

Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies



Volume 5, Number 1 (January 2002)

THE NATURE OF CONTINUITY AND DISCONTINUITY OF
GHANAIAAN PENTECOSTAL CONCEPT OF SALVATION
IN AFRICAN COSMOLOGY¹

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1. Introduction

Though the mainline historic churches have been operating in Ghana since the beginning of the nineteenth century, it was only at the beginning of the twentieth century that Evangelical Pentecostalism began to register its presence. In spite of this late arrival, it is now by far the most important religious trend in Ghana today. The Pentecostals form the bulk of the Christian population of 62% in Ghana. It is also noteworthy that the largest Protestant church in the country is a Pentecostal denomination: the Church of Pentecost. Why has the growth of the Pentecostal churches outstripped the mainline denominations, which have been operating in the country for over two hundred years? This article attempts to address this and other related issues.

From the human perspective, the single significant factor that has given rise to a boom in Pentecostal activities in Ghana is that Pentecostalism has found a fertile ground in the all-pervasive primal religious traditions, especially in its cosmology and in its concept of salvation.

Field has underscored the irrepressible nature of the ideas underpinning the primal religion, when she said that:

Though it is not difficult by warfare, foreign administration, modern industry and other means, to smash up an ancient religious organisation, the ideas which sustained it are not easily destroyed. They

¹ An earlier version of this study was presented at the Theological Symposium on Non-Western Pentecostalism, Anaheim, CA, USA in May 2001. The present version has been substantially revised.

are only disbanded, vagrant and unattached. But given sufficient sense of need, they will mobilise again.²

Field's observation, among other things, underscores the resilient nature of the traditional religious ideas of the people which the European colonizers and the Christianization agencies encountered. These ideas have continued to influence the people's perception and understanding of salvation.

The Akan people of Ghana form the largest ethnic group in the country. The core of the religious ideas of the Akan people could be equally applicable to the various ethnic groups in Ghana, and indeed the fundamentals of the traditional African perception of reality as a whole. I will therefore use their traditional religious ideas as a springboard in our attempt to examine the primal understanding of salvation of the people of Ghana.³

2. The Akan Search for Salvation

2.1 The Roots of Primal Conception of Salvation

The primal cosmology and the primal view of life are the main factors here. The primal cosmology postulates external hostile agencies more powerful than humans. A person sees him/herself as constantly exposed to the influences of evil supernaturalism. In the terrestrial realm are found men and women who manipulate the spirit force in the celestial realm for evil purposes. The negative perception is further deepened by the activities of religious specialists. The concept of power thus reigns supreme in this spirit-filled universe. Every event here on earth is therefore traceable to a supernatural power in the spirit realm. From the same source, therefore, recourse is made for the ultimate succor of humanity.

² Margaret J. Field, "Some Shrines of the Gold Coast and Their Significance," *Africa* 13:2 (April 1940), pp. 138-49 (138).

³ The inhabitants of Akim, Akwamu, Akuapem, Assin, Ashanti, Denkyira and Wassaw belong to the Akan group, speaking the Twi language. S. G. Williamson, *Akan Religion and the Christian Faith* (Accra: Ghana Universities Press, 1965), p. x points out that "the Fante people, and such tribes as the Brongs of north Ashanti are also, however, from the point of view of language and tribal custom, political organisation and religious beliefs, Akans."

It is from this background that salvation is defined and experienced. In the religious encounter between Pentecostalism and Akan religion, this perception of reality becomes integral in the proclamation of the gospel. For Pentecostals (including the trained scientist and the illiterate peasant), these forces are real. They are not just the figments of the imaginations of the ignorant. The cosmic struggle is accepted as real because the Bible, they argue, presents the phenomenon as real, not just because the traditional culture admits this to be so.

2.2 The Akan Worldview

What is the Akan primal understanding of the nature of the universe and what do they consider to be the highest good of humans, that is, salvation? How is salvation perceived and appropriated? What is the religious and linguistic meaning of salvation in the traditional Akan worldview? We will attempt to address these questions in the following section.

Central to the Akan religious ideas is the belief in the multiplicity of spirits in the universe. The Akan cosmos, like that of other African peoples, is divided into “two inter-penetrating and inseparable, yet distinguishable, parts,”⁴ namely, the world of spirits and the world of human. The Akan understanding of the spirit world conveniently falls within Parrinder’s fourfold classification of categories within West African religions, namely, the Supreme God, chief divinities or gods, ancestors, and charms or amulets.⁵ The Supreme Being is variously referred to as *Onyankopon*, *Onyame* (also spelled, *Nyame*), or *Odomankoma*.⁶ *Onyame* implies the basic idea of deity as understood in Christian theology. *Onyankopon* denotes the supremacy of God, the One Greater *Nyame*. *Odomankoma*, denotes the infiniteness of *Nyame*. Next to *Onyame* is *Asase Yaa*, the earth goddess, who is responsible for fertility. *Asase Yaa*, in some sense, is also the “custodian of morality and social decorum, the traditional ethical code.”⁷ In addition to *Asase Yaa*,

⁴ Cyril C. Okorocha, *The Meaning of Religious Conversion in Africa* (Aldershot: Avebury, 1987), p. 52.

