him. Satan is specially mentioned in Job 2:1 as he came to accuse Job before God. In 1 Chronicles 21:2, Satan led David to take a census of the Israelites. Also, In Zachariah^h 3:1-2, Satan is seen accusing the nation before God. The New Testament evidence for Satan's existence is extensive. Every New Testament writer and nineteen of the books make reference to him (cf. Matt. 4:10; 12:26; Mark 1:13; 3:23, 26; 4:15; Luke 11:18; 22:3; John 13:27, etc.). Christ Himself makes reference to Satan twenty-five times. The fact of Satan's existence finds ultimate support in the veracity of Christ's words.¹⁷ Enns further states that:

The Scripture mentions three major features of personality when discussing Satan. Satan reflects intellect in that he schemes and is crafty in his work (Eph. 6:11). His work of deception indicates his ability to think and plan a course of action that will be successful in deceiving people (Rev. 12:9). His knowledge and facility with Scripture (in deception) further illustrates his intellect (Matt. 4: 5-6). Satan's emotion is seen in his desire to exalt himself above the rule of God (Isa. 14:12-17); note the "I will's"). Satan desires to trap new converts through their conceit (1 Tim. 3:6). Recognizing he has only a short time on earth, Satan vents great wrath, "burning anger" (Rev. 12:12) and demonstrated his will in attempting to entice Christ to sin (Matt. 4:3). Satan's will is most clearly reflected in his wish to be like God (Isa. 14:13-14).¹⁸

In regard to the position and character of Satan, we know that he is the very embodiment of a lie, for "there is no truth in him... he is a liar, and the father of it," said the Lord. The various names by which he is described in the Scriptures reveal his power. Fallen though he be, he is called by the Lord Jesus no less than three times the "Prince of this world" (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11), thus plainly recognizing his rule over the earth. That he is a personage of rank and power we learn from Jude: "Michael, the archangel, when contending with the devil, he disputed about the body of Moses, does not bring against him a railing judgment, but said, the Lord rebuke thee" (Jude 9). He is also called the "god of this age" (2 Cor. 4:4), for men obey and worship him, even unconsciously, when they do not obey and worship the Creator.¹⁹

The word *diabolos* signifies "separator and slanderer" or "malignant accuser." Satan is the great separator and he separates by slandering. He separated the race of man from God in Eden and ever since he has been separating men from each other with hatred, malice, envy and jealousy. He is especially named the "accuser of the brethren" (Rev. 12:10), and we find him also described as "the great dragon," the "old serpent," and the

“deceiver of the whole inhabited earth.” In pagan lands, the deceiver is daring in his tyranny, holding men and women in gross and open sin. In civilized countries, the god of this age needs must veil his working. In these last days however, he is beginning to more openly manifest himself as the prince of the world.²⁰ He is familiarizing people with his name. Books to be popular must be about him, and in fashion’s realm serpents have been the favorite’s ornaments of dress, while palmistry, clairvoyance, planchette, and other means of intercourse with the spirits of evil, abound on every hand.²¹ Bolaji Idowu asserts that in Yoruba theology:

Esu is depicted as so versatile a character that one must be weary of what one says about him. He has often been sweepingly called either the “Devil” or “Satan”. He is certainly not the Devil of our New Testament acquaintance, who is an out evil power in opposition to the plan of God’s salvation of man. On the whole, it would be near the truth to parallel him with Satan in the Book of Job, where Satan is one of the ministers of God and has the office of trying men’s sincerity and putting their religion to the proof. What we gather from our sources is that *Esu* is primarily a “special relation officer” between heaven and earth, the inspector-general who reports regularly to *Olodumare* on the deeds of the divinities and men, and checks and makes reports on the correctness of worship in general and sacrifices in particular.²²

