

COMMUNICATING THE MESSAGE ABOUT JESUS TO AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGIONISTS

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Traditional religions are religions that claim the universe works by rules and cycles that can be known, and that the universe is animated by gods and spirits, some friendly others not (Ellwood 1995, 51). Traditional religions are practiced on all the continents of the world, especially in Africa, Asia, South America, and North America.

This article focuses on African traditional religions by seeking to examine meaningful ways of communicating Jesus Christ to its adherents in such a way that they come to trust in Him as their Savior from sin without necessarily losing their cultural identity.

Alternative Designations, History, and Membership

Traditional religions are tied to particular ethnic groups. Traditional religions have a number of alternative designations. Some scholars have designated them as “prehistoric religion,” “cosmic religion,” “non-literate religion,” “preliterate religion,” “archaic religion,” “local religion,” “animism,” “primitive religions,” “tribal religions,” and “Shamanism” (Manske and Harmelink, 1.00).

This article uses “traditional religion” because this designation is most preferred by its adherents. African traditional religionists frown on designations like “prehistoric,” “non-literate,” “preliterate,” “primitive,” also “animism” because such designations are deemed to be condemnatory. The term “shamanism” is looked down upon because of its foreignness. In a context where tribalism (discrimination against other tribes) is frowned upon, the designation “tribal religion” is considered inappropriate. Further, important writers on African religions such as Kwesi Sarpong, Bolaji Idowu, and John Mbiti have used the designation “traditional religions.” It is our intention to be sensitive to views of those involved in the religion under discussion.

It is estimated that there are about 68,872,000 traditional religionists in Africa. The highest concentration is located in West and Central Africa (Manske and Harmelink, 1.00).

Worldview of the African Traditional Religionist

The African traditional religionist’s approach to the universe does not conform to the analytical approach that characterizes modern society (Williamson, 85). Beliefs are not presented as theological systems, but are usually expressed as statements. As a result, this religion has no historical human founder nor creeds. It is expressed in wide local variation in belief and practice (Manske and Harmelink, 1.00).

E.B. Tylor believes that traditional religion and the idea of a separate soul developed out of the experience of primitive humanity's dreams and trances. Other scholars like R.W. Marret said that traditional religions evolved over time. Traditional religionists, by contrast, believe that their religion originated through special revelation from the gods and ancestors.

For the traditional religionist, this world is a community of spiritual beings and physical beings. There are both good and bad spiritual beings. God, the Sky God or the Supreme God is Creator and head of the universe. He has withdrawn from activity and rules by delegated authority through lesser gods, ancestors, and the family. Human life is dominated by the presence of "spirit" everywhere, and a person has to live with his world of spirit powers to manage and exploit the blessings that arise out of this relationship. The lesser gods inhabit natural shrines such as rivers, trees, rocks, forests, or even animals. The lesser gods are usually referred to as God's children and spokesmen. They are created by God and exercise derived power. The gods are usually deities of a town, family, or even personal deities. It is the duty of gods to maintain and increase fertility or the "life-force" within every community.

The gods are served by priests, priestesses and prophetesses. These priests administer charms (repositories of divine power), on behalf of the gods. Charms are used to protect against the power of evil or to work harm against another person.

In addition to the good spirits, there are evil spirits. The head of these evil spirits is a being akin to the devil of the Christian religion. This being is hostile to humans and works in close collaboration with evil spirits (demons) and witches or wizards.

The seen world is represented by humanity and nature. Often humans are regarded as children of gods or semi-divine primal parents (Elwood, 51). Every person is a member of a blood group, the family. The individual is born into a family, is trained by the family, develops in it, and is buried by it. An individual is obligated to the family, and he loses his social standing when his actions run counter to the community's idea of right conduct. Life cannot be sustained outside the family. The family also gives the African traditional religionist a religious identity in that it is only by means of the family that he or she is connected to the spiritual world of the ancestors.

Humanity is the repository of "life-force." The right use of this "life-force" is a person's chief responsibility (Busia, 197). Humankind's chief end is to multiply and increase.