⁵ E. G. Parrinder, *West African Religion* (London: Epworth, 1961), p. 12.

⁶ The Akan designate the Supreme Being by three distinctive names, *Onyame* (also often called *Nyame*), *Onyankopon* (this like the *Nyame*, has other ways of spelling or pronouncing), and *Odomankoma*. See J. B. Danquah, *The Akan Doctrine of God* (London: White Friars, 1968), pp. 30-31, 43.

⁷ Okorocha, *The Meaning of Religious Conversion*, p. 52.

there is a host of divinities or gods (*abosom*), capricious spirit entities, believed to be the children of God. These nature spirits are of three categories: state gods, family or clan gods, and gods of the medicine man. Some of the most famous gods are associated with lakes, rivers, rocks, mountains and forests. The continued featuring of a particular god (*obosom*) in the religious pantheon of the Akan largely depends upon the ability of that *obosom* to function to the satisfaction of supplicants. The Akan esteem the Supreme Being and the ancestors far above the *abosom* (gods) and amulets. Attitudes to the latter depend upon their success, and vary from healthy respect to sneering contempt and rejection.

The Akan never confuse the identity of *Onyame* and the identity of the *abosom*. The *abosom* can be discarded, whereas *Onyame* cannot. Johannes Christaller, who devoted a considerable amount of effort to study the Akan language, had to conclude that the Akan, presumed by outsiders to be polytheists, were “to a great extent rather monotheist [since] they apply the term for God only to one Supreme Being.”⁸ Patrick Ryan makes the same important observation in his article on the distinction of God from gods by the Yoruba and the Akan. He concluded that before the advent of the European missionaries, the Akan and Yoruba held to the absolute uniqueness of the Supreme God. He writes:

Finally, it should be noted, in the process of dismantling the category of “God and the gods” in West Africa, that both the Yoruba and Akan populations of West Africa are better equipped linguistically than are Semites, Greeks, Romans and their inheritors to press the absolute uniqueness of God. There is no need for Olodumare (Olorun) or Onyame (Onyankopon) to arise above the “other gods,” as Psalm 82 bids Him. It would seem, in fact, that even before Muslims and Christians arrived in the West African forest zone...speakers of Yoruba and Akan were assured of supremacy of the One Whom a modern theologian calls “the incomprehensible term of human transcendence.”⁹

The ancestral cult is one of the strongholds within the religious universe of the Akan. This has been made possible because of the Akan understanding of humans and the community. Since survival of humans and their community is dependent upon the help given by the ancestors

⁸ Christaller, *A Dictionary of the Asante and Fante Language* (1881), pp. 342-43, quoted by Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity* (Oxford: Regnum Press, 1992), pp. 291-92.

⁹ Patrick J. Ryan, “‘Arise, O God!’ The Problem of ‘Gods’ in West Africa,” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 11:3 (1980), pp.161-171 (169).

and the divinities, how humans relate to the spirit force is crucial to their well-being.

The idea of the cosmic struggle is strong in the Akan understanding of the nature of the universe. For one to be able to fulfill his or her aspirations in life requires the “balance of power” in favor of the supplicant. This “tilting of cosmic power” for one’s own benefit or for the benefit of his or her community is what I have referred to as “maintaining the cosmological balance.”

2.3 Maintaining the Cosmological Balance

Within the world of humans are found men and women who manipulate the spirit force for evil purposes. These are the *akaberekyerefo* and *adutofo* (charmers, enchanters and sorcerers) and *abayifo* (witches). The activities of these forces are directed against humankind. It is within this context that charms and amulets play their role. The forces of evil are always at work against human beings in order to prevent them from enjoying abundant life, or fulfilling their *nkrabea* (destiny). The central focus of the religious exercises of these religious specialists is therefore the harnessing of power inherent in the spirit force for their own advantage. To the Akan, just like other African peoples, whatever happens to the human being has a religious interpretation. To them, behind the physical is the spiritual; behind the seen is the unseen. From the spiritual source, therefore, lies the ultimate succor.

It is the foregoing picture that colors the perception and appropriation of salvation by the Akan. Herein lies the ultimate goal of their religious pursuits.