The *Baba'lawa* usually holds the view that *Esu* was created to be the right-hand divinity to *Orunmila*. It is his duty to run errands for *Orunmila*; he must always be in attendance and act under his orders. *Orunmila* is assigned the duty of hearing the voice of *Olodumare* and declaring His will to the world; but wherever *Orunmila*'s declaration is not heeded, it is the duty of *Esu* to bring some calamity by way of punishment upon the recalcitrant. In return for the service which *Esu* gives to *Orunmila*, *Orunmila* feeds him. But whenever he is not satisfied with the feeding, he takes it upon himself to spoil the works of *Orunmila*. Whenever anybody gets into trouble through the agency of *Esu*, *Orunmila* can always be relied upon to show the way out of the difficulty. That is why it usually happens that whenever there is a cult of *Orunmila*, that of *Esu* is set up also, on however small scale. The two of them often work in collaboration.²³ *Esu* as the approver and bearer of sacrifices to heaven is known to the *Baba'lawa* as *Osetura*. On the whole it appears that it is *Orunmila* who is always placed under obligation to *Esu* rather than the other way round. It is an acknowledged belief that *Esu* can spoil the works of *Orunmila* whenever he finds cause to do so. He also helps him out of difficulty on occasion. Once when all the other divinities conspired against *Orunmila* and took him in accusation before *Olodumare*, it was *Esu* who defended him and whose submission *Olodumare* reaccepted.²⁴

The attitude of the Yoruba to *Esu* is generally one of dread. It is believed that he is held in constant dread also by the other divinities. This is because, by virtue of his office, he holds the power of life and death over them as prosperity or calamity for them depends upon what reports he carries to *Olodumare*. Everybody seeks therefore to be on good

terms with him. We hear the warning; *Bi a barubo, kiamut'Esukuro* which means "when sacrifices are offered, the portion which belongs to *Esu* should be set aside for him". He is feared also because incidentally, he is malicious and a mischief-maker, quite capable of causing confusion, bringing about complicated situations or promoting malice among people. By his guile he would make enemies of very close friends, cause husband and wife to quarrel and make antagonists of father and children.²⁵ Metuh observes that:

Biblical and African views on the problems of evil are so close. Although certain aspects of the African views are surpassed and need to be modified or perfected by the biblical message, other aspects could be retained as very useful means of planting Christianity firmly in the African soil. Belief in the existence and powers of Evil spirits exists in the Bible from the earliest times right through to post New Testament times. In Old Testament times most sickness were attributed to the actions of evil spirits. After the exile, there was clear distinction between angelic and demonic powers. Later Jewish thought regarded evil spirits as fallen angels' accomplices of Satan.²⁶

They are impure spirits who torments men and try to lead them to evil. In the New Testament, the duel between the kingdom of Satan and the kingdom of God came to a head. The final stake is man's salvation. Jesus routs Satan and his army of evil spirits (Matt. 4:11; Jn. 12:31). This is illustrated by his casting out of evil spirits (devils) and healing people of different types of sicknesses. The evil spirits acknowledge his superiority and obeyed him. He gave the same power to the apostle. He cast out devils "by the spirit of God and that is proof that the kingdom of God has come among you" (Matt. 2:25-28). Expulsion of evil spirits, and miracles will henceforth accompany the preaching of the Gospel (Mk. 16:17).²⁷

Demon Possession

Demons are not the spirits of the dead person that have come back to oppress people on earth, they are evil or unclean spirits, who are the servants of Satan. Enns define demon possession as a demon residing in a person, exerting direct control and influence over that person, with certain derangement of mind and or body. Demon possession is to be distinguished from demon influence or demon activity in relation to a person. The work of the demon in latter is from the outside; in demon possession it is from within.²⁸ Okezie opines that:

It may be worthwhile to say here that a Christian (who is indwelt by the Holy Spirit) cannot be demon possessed. This is because the demons cannot penetrate to the level of the spirit where the Holy Spirits in dwells. It is also possible for demons to invade a believer's life because of his or her ancestral and family background. The early church led new Christian to renounce their pagan background and pagan beliefs. They

would always lead anew convert to break every tie and every bondage or covenant which he or she may have inherited from his or her former religion or associations. After doing this, the new believer would declare complete and total allegiance to the Lord Jesus Christ. However, along the line this practice was forgotten. Satan may still claim legal right to inhabit a person because of previous covenants made by or on behalf of that individual by parents, relatives or ancestors.²⁹