A human being is believed to have a soul and a spirit. At death the spirit returns to the Supreme Being. While many adherents of traditional religions believe in reincarnation, it is generally believed that after death the soul passes on to a spirit world similar to life on earth (Ellwood, 33).

The dead are considered to be part of the clan, and are involved in life on earth. Meals are usually left for them, sometimes daily, and water or drink is poured to them as

libation. Through such rituals the spirits of departed elders are usually propitiated. Their names and deeds are recalled, and their favor and mercy solicited. While appeasing the ancestors take the central place, it is the gods who order, oversee, and supervise life. Above all is the Supreme God.

Life, as expressed in traditional religion, involves taking proper precautions against the powers that might destroy a person. The adherent of Traditional Religion does not believe that human beings are corrupt or fallen. Within his own cultural environment he accepts himself as he is: a created being, possessing something of the divine nature, one who exists and is sustained by God and a relevant cultural system. He already lives with God, the spirits and the ancestors (Ellwood, 28).

Sin, for the African traditional religionist, is not a state of being as in Christianity. Rather, it is primarily blasphemies or breach of vows against the gods or ancestors. Murder, theft and all “offences against persons or property are matters which have to be settled primarily by the family and society” (Williamson, 107). It would appear that the gods and ancestors are mainly concerned about their dignity and about offerings to be paid to them, and that man’s concerns must be rectified and punished by man. It must be recalled, however, that the spirit ancestors and the gods sustain and keep the community (Busia, 204).

The substance of traditional religions is tremendously varied (Ellwood, 29). Each tribe exhibits certain unique variations. But the essence of all African traditional religions is the overlaying of our world by another world of gods, spirits of the returning dead and rites in a world where everything is alive. Moreover, their priests, through ecstasies (out-of-body journeys), are believed to be able to control spirits and travel in a trance to the spirit world or to intercede with the gods.

Finding a Common Ground Between Traditional Religions and Christianity

Traditional religions and Christianity have some things in common, to the extent that it has been suggested that traditional religions constitute a preparation for the hearing of the Christianity’s unique Gospel. A common ground can be found in the area of how the universe came to be (cosmology).

Both religions believe in a Supreme God who is creator. This Supreme God is also benevolent, a helper and a deliverer. God in both religions, rules by delegated authority. In Christianity, God rules by his divine Son and through governments, and family heads. But in traditional religion, God rules through lesser gods, ancestors, and families.

Both Christianity and African traditional religions have creation accounts. In Christianity, Adam sinned in the Garden of Eden, and an alienation of humans from God resulted. With this, alienation from an originally given right relationship of humans with God, death, both physical and spiritual, entered the world. In most African traditional

religions, the Supreme God dwelt close to humanity until humanity offended God. The offended God departed and chose to dwell far away from the reach of humanity.

The two religions claim that the universe is inhabited by spiritual beings as well as physical beings. These spirit-beings are both good and bad. In addition to the Supreme God, both religions acknowledge the existence of a head of the evil spirits who is a personal opponent to humankind and is notorious for rebellion and destruction. In Christianity, this evil one is known as humanity's accuser, Satan.

Traditional religions and Christianity have specialized ministers who administer certain functions for the people they serve. Christianity has pastors, priests, and elders, while traditional religions have priests, priestesses, and prophets.

Sacrifice for sin is an important theme in both religions. In African traditional religions, sacrifices are human beings' attempt to turn back evil, or to bargain with God. In Christianity, however, God incarnate in the Person of Jesus Christ died as a sacrifice for the sins of the world.

Both religions recognize the important role of the family as the basic unit of society. The family nurtures the individual and offers the individual a sense of community.

Finally, both religions believe in the continuation of life beyond death.

The summary above, while not exhausting all the commonality between Christianity and traditional religions, shows some resemblance between the cosmology of traditional religion and Christianity. These resemblances are useful in dialogue between the two religions. At the same time, there are crucial differences between the two religions.

Tension Between Christianity and Traditional Religions

The main differences between Christianity and African traditional religions exist in the domain of their respective claims and in their organization. Above all, they differ on how a human being enters a blessed eternity in the presence of a holy and just God.