2.4 The Akan Primal Religion and the Search for Salvation

As one critically examines the prayers of the Akan in the traditional religious setting, he or she cannot help but come to the conclusion that the overriding concern is the enjoyment of *nkwa* (life). This is not life in abstraction but rather life in its concrete and fullest manifestations. It means the enjoyment of long life, vitality, vigor and health; it means life of happiness and felicity.¹⁰ *Nkwa* also includes the enjoyment of *ahonyade* (possessions, prosperity), that is, wealth, riches and

¹⁰ J. G. Christaller, *Dictionary of the Asante and Fante Language Called Tshi (Twi) Based on Akuapem Dialects*, 2nd ed. (Basel: Evangelical Missionary Society, 1933), p. 277.

substance,¹¹ including children. *Nkwa* also embodies *asomdwei*, that is, a life of peace and tranquility, and life free from disturbance.¹²

The religious people are well aware that as much as they work hard to experience *nkwa* in its full manifestations, there comes an overwhelming realization of the fact that there are powerful forces fighting against individuals and their community. Abundant life can only become available to them through the mediation of the spirit beings—divinities and the ancestors. Unto these beings, therefore, the supplicant constantly lifts up their eyes in an expectation of divine aid. The following sample of a traditional prayer, normally said by the head of family during important festivals, is illustrative of this motif.

Almighty God here is drink; Earth god here is drink; Great ancestors come and have a drink.... We are not calling you because of some evil tidings. The year has come again and you did not allow any evil to befall us. We are offering you drink; beseeching that the coming year will be prosperous. Don't allow any evil to come near our habitation. Bless us with rain, food, children, health and prosperity.¹³

Rattray gives us another example from the prayers of an Ashanti king at an annual festival:

The edges of the years have met, I pray for life.
May the nation prosper.
May the women bear children.
May the hunters kill meat.
We who dig for gold, let us get gold to dig, and grant that I get some for the upkeep of my kingship.¹⁴

These prayers, like many other prayers found among the various ethnic groups of Ghana, illustrate the concerns of the Akan and the need for vital power which subsists in the Supreme Being and the non-human spirit entities.

Beckmann, commenting on the Ashanti king's prayer cited above, states:

¹¹ Christaller, *Dictionary of the Asante and Fante Language* (1933), p. 186.

¹² Christaller, *Dictionary of the Asante and Fante Language* (1933), p. 468.

¹³ My personal observation.

¹⁴ R. Sutherland Rattray, *Religion and Art in Ashanti* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1927), p. 138.

There was no self-abnegation in the king's prayer. He called for power, life, prosperity, fertility, success, and wealth. The vitality of West African religion may have been one reason why Afro-American slaves were able to survive capture, brutal transport to the Americas, slavery—and still keep dancing.¹⁵

The ultimate end of human existence is the enjoyment of multifaceted *nkwa*. But it is also clear from one's experience that, if left to the individual alone, it will only remain an illusory dream for the obvious fact that there are some forces, fighting hard to remove *nkwa* from one's reach.

The uncertainties and anxieties one faces range from those which originate from the day to day problems of life to those which are born of the fear of evil spirits and malicious persons, such as witches and sorcerers. To maintain and reactivate the protective presence of the benevolent divine force, the individuals and their community must of necessity maintain the cosmological balance through protective and preventive rites. These rites are designed to cleanse the tribe, the clan, the family and the individual, and to secure the much-needed protection from the spirit force. Protective rites immunize potential victims from *abayifo* (witches), *akaberekyerefo* and *asumantufo* (sorcerers, charmers and bad medicine men) and evil spirits on the one hand; and, on the other, purificatory rites remove the danger-radiating pollution, which would ordinarily destroy the personhood of the individual concerned, and thus prevent him or her from fully participating in *nkwa*. The ancestral rites seem to fulfill both protective and purificatory categories. The ancestors are both appeased in case they are offended, and petitioned to support as well as protect their descendants.

The societal equilibrium is thus maintained and preserved through the purificatory and protective rites and the observance of certain prescribed taboos. Violations of these demands may cause serious consequences to the individual, his or her family or an entire community. The individual realizes that, in spite of the constant efforts one makes in order to bring meaning into their life, things do go wrong. When this happens, those involved go to *abisa* (consultation with the shrine priest). The intention is to contact the spirit force in the spirit realm to find out what might have caused the problem. It is through the *abisa*¹⁶ that one is

¹⁵ D. M. Beckmann, *Eden Revival* (London: Concordia, 1975), p. 17.

¹⁶ *Abisa* is a religious term, implying "asking" or obtaining or seeking information on a particular issue, from the diviner, medicine man, or traditional

able to remove what would likely prevent the person from enjoying *nkwa*, which embodies *ahonya* (wealth) and *asomdwei* (peace and tranquility). It is to the religious specialist, the diviner, that one goes for *abisa*. One needs to know the forces behind the problems or the factors that might have occasioned his or her woes. This information is relevant to the individual in order to be able to arrest the situation. The information one obtains from the diviner may require that he or she performs some protective rites to secure protection against one's enemies. It may also require that some purificatory rites be performed in order to appease the ancestors or the divinities for some particular reason.

Some of these rites may be very elaborate and expensive. These expensive cases particularly involve matters that have been taken to the court of the gods in seeking for vengeance or vindication. The more powerful the particular deities are, the more expensive and elaborate the processes for disentanglement. In spite of the costs, victims do everything possible to raise the required money for it. If, for one reason or the other, one fails to do this, the "curse," it is believed, will still be hanging over the upcoming generations of the family. This ancestral yoke will remain in the family until a relative eventually removes it. It is only then that *nkwa* could become theirs.