However, a believer can be the target of demonic activity to such an extent that he may give the appearance of demon possession. Many people get involved with demons through their family. Most, if not all the people in Africa come from families that worshipped all kinds of evil spirits represented by stones, wood, trees, animal, reptiles, rivers etc. Okezie citing J.S Mbiti a notable African scholar writes:

Traditional religion is not primarily for the individual, but for his community of which he is part. Chapters of African religion are written everywhere in the life of the community, and in traditional society there are no irreligious people. To be human is to belong to the whole community, and to do so involve participating in beliefs, ceremonies rituals and festivals of that community. A person cannot detach himself from the religion of his group, for to do so is to be severed from his roots, his foundation, his context of security, his kinship, and the entire group of those who make him aware of his own existence. To be without one of those corporate elements of life is to be put out of the whole picture. Therefore, to be without religion amounts to a self-excommunication from the entire life of society, and African peoples do not know how to exist without religion.³⁰

People who have such religious background could easily have been dedicated to one form of idol or the other. In Christianity, a demon is traditionally an evil spirits, not human in origin, and bent towards the destruction of mankind using every guile imaginable. Demon can get access simply by acknowledging or accepting its presence. Acceptance often means committing sin; e.g. demons gradually gain control of the eyes when the eyes sin by looking at things vile, gain control of the tongue when it is used for slander or blasphemy, and can make it slip, etc., and this can spread to other parts of the body, regardless of whether the sinner calls himself Christian or not. This is called possession. In sore extreme cases, the demon gains an actual entrance into the bodily frame, leading to disastrous result, often hideous and antagonistic. There are examples of such in the Gospels.³¹ Gyang Pam asserts that:

Some Christians believe that symptoms of demon possession include voices in one's mind or a horror of mind, especially when there are no signs of insanity or mental damage/ un-healthiness, a stubbornness of mind, holding fast to a particular belief and refusing to listen to reason, a split personality as if two separate personalities share the same body.

However, most Christian demonologists assert the importance of a medical and psychiatric evaluation before assuming that the person in question may be possessed by a demon. Schizophrenia, for example, can exhibit many symptoms commonly attributed to possession.³²

A further study of the activities of the spirits shows that they may cause terrible harm on men. This they do through causing madness or epilepsy and other terrible sickness. In some cases they may possess people causing them to prophesy. Mbiti explains that "During the height of spirit possession, the individual in effect loses his own personality and acts in the content of the 'personality' of the spirit possessing him."³³ E. C. Ekeke and C. A. Ekeopara observed that: The spirits may choose to drive the person away making him to live in the forest or may give the person information for the larger society in the case of a prophet or soothsayer. When spirits possession is noticed, the traditional doctors and diviners may be called to exorcise that spirit from the person thereby setting him free from his captor.³⁴

Pneumatology among the Christians today-Person, Residence and Activities

The term Pneumatology comes from two Greek words, namely, *Pneuma* (πνεῦμα) meaning "wind," "breath," or "spirit" (used of the Holy Spirit) and *logos* meaning "word," "matter," or "thing." "Pneumatology" refers to the study of the biblical doctrine of the Holy Spirit or the study of the person and work of the Holy Spirit. Generally, this includes such topics as: the personality of the Spirit, the deity of the Spirit, and the work of the Spirit throughout Scripture.³⁵

Aremu and Malomo opine that the usual wrong conception of personality is to attribute personality only to human beings. Since God made man in His own image, we can expect similarities between man's personality and God's personality. Personality may simply be defined as possession of intellect, emotions and will. If we are able to demonstrate that the Holy Spirit possesses these qualities, then he is a person. Furthermore, His works and designations confirm His personality. The personality (personhood) of the Holy Spirit has been denied by certain groups throughout the history of the Church.³⁶ Early in church history Arius denied the personality of the Holy Spirit; he said the Holy Spirit was only an influence emanating from the Father. He was condemned as heretical at the Council of Nicea, A.D. 325. His teaching has continued to the present time in Unitarianism and the cults, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses. Holy Spirit is not a thing or an inanimate object. He is a full person with all the traits of a person. This is clear from John 14:16-18, where Jesus referred to the Holy Spirit as "another advocate," indicating that the Spirit is a person with the same nature as Jesus, but distinct from Jesus (John 15:26).³⁷