In traditional religions there is a faint line between humanity and the world of the spirits. Communication with the spirit world is the norm rather than the exception. God speaks the language of the people, the gods speak the language of the people, and the ancestors also speak the language of the people. But in Christianity God does not permit its adherents to communicate with any spirit apart from Him. God also forbids any attempt to contact the spirits of the dead. Certainly the Scriptures note that at times angels talked to human beings. Angels approached Abraham; an angel talked to Joshua; an angel appeared to Mary; and an angel appeared to the women who visited Jesus' tomb. Yet it is clear that the humans involved did not initiate these encounters.

Christianity's emphasis is on the unique quality, content, and purpose of its revelation, while traditional religions make no such claim. Traditional religions may be called nature religions. They are "directed towards the maintenance of vitality in the life and society of the natural man" (Williamson, 96-99), while Christianity's emphasis is on a special spiritual kingdom centered in a unique individual who is both God and Man come to give sinners forgiveness and God's new creation.

In this regard, Christianity sees the Divine Being in terms of a unique Person revealed and involved in history, Jesus of Nazareth. Through Him God the Creator, who is also Redeemer of creation, is fulfilling His will and purposes. For the traditional religionist the Creator Supreme God is far removed from human involvement, least of all its suffering. He is inaccessible to humankind.

Christianity's strong ethical consciousness is based on God's action on behalf of fallen humanity (Colossians 3:1-3). For the adherent of traditional religions, though, what is called religion is not in any way related to moral ideas. Righteousness is usually set forth by society. Righteousness is to honor and sacrifice to gods and ancestors, and to observe tribal norms of behavior and taboos (Ellwood, 51). But when the Bible gives its readers explicit ethics and morals, it is God who sets the standard for righteousness. At the same time, He also gives righteousness and empowers righteous living of anyone who is "in Christ." A person is righteous in God's sight when he or she trusts Christ as the truly Righteous Savior. In Christ is the central revelation of God's grace and forgiveness (Isaiah 59:14).

Unlike traditional religions, Christianity is not rooted in one land or race of people but is universal. According to Christianity, God speaks to individuals and groups of people across all cultures. God as Creator and Redeemer gives each and every individual a special sense of worth and dignity. Human self-esteem is not dependent upon one's social status or clan prominence or fulfillment of tribal ritual, but upon God esteeming them by saving them in Jesus Christ.

In traditional religions, God is just like a natural inheritance: passed from generation to generation, giving the group rather than the individual the sense of worth and dignity. With reference to Akan religion, for example, J.B. Danquah said that "Akan religion, in its highest expression, is the worship of the race." (Danquah, 169)

Christianity has a sacred book, creeds and dogmas. Traditional religions are expressed through cultic rites and religious practices. Oral tradition and repetitive rituals convey beliefs in traditional religions.

In summary, Hiebert (1978) would classify Christianity as a high religion and traditional religions as low religion. A high religion is systematized and well-organized. "High" religion places emphasis on the high God and cosmic ideologies. Low religions place emphasis on how to control spiritual power. Their main concerns are pressing earthly issues. These differences prepare the ground for a closer look into the worldview of the traditional religionist.

Christian Witness and the Worldview of Traditional Religion

Christians must learn the categories of thought of traditional religionists and explore ways by which Christianity can be communicated through their own categories. In witnessing about Jesus' ministry on behalf of helpless sinners, Christians can address central issues of the Christian faith without neglecting issues relating to ethnic identity.

The traditional religionist lives in community with family, ancestors, and gods. He finds his identity in this relationship. He will be interested in issues relating to his identity within the Christian message. How could he be a member of his tribe, break his ancestral links and become a Christian, an identity apparently foreign to him? He lives in a spiritual world, a context of participation in a world surrounded by God, the gods and the ancestors, and Christians need to respond to his questions on these concerns.

Christians can communicate the unique message of the Gospel to the traditional religionist without compromising the message or asking the hearers to annihilate their culture. The central proclamation of Christianity, the giving and receiving of God's forgiveness of sin through Jesus Christ, as well as issues relating to theological identity, do not need to be divorced from one another. It is possible to bring them together. God is to be proclaimed as the rescuing Creator God of all people Who in Jesus Christ provided every tribe and nation the way to a blessed eternal life. Moreover, He is the only one true God in whom the traditional religionist receives his valuable identity.