2.5 The Akan Terms for Salvation

The main Twi term for salvation is *nkwagye*. It is made up of two words: *nkwa* and *gye*. *Nkwa*, as we indicated above, means vital life, vitality, vigor, health, happiness and felicity. In short, *nkwa* means abundant life, that is, "life in all its fullness." *Gye* has several meanings.¹⁷ But when used in the salvific sense, it means "to rescue," "to retake," "to recapture," "to redeem," "to ransom," "to buy out of servitude or penalty"; it also means "to release," "to free," "to deliver," "to liberate," and "to save." It could also mean "to lead," "to conduct," "to guide," "to take along with," "to protect," "to defend," or "to preserve."¹⁸ The term *nkwa-gye*, therefore, is pregnant with rich meaning. Among other things, it means the "liberation or preservation of abundant life" or the "saving of abundant life." It is the liberation and preservation of life and all that goes with it.

priests. "Go to *abisa*," therefore, means consulting the diviner in order to obtain information on a particular issue(s).

¹⁷ Chistaller, *Dictionary of the Asante and Fante Language* (1933), p. 156.

¹⁸ Chistaller, *Dictionary of the Asante and Fante Language* (1933), p. 156.

The *nkwagyefo* (the one who saves), therefore, is the one who saves and preserves one's life. The related terms are synonymous nouns *agyenkwa* and *ogyefo*. They mean the "rescuer," "savior," "redeemer" and "deliverer." Whether used in reference to a deity or to a human being, it conveys the same meaning of deliverance. For example, in a situation where the timely intervention of a person prevented a catastrophe or something unfavorable from happening, that person could be said to have become *ogyefo* or *agyenkwa* in that particular instance.

The term *agyenkwa* and its cognates, therefore, convey concrete realities. The *agyenkwa* is a powerful one, otherwise he cannot rescue and protect one from the powerful malevolent spirit beings such as the *abayifo*, *akaberekyerefo*, *adutofo* and the *awudifo* (wicked ones). He saves from danger and all perilous conditions. The *agyenkwa* places one in the "realm of the protected ones" and offers *banbo* (security). The *agyenkwa* rescues one out from situations considered inimical, injurious, or life threatening. The *agyenkwa* saves, protects and preserves life.

The savior rescues both from danger and continues to protect the "rescued one" from danger, and makes it possible for one to experience *nkwa*, that is, life in all its fullness, which embodies *ahonyade* and *asomdwei*. It is in this vein that Mercy Oduyoye could state:

The Agyenkwa means the one who rescues, who holds your life in safety, takes you out of a life-denying situation and places you in a life affirming one. The Rescuer plucks you from a dehumanising ambience and places you in a position where you can grow toward authentic humanity. The Agyenkwa gives you back your life in all its fullness.¹⁹

In the foregoing considerations of the Akan concept of salvation, I have stated that salvation has to do with concrete realities, things one can identify within the day-to-day life. It has to do with physical and immediate dangers that militate against individual or communal survival and enjoyment of *nkwa*. It embodies *ahonyade* (good health, general prosperity and safety and security); it also embodies *asomdwei* (the state of being which radiates peace and tranquility). This is the general context within which salvation is perceived and appropriated. It is this worldview that Christianity encountered.

¹⁹ Mercy Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1986), p. 98.

3. Pentecostal Response

3.1 Pentecostal Understanding of Salvation

What then is the understanding of the concept of salvation in the religious consciousness of Pentecostals? It may be stated that though when the Pentecostals talk of “salvation,” they are talking primarily in terms of the atonement, forgiveness of sin and reconciliation with God. Yet by their practices, they are reaching out to things that go beyond the “born again” experience, to an experience that permeates their life here and now life and promises them of a better tomorrow in the hereafter.²⁰ Evidence available indicates that supplicants attend Pentecostal prayer camps primarily in search of salvation that relate to the here and now. Supplicants’ concerns include the need for healing; financial and economic problems; problems related to marriages, children, employment and family needs. Some go there because of lawsuits; others go there because they are struggling with drunkenness and they want to overcome it. Some go there because of educational issues; they go there because of accommodation needs: a place to lay their heads. Some go there because of the problem of bad or frightful dreams; some have problems with demonic and witchcraft attacks. Others go there because of social expectations, particularly the need to provide for their families. But this is not all. Some supplicants, in addition to their material needs, seek “spiritual upliftment.” This category of supplicants seeks prayer so that they can move beyond the experience of nominal Christianity to a devoted and committed Christian life.