It is not enough to say Christians have one God who subsists in three persons of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We must from the scriptures know how the Holy Spirit is God. As we noted above; the Holy Spirit is distinguished from, yet closely related to, the Father and the Son—and that on an equal basis. He receives the worship due the Father and the Son (2 Cor. 13:14) and does divine works, including inspiring Scripture (2 Peter

1:20-21; Matt 19:4-5), regenerating hearts (Titus 3:5), and creating, sustaining, and giving life to all things (Gen 1:2; Job 26:13; 34:14-15; Psalm 104:29-30). He is said to be eternal (Heb 9:14; only God is eternal), omniscient (1 Cor. 2:10-11), and is actually referred to as God (Acts 5:3-4; 1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19-20). There is very little room for doubt; clearly the Holy Spirit is divine.³⁸

The Place of the Holy Spirit in the Life of a 21st Century Christians

The Spirit is Christ's Spirit, the Spirit of the son of God, and the Christian, indwelt by the Spirit, enters into a new relationship to God, that of a son to his Father. Through the Spirit, Christians are enabled to address God as Father, and the proof that they are sons of God is the indwelling Spirit, which cries out in them "Abba! Father!" (Gal. 4:6). The Spirit testifies to our spirit that we are sons of God, and fellow heirs with Christ (Rom. 8:14-17). Through the Spirit, with its assurance of sonship towards God, the Christian has access to the Father and communion with him. In the Spirit man can speak to God, for the Spirit prays within him, interceding "for the saints according to the will of God."³⁹ Although man cannot pray as he ought, the Spirit "intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words" (Rom. 8:26-27). The indwelling of the Spirit gives man his peculiar right and dignity (1 Thess. 4:8). It is this indwelling which is the distinctive mark of the Christian life (Rom. 8:9). It is the mode of Christ's own indwelling (Eph. 3:16-17). "Participating in the Spirit" is the common experience of all Christians (Phil. 2:1), producing the fellowship of the Spirit which Paul mentions in 2 Cor. 13-14.⁴⁰

The Spirit is not only the power of convincing believers of the truth of the gospel, not only promoting its preaching, but the Spirit is the power of new creation to those who have come to faith in Christ. Christians who were formerly alienated from God have not simply been entered into the heavenly register of the redeemed; the Spirit indwells them and empowers them to live a life pleasing to God (Rom. 8:1-4; 12:1; 1 Thess. 4:1; to the Lord, 2 Cor. 5:9; Eph. 5:10). This life is described as being "Led by the Spirit (Rom. 8:14) or "walking in the Spirit" (Rom.8:4; Gal 5:16, 25). All Christians are thus partakers of the Spirit, who should "be filled with the Spirit" (Eph. 5:18) and "aglow with the Spirit" (Rom. 12:11). All have entered upon this state of life in the Spirit through acceptance of the gospel and baptism. By the Spirit prophetic guidance is available to the church (1 Tim. 4:1), and the indwelling Spirits enables the truth of Christianity to be preserved inviolate (2 Tim. 1:14). Regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit-that is to say, the new life in the Spirit- is effected for all Christians through the baptismal washing (Tit. 3:5).⁴¹ All Christian are anointed, as the people of the Spirit-possessed Messiah, with the function of the Spirit (cf. 1 John 2:20). The Spirit is the assurance of Christ's indwelling presence (1 John 3:24). The Spirit witness to the reality of Christ's incarnation, with the water and the blood of his death and of the Christian sacraments (1 John 5:7-8); and the acknowledgment that "Jesus Christ has come in the flesh" is the criterion of the Spirit's inspiration in the church (1 John 4:2).⁴²