Communicating the Central Issues of Christianity to the Traditional Religionist

God the world's Creator is also its Redeemer. He Himself acted in Jesus Christ to solve the universal sinfulness of human beings, and their need for his rescue from sin's domination.

In addressing the universal sinfulness of humanity, Christians need to reformulate and expand the traditional religionist's understanding of sin and salvation according to biblical concepts. Sin must be defined as God sees it, beginning with pre-existing perceptions of sin and salvation and redefining this indigenous terminology to conform to biblical categories. This reformulation would enable the Traditional Religionist to see the futility of turning to ancestors and spirits for freedom from bondage to sin, ancestors and evil spirits. Rather the Christian message brings to the traditional religionist certain salvation as a gift already purchased for him, wrapped in the Person of the living God incarnate, Jesus Christ, Lord of all time, places and people.

African Traditional Religion and Sin

In traditional religions sin is defined theologically and socially.

Theological sins are primarily blasphemies or breach of vows against the gods or the ancestors. They are sins defined by spirits, sins that disrupt human relationships with

God, gods, and spirits. The tendency to fall out of favor with the gods and the ancestors causes the traditional religionist to live in an environment of fear. When he sins against the gods he only has recourse to sacrifices to seek blessings, appease angry gods, induce spiritual beings to turn back evil, and to honor them. These sacrifices are rarely done in praise of God.

Social sins, on the other hand, are offences committed against individuals or groups within the culture. In these cases there is a breach of the individual against the corporate community (Mbiti, "God, Sin and Salvation in African Religion," 4-5). The tendency to lose face discourages social sin. Interestingly, the greatest social sin is sorcery, since someone in the community is covertly seeking to kill, maim, or destroy by ritual means.

Sin is anything that disrupts the cohesiveness of an ordered world and causes disharmony. When disharmony occurs, rituals such as sacrifices and offerings must be performed to restore order in the universe. For the traditional religionist, salvation is the restoration of harmony. It is achieved through sacrifices which reestablish the spiritual balance between God and man, the spirits and man, the departed and the living (Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 59).

The Christian needs to explain to the traditional religionist that humanity is by nature sinful and that his concepts of sin, righteousness and salvation displease God. Because sin is more than a matter of wrong thoughts or inadequate rituals, the traditional religionists, like all sinful human beings, need to turn in total dependence upon Christ's sacrifice on the cross for forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with God (2 Corinthians 5:17-21).

Christianity and Sin

A culture that has a strong sense of theological sin is generally responsive to the proclamation of the Good News of Divine rescue. The Christian has to explain to the Traditional Religionist how Christianity, whose concept of sin is primarily theological, has a deeper awareness of sin's impact on human beings. Christianity tackles sin's roots in the human heart.

Christianity sees humanity as a fallen race (Romans 6:23). This fallen condition alienates human beings from the holy God. Every person's basic need is salvation from sin's bondage and the gift of reconciliation with God through Jesus Christ.

The fact that the traditional religionist continuously offers sacrifices to his gods for sin indicates that he is sinful by nature. Nevertheless, any sacrifices human beings perform are not able to atone for the penalties connected to his sinful nature. Christians come with the Good News that human beings do not offer sacrifices any longer. God Himself has offered the once-and-for-all perfect sacrifice through His Son Jesus Christ. Born sinless, Jesus also lived a sinless life. He also died on a cross as a sacrifice on behalf of sinful humanity, paving the way for the gift of forgiveness to sinners and peace

with God. Christ's sacrifice is powerful enough to atone for the man's sinful nature, hence the supremacy of Christ and the Christian sacrifice to that of the African traditional religionist.

God continues to exhort Africans, as well as all others, to repent of their sins and trust in Jesus Christ for the new life He provides. The traditional religionist has lost sight of this merciful and gracious God Who gives redemption in Jesus. For the traditional religionists to stay focused upon the true God in spirit and truth, Jesus Christ is the only help. The traditional religionist needs to turn his back on his idols and ancestral spirits, who in reality are manifestations of demonic spirits, and seek God's comfort in Christ Jesus.