These are the day-to-day needs of real people, men and women, old and young, rich and poor, literate and illiterate. When these people pray or ask for prayers, they are reaching out to God, in search of “salvation.” Through these Pentecostal churches and their healing centers many claim to have received salvation to otherwise hopeless situations. For these

²⁰ A study of the contents of prayers at Pentecostal prayer sessions amply demonstrate this. See E. K. Larbi, “The Development of Ghanaian Pentecostalism: A Study in the Appropriation of the Christian Gospel in Twentieth Century Ghana Setting with Special Reference to the Christ Apostolic Church, the Church of Pentecost and the International Central Gospel Church” (Ph.D. thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1995). Though Owusu Tabiri, the foremost healing evangelist in contemporary Ghana, spent most of his time praying for the physical needs of supplicants, the issue of “accepting Christ as Lord and personal Saviour” appears to be his key starting point, since it is believed that this is the door to God’s blessings.

people, the concept of salvation cannot be divorced from their existential needs. The “Savior” in this sense, is not only the one that saves them from the curse and the blight of sin (though this is their starting point), he is also the one who supremely helps them in their day-to-day existential needs.

Since it appears that the overriding concern of majority of suppliants is mainly for things related to the existential here and now, one may be tempted to conclude that African Christians are not conscious of redemption from sin. Valid as this position may be in certain segments of African Christianity, it does not fully account for the African experience, or at least the evidence I have with the Church of Pentecost (COP), the International Central Gospel Church (ICGC), and the prayer groups I studied in Ghana. It may be said that because of the African’s holistic orientation to reality, and more so because of economic, social and political upheavals that perennially plague the continent of Africa, material concerns play a very important role in his religious consciousness, and in African perceptions of the role of the “savior” in this regard. However, to assert that Africans are not conscious of redemption from sin may seem rather incongruous. Mbiti’s observation may be relevant for us here:

[W]hile some African Christians, including many in the independent churches, put great emphasis on the physical saving acts of Jesus, such as those recorded in the gospels, we must not limit the African understanding to the physical level of life. There are many who also put great emphasis on the Cross of Jesus and its saving grace. Perhaps the best example of this is the East African Revival Movement.... Nobody can deny that through the channels of the Revival Movement, people are appropriating biblical salvation, which makes sense to their lives and satisfies their yearnings. The concentration here is more on Jesus and his Cross, and less on his other activities prior to the Cross. The revival also takes up the life of the believer after death, so that it holds firmly that the Christian goes immediately to be with the Lord in heaven.²¹

The interviews we conducted and the questionnaires we administered to several church members and church leaders within the COP, ICGC and others suggested that the biblical concept of the original sin is very clear among the classic Pentecostals and also among those

²¹ John S. Mbiti, *Bible and Theology in African Christianity* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 166, 168.

neo-Pentecostal leaders who have their roots in classic Pentecostalism, or the Scripture Union. When we asked our respondents the question: What is your understanding of terms like “Jesus saves,” “there is salvation in Jesus,” or “you need salvation,” almost all of them suggested as the first point the issue of original sin, the depravity of the human nature, and reconciliation that comes through the atonement of Jesus Christ. The material and physical aspects of “salvation” were most invariably suggested as secondary. In fact, Bishop Owusu Tabiri (one of the contemporary healing evangelists in Ghana), for instance, in spite of his concern with the health and the economic and social well being of his suppliants, necessarily anchors the suppliants in the doctrine of sin and the atonement. This may be due to the fact that Owusu Tabiri came from classic Pentecostalism.

My investigations revealed that some, when they heard the gospel preached to them, understood the issue of original sin and the need for forgiveness and reconciliation with God. However, because of their life experiences, what really attracted them to join the church was the concrete and material help that Jesus provides in the here and now. It was later on that they fully appreciated and embraced teachings on the original sin and the atonement.

Mbiti’s observation is relevant for us here:

Often in the New Testament, individuals are physically saved first by Jesus and through the acts of the apostles. Only later does the spiritual dimension of their salvation surface and grow. But this need not be the order of sequence since God’s grace is not confined to one method, and the experience of Paul on the road to Damascus is a clear illustration of the reversal of this sequence. Indeed many African Christians came to the Christian message of salvation, which speaks first about spiritual matters and only later, or not at all, about physical welfare in their lives.... What is important here is to consider salvation in holistic terms.... Only when one is expressed at the expense of the other, a distortion of biblical salvation ensues and one part of man is virtually excluded and starved out.²²

3.2 The Roots of Pentecostal Concept of Salvation

The two main sources of influence for the Pentecostals’ concept of salvation are the Bible and the primal worldview. The cornerstone of Pentecostal theological self-understanding is the Bible. Pentecostals

²² Mbiti, *Bible and Theology*, pp. 158, 159.

believe the Bible to be God's word and therefore inerrant. "The Bible is infallible in its declarations, final in its authority, all sufficient in its provisions and comprehensive in its sufficiency."²³ The Pentecostals believe "the whole Bible, both Old and New Testaments, is the pure word that cannot be changed, added to, or taken away from, without terrific consequences."²⁴ Though the Pentecostals believe that the word of God was first given in particular historical contexts, they are resolute in insisting on its eternal relevance. Old Testament and New Testament promises to the Jews and the early Christians for their material well being (e.g., Deut 28:1-15; 30:9-10); Malachi 3:8ff; and Luke 6:38; 3 John 2; Mark 16) are thus literally appropriated by Pentecostals. For them, the gap between the original receptors of the divine self-disclosure and contemporary readers is bridged through the agency of the Holy Spirit, the supreme biblical teacher.²⁵

The Pentecostal presupposition of biblical infallibility and biblical literalism finds its logical conclusion in what may be considered as a dualistic world view: a spiritual universe in which the devil and his fallen angels are constantly at enmity with God and his holy angels. Human beings are grouped into two in this cosmic arena: those who belong to God and those who belong to the devil. Pentecostals do not see any "demilitarized zone." You either belong to the "kingdom of light" or the "kingdom of darkness."