The Spirit World and Its Implications for 21st Century Christians

It is very easy to blame anything and everything on demon possession. Whether the problem is a headache or stomach ache, the problem is said to be demons. But we need to be careful and must remember that many things can be explained naturally. We need not blame demons for anything unusual that happens that is beyond our control. If African Christians understand that the misfortunes and spiritual attacks that humans fear are consequences of their own conduct, they would have focused on ways to improve their innate weaknesses to live in accordance with biblical injunction. Instead they look for powers to avert the assumed misfortune that evil spirits bring on them.⁴³ Ikenga opines that:

The belief in evil spirits and the belief that certain diseases are caused by evil spirits are still very strong in Africa. The coming of the kingdom of God in Africa should be marked by routing of Satan and the evil spirits in Africa. However, what the missionaries identified as evil spirit were mainly deities which the people worshipped as good spirits. In many places, missionary catechesis denied the existence of witches, sorcery and other evil spirits and forces which the people feared. Thus the people never experienced the Gospel as liberating power. To extend Christ's victory over Satan and the evil spirits to Africa, emissaries of the Good news should cast out the devils there and heal diseases "by the spirit of God" (Matt. 12:25). This has been the secret of the success of the Independent Churches in Africa. Comparable successes have been achieved by some pastors who practice the healing ministry.⁴⁴ They have pulled crowds, brought consolation to many tormented hearts, and confirmed the flagging faith of many weak Christians. R. J. Gehman posits that, we may be sure that the Kingdom of Darkness does not remain unconcerned when the servants of the King of kings invade with the light of the Gospel. We also believe that the power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ will overcome darkness. It is a known fact that in lands where the Gospel is preached and believed, the visible activities of demons has been quieted and experience with evil spirits decreases with the coming of the Gospel. Our Lord declared, "I will build my church and the gate of Hades will not overcome it" (Matthew 16:19). Thus we find that although the Bible teaches the existence of Satan and his many fallen angels; Jesus Christ is Lord and through his death on the cross the powers of the Kingdom of Darkness have been defeated.⁴⁵ Kunhiyop opines that:

Fear of the spirit world has led many African Christians into syncretistic beliefs and practices. The African church is permeated with descriptions of demonic activities that are rooted in the pre-Christian world view and are not consistent with the biblical revelation. The weak and vulnerable-

especially children and the elderly- are sometimes accused of involvement in witchcraft and abused. Angels like Gabriel and Michael have been given almost godlike status and offered worship. These attitudes are not only found among lay people. There are church leaders who focus solely on deliverance ministries and neglect the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ. They adopt titles such as “man of God,” “woman of God,” “supersonic man of God,” and “demon destroyer,” which draw attention to themselves rather than to God. Their preaching is a mix of truths and untruth as they appeal to select Bible passages before making wild leaps into dramatic speculation.⁴⁶

In many respects, they resemble the magicians of old and traditional spiritists and diviners. They claim to be able to decree God to do something, command and bind Satan, cast him into the Abyss or the ocean, bind territorial spirits, bind the strong man, take dominion over an area in Jesus’ name and storm the gates of hell. A major problem with such teaching is that it “gives unhealthy attention to the devil and demonic activity. It underemphasizes the finished work of the cross, as well as the work of the Holy Spirit and angels... it all has to do with giving direct attention to the devil and demons, which is something the Bible has not commanded us to do. In fact, it could be quite dangerous”. Nowhere does the Bible teach us to look out for demons or Satan. Our task is to preach the gospel and live our lives in the power of the Holy Spirit.⁴⁶

Conclusion

African Christians are right to appropriate their religio-cultural heritage in to Christian Praxis but the problem is that they use two incompatible conceptions are brought together, hence epistemological crises occurs. Africans who come to the Christian faith already have a belief in the existence of God and the spirit world. The reality of God does not constitute a problem for African thought. The question about God is not: “who is God?” since he always dwells among the people and all that one has and knows comes from God, such as descendants, cattle, harvest, etc. The preoccupation with the occult, spiritism and witchcraft in many quarters is a clear indication that this subject needs urgent attention. Christians need to base their thinking about the spirit world on the Bible, rather than on traditions. But that does not mean that we have to reject everything in African Traditional Religion. The Bible agrees with it that there are different categories of spirits, and that some are good while others are evil.

Endnotes

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