The Christian must speak the comforting, Good News that God will protect the traditional religionist from any attacks of the evil spirits. Christ made a public show of them on the cross. And His Easter empty tomb is the proof of that conquest.

The traditional religionist is to be invited to be baptized into the Name of the Triune God, and thereby have God's Spirit, the blessing of the sonship of Jesus Christ, and the heavenly Father's favor (Matthew 28:19–20).

However, the Traditional Religionist will want to hear more than the communication of the Gospel. He will want to find out how the Gospel fulfills his quest for identity. His usual question is: "Is that gospel not a white man's religion?" "Is it not for Westernized people?"

How can the Traditional Religionist find his identity in Christianity?

Traditional Religionists' Identity in Christianity

When Basel missionaries first witnessed to the Akropong Chief in Ghana in the nineteenth century, the Akropong chief promised the missionaries that he would only grant them audience if the white missionaries could produce in his presence black men who were Christians. The missionaries, in response to the chief's request, sent for black Jamaican Christians who had been settled in Liberia after the abolition of slavery in America. The Jamaican Christians traveled by sea to Ghana, and when the chief recognized that blacks could find their identity in Christ, he allowed the missionaries and the Jamaicans to stay at Akropong.

The chief was concerned with what most traditional religionists are concerned with. "Is Christianity for the African?" "Is the Christian God not a foreign God?"

The Christian needs to explain that witnessing to Christ does not consist in introducing something foreign into the traditional culture, but it is letting the Christian Gospel relate to the revelation God has given of Himself prior to Christian witness. The task of the Christian is to convince the traditional religionist to see points of contact

between what God has revealed in the traditional religionist's culture (general revelation) and the unique revelation that is the saving gospel.

God, through the power and order of the created universe, as well as the internal witness of the accusing conscience has given to all people a testimony that they are accountable to him at a final judgment. No one can object that adequate opportunity had not been given to know God and his moral demands (Romans 1:19-20).

General revelation is therefore God's ready-made point of entry by which the traditional religionist may begin his journey to the identity God himself establishes for him in the Christian faith. For this reason, the Christian, in his witness to the Gospel can feel free to use the language, concepts and idioms of the traditional religionist to account for the need for the blessing of the Christian faith. Because the same God of Whom the Christian testifies has already revealed Himself to the traditional religionist to some extent, the Christian message loses its foreign identity and assumes an indigenous identity. For the same God who was imperfectly known by the traditional religionist has now made himself fully known as the Rescuer of the helpless through Jesus Christ.

Thus, God's previous revelation in the culture of the traditional religionist becomes one of the means of linking the traditional religionist to Christianity. Christianity no longer needs to be viewed as a foreign religion, for in it the traditional religionist finds his true identity. (Galatians 3:26-28). In short, linking God's previous revelation (general revelation) to the unique Christian Gospel helps in presenting that Gospel to traditional religionists (Romans 10:14, 17).

Conclusion

The Christian needs an objective understanding of African traditional religion in order to effectively witness about the Christian faith. It is also important for the Christian to communicate the Gospel within the context of the cultural worldview of the tribal religionist.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ offers abundant hope to the African traditional religionist. It offers new birth and cleansing for the traditional religionist, and introduces him to the supreme God from whom the traditionalist has been alienated for a long time. It frees the traditional religionist from extreme spiritual bondage and the fear of wicked spirits and introduces him to the liberty and comfort in Jesus. This Gospel points to the sacrifice of Jesus as the only valid sacrifice to overcome all evil powers, even death. It introduces the traditional religionist to the gracious and merciful love of the Lord God, who cannot be manipulated but works all things together for good for those who love him in Jesus Christ (Romans 8:28).

The Christian message is both universal and particular. For the Gospel provides the traditional religionist an enabling environment for the recognition and response to the living God he had previously known, not in His mercy, but in His demands and power. Now this God is revealed within a new context, the context of Christianity and the gift of

Divine mercy and redemption. Thereby the Traditional religionist comes to share in the Abrahamic link, worshiping the one and only God together with a universal body of saints.

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