Spirit-filled believers, thus, are God's army in the terrestrial realm. The redemption of the rest of humankind is entrusted into their hands. They are to take the message to the unsaved, set the captives free, cast out demons from their human tenements, take dominion over the principalities, authorities and powers, heal the sick and raise the dead. Signs and wonders should necessarily follow the preaching of the gospel, thus confirming the veracity of the Bible. The signs that followed the early disciples are believed to be as valid now as then. Signs and wonders must of necessity follow believers today as they obediently testify to Christ. It is in this encounter that the gifts of the Holy Spirit become more significant.

²³ *Ministers' Manual* of Church of Pentecost (Accra, n.d.), p. 4.

²⁴ *Constitution* of Christ Apostolic Church (Accra, 1989), p. 6.

²⁵ The belief in the supernatural aid given by the Holy Spirit is seen as sufficient. Human effort alone in interpreting the text is thus discounted by some. It was this understanding that led some members of the group to discount Bible schools and seminaries.

For Pentecostals, the authority of the word of God does not so much rest in its historicity as in its source, though the former nonetheless is considered important. The word of God is authoritative, or powerful not because of its historical validity, but because it is the very words of the most powerful deity, the God among gods, and Lord among lords. It is because God is “all-powerful,” and the “God of miracles,” that the Pentecostals believe his word has potential power, for it carries divine authority. Their belief is thus in consonance with the affirmation that:

The Bible is not simply an historical book about the people of Israel; through a re-reading of this scripture in the social context of our struggle for our humanity, God speaks to us in the midst of our troublesome situation. This divine Word is not an abstract proposition but an event in our lives, empowering us to continue in the fight for our full humanity.²⁶

4. Concluding Thoughts

4.1 Akan Worldview and Christianity

In S. G. Williamson’s comparative study of Christianity and Akan religion, he argued that the church established by the western missionaries made some considerable gains both in propagating the Christian religion and in acting as a social and cultural force. Yet it was not able to speak directly to the people in religiously convincing terms. It, therefore, failed to meet the spiritual need at the level at which the Akan experiences it. He argues that the western mission-related church, by and large, is still an alien institution. It failed to root itself in the life and institutions of the Akan people in that:

The Christian church denominationally implanted from the west, has substantially retained its original forms and expressed itself in western modes. Missionaries clearly set out to establish, not an Akan Church, but the Church they represented in the homeland. The polity and organisation, the liturgies and devotional expressions, the discipline and instruction, the total outlook derives directly from the parent Missionary Societies and the Churches supporting them. The

²⁶ From the Final Communiqué, “Pan African Conference of Third World Theologies, December 17-23, 1977, Accra, Ghana,” in *African Theology en Route*, eds. Kofi Appiah-Kubi and Sergio Torres (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979), pp. 189-95 (192-93).

Christianity of the Akan area proves to be the denominational Christianity of the west.²⁷

Williamson continues that:

[B]y the assault of the missionary enterprise on traditional beliefs and practices, and by the nature and method of its approach, the implanted Christian faith denied the Akan outlook in fierce and abrupt terms, and thus failed to meet the Akan in his personally experienced religious need. The Akan became a Christian by cleaving to the new order introduced by the missionary rather than by working out his salvation within the traditional religious milieu.²⁸

Williamson's critique, like that of many other writers, raises several significant issues. The heart of it all is the issue of the relationship between Christianity and culture. At the heart of every culture lies the worldview: how people perceive, understand and interpret reality. Every culture has within its religious system certain practices directed towards the achievement of what is considered the highest good.

The missionaries came from a continent with a history of slave trade and colonial imperial expansion and domination. Christianity, dubbed the "white man's religion," was associated with a superior culture. The term "Christian" became synonymous with civilization and development. The agents of the proselytization process were conscious at that time of its developing technology and of its cultural achievements. Baeta rightly observes that:

The fact that the evangelists and their hearers belonged to such glaringly racial types; the fact that their cultural backgrounds were so different; the unfortunate associations of the colour black in European superstition; the Slave Trade, with Europeans being always owners and Africans always the owned...the fact that the majority of missionaries to our parts were connected with the movement known as Pietism; these and such-like factors determined the policy, which was adopted by all missions practically without exception, of non-amalgamation with, and aloofness from African culture.²⁹

²⁷ S. G. Williamson, *Akan Religion and the Christian Faith*, ed., Kwesi Dickson (Accra: Ghana Universities Press, 1965), p. 165.

²⁸ Williamson, *Akan Religion and the Christian Faith*, pp. 170-71.

²⁹ See Noel Smith, *The Presbyterian Church of Ghana 1835-1960* (Accra: Ghana Universities Press, 1966), p. 87.

The western mission agencies coming from post-enlightenment and rationalistic background approached the missionary task from this ideological frame of mind. For many in the receptor culture, Christianity was not accepted for its religious value. Rather, it was seen as:

... a religion which offered material blessings. To learn to read, to learn something of the ability of the European to control his environment and to evolve a superior material culture, factors, which to the African were bound with the white man's worship of Christ, operated as strong motives for announcing oneself as a baptismal candidate.³⁰

The attitude of the missionaries and their African disciples towards the Akan primal worldview and the Akan culture was one of negation, a denial of the validity of supernatural powers. For example, the Gold Coast Christian Council pamphlet on witchcraft postulated a position that the phenomenon of witchcraft was not a reality but a psychological delusion. The Council also relegated Tigare cult to the realm of trickery.³¹

The denial of the existence of the spirit-force (witches, sorcerers, fetishes, magic, charms and the local deities) in the missionary enterprise radically undermined the work of the missions. In the process, they ended up producing "two-world" Christians with double allegiance, as Asamoah observes:

Anybody who knows African Christians intimately will know that no amount of denial on the part of the Church will expel belief in supernatural powers from the minds of the Christian, and he becomes a hypocrite who in official church circles pretends to give the impression that he does not believe in these things, while in his own private life he resorts to practices which are the results of such beliefs.³²

Recognition of the malevolent spirit-entities, while at the same time proclaiming the supremacy of the all-powerful benevolent Christ, might have produced Christians of dual allegiance. While accepting the existence of several evil forces and the effects of their activities on the well-being of a human being, these Christians would set the whole

³⁰ Noel Smith, *Presbyterian Church of Ghana*, p. 101.

³¹ E. A. Asamoah, "The Christian Church and African Heritage," *International Review of Mission* 175, XLIV (July 1955), pp. 292-301 (297).

³² Asamoah, "The Christian Church and African Heritage," p. 297.

cosmic struggle in the context of the supremacy of Christ. This approach would have affected the worldview of the Akan “from the center,” thereby influencing his entire religious outlook.

Religion, by its nature and purpose, should be holistic: addressing the total needs of the total person: spiritual, physical and emotional, providing authentic answers for the person’s everyday quests, fears and anxieties. If a particular religious system fails to address what the people feel that their whole existence and survival hinge on, that system is bound to be jettisoned when the people are confronted with the real issues of life. For example we read, as far back as 1632, that the European priest at Elmina lamented that:

Edina [Elmina] had its own pagan priest to whom the people gave full confidence...he was even consulted by many so-called Christians, in secret of course...placing more confidence in him than in their Catholic priests.³³

The situation described above did not change during subsequent centuries. For example, we are told that Tigare caused “serious headaches to the Churches—often more than half of the congregation following the new cult.”³⁴

4.2 Pentecostal Message among Akans

In the Pentecostal proclamation, therefore Jesus is placed at the center of the cosmic struggle. The Son of God is presented as the *Osahene* (“Field Marshal”) who “has disarmed principalities, and powers,” and has “made public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross” (Col 2:15). The Champion of the cosmos has enabled the redeemed to be “seated with Him in the heavenly places far above the principalities, authorities and powers” (Eph 2:6).

The success of the Pentecostals, therefore, lies in their ability to place the traditional understanding of the cosmic struggle in the realm of Christian belief. The stand taken by the Pentecostals is thus the antithesis of the stand, which was taken by the emissaries of the historic churches who assumed the position that these forces were non-existent, much to the dismay of the majority of their followers. Although Pentecostals “have an uncompromising attitude towards traditional religion, which

³³ H. W. Debrunner, *A History of Christianity in Ghana* (Accra: Waterville, 1967), p. 32.

³⁴ Debrunner, *A History of Christianity in Ghana*, p. 32.

they depict as...diabolical,”³⁵ yet the traditional concept of salvation appears to have been a *praeparatio evangelica* to the Pentecostal conception of salvation. Pentecostals have taken the issue of material prosperity to the realm of divine blessings. The traditional African understanding of salvation and the biblical motif about God’s desire to intervene to rescue people in desperation, has continued to form much of the background of the way Pentecostals in particular and African Christians in general, perceive, appropriate and experience the concept of “salvation.” As the history of the church in Ghana has well illustrated, the need for healing, security and economic well-being continue to occupy the minds of African Christians. For them this is part and parcel of what they consider as salvation. Unless these are fully addressed, church members will inevitably seek succor from other realms. These sources, however, may not necessarily be Christian.

4.3 Continuity and Discontinuity between Pentecostal and the Primal Understanding of Salvation

My consideration of the issue of salvation in this paper has been based on my conviction that Pentecostalism, like every religion, is about salvation, no matter how this term is understood in various religious communities. My findings support the thesis that in the primal religion the followers are reaching out to a form of salvation that relates to the existential here and now. Their concept of salvation embodies the enjoyment of life in its fullness. The concept of salvation in the primal world is single-faceted, relating solely to the here and now. There is no concept of heaven tomorrow.

With regard to the Pentecostals, I have indicated that they have a dual faceted conception of salvation, incorporating “this-worldliness” and “other-worldliness.” In spite of this dual concept of salvation, the salvation of soul plays a central role in their scheme of salvation. The experience of “soul salvation” not only prepares the “redeemed ones” for the “celestial city” in the hereafter, but also, it is perceived as the key to abundant life or salvation today.

The Pentecostals’ concept of salvation (both classical and neo-Pentecostal) today embodies the enjoyment of prosperity, which includes wealth, health and fertility. Herein lies the continuity between the primal concept of salvation and that of the Pentecostals. Though the neo-

³⁵ Birgit Meyer, “‘Delivered from the Powers of Darkness’: Confessed of Satanic Riches in Christian Ghana,” *Africa* 65:2 (1995), pp. 236-55 (237).

Pentecostal movement is largely an offshoot of classic Pentecostalism, in spite of differing emphases, there is no essential difference between the two groups' conception of salvation, whether in the here and now or in the hereafter. It must, however, be noted that, though the primal understanding of salvation today is the same as the Pentecostals' conception of salvation, the way salvation is sought in the two realms is different. In the primal world salvation is sought through traditional forms of supernatural succor, which include the divinities, the mediatorial role of the ancestors, and the use of charms and amulets. But the Pentecostals are uncompromisingly hostile to these traditional forms of succor. They look to the Christian God as the only and ultimate supernatural succor. What cannot be found through the traditional forms of supernatural succor is now available to them in Christ. By virtue of the superior power of Christ in salvific encounters, he is perceived as the matchless and incomparable one. He is thus considered as superior to the traditional pantheon: the local divinities, the ancestral cult, witches, charms and amulets, and all other forms of magical power. He is not one among many; rather, he is the one above all. He is thus the central focus of the Pentecostal spirituality, not the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, among other things is perceived as the enabler. Through him the saints are able to fully fulfill their witness to Christ both in word and in deed. The Holy Spirit is thus not the central focus of Ghanaian Pentecostal spirituality. At least among the classic Pentecostals, and those groups whose leaders had their upbringing within the context of classic Pentecostalism, and the Scripture Union. The evidence may be different among some of the newly emerged fringe groups within the neo-Pentecostal movement.

Pentecostals see a sharp distinction between all forms of traditional spirit possession and "Holy Spirit possession." The former includes ancestral spirit possession and possession by the local divinities which is normally accompanied by the supernatural ability to speak a language that is not normally spoken by the possessed. These are categorically condemned as demonic power by the Pentecostals. Their concern for biblical truth causes them to reject outright all forms of association, which appear to be an antithetical to biblical orthodoxy. It is for this reason that the exorcising of the traditional past becomes central to the evangelistic activities of the deliverance apostles within neo-Pentecostalism.

The Pentecostals' critical and condemnatory stand against the spiritual churches and those within the historic churches, who patronize the secret societies like the Free Masons, is influenced by the sharp

distinction they draw between the Holy Spirit and “familiar spirits.” They see the name and the blood of Christ and the word of God as efficient and sufficient for salvation. Hence they insist, “There shall be no burning of candles and incense for prayer; no special fire; no incantations, nor the use of special names of angels, except the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.”³⁶

The charge was made by Oosthuizen that “the most difficult theological problem in Africa is the confusion that exists with regard to the ancestral spirits and the Holy Spirit.”³⁷ However, this could not be sustained in the Ghanaian situation in so far as the Pentecostals are concerned. Neither can they be charged that the “traditional beliefs about possession by an ancestral spirit...have been transferred to the idea of being filled with the Holy Spirit.”³⁸

The story of the incarnation is thus their good news of salvation from fear of evil spirits, from sickness and disease, from economic and social deprivation, from ignorance of who they are, and, above all, salvation from total and complete alienation from the Father of all flesh: God. In this understanding, they see themselves in an exalted position in Christ.³⁹

³⁶ Constitution of Christ Apostolic Church (1989), p. 58.

³⁷ G. C. Oosthuizen, *Post Christianity in Africa* (London: C. Hurst, 1968), p. 120, quoted by Allan Anderson, *Moya: The Holy Spirit in an African Context* (Pretoria: University of South Africa, 1991), p. 85.

³⁸ B. A. Pauw, *Religion in a Tswana Chieftdom* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 207, quoted by Anderson, *Moya*, p. 85.

³⁹ Ephesians 1:17-2:6.