

EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY

VOLUME 17

Volume 17 • Number 1 • January 1993

Evangelical Review of Theology

*Articles and book reviews original and selected from
publications worldwide for an international
readership for the purpose of discerning the
obedience of faith*

EDITOR: BRUCE J. NICHOLLS

Published by
PATERNOSTER PERIODICALS



gone to the realm of the 'spirits and the gods', so to speak, he has gone there as Lord over them in much the same way that he is Lord over us. He is therefore Lord over the living and the dead, and over the 'living-dead', as the ancestors are also described. He is supreme over all 'gods' and authorities in the realm of the spirits. So he sums up in himself all their powers and cancels any terrorizing influence they might be assumed to have upon us.

The guarantee that our Lord is Lord also in the realm of the spirits is that he has sent us his own Spirit, the Holy Spirit, to dwell with us and be our protector, as much as to be Revealer of Truth and our Sanctifier. In [John 16:7ff](#), our Lord's insistence on going away to the Father includes this idea of this Lordship in the realm of spirits, as he himself enters the region of spirit, it also includes the idea of the protection and [p. 64](#) guidance which the coming Holy Spirit will provide for his followers in the world. The Holy Spirit is sent to convict the world of its sin in rejecting Jesus, and to demonstrate, to the shame of unbelievers, the true righteousness which is in Jesus and available only in him. But he is also sent to reveal the spiritual significance of God's judgment, this time not upon the world, but upon the devil, who deceives the world about its sin and blinds people to the perfect righteousness in Christ. Our Lord therefore, entering the region of spirit, sends the Holy Spirit to his followers to give them understanding of the realities in the realm of spirits. The close association of the defeat and overthrow of the devil ('ruler of this world') with the death, resurrection and exaltation of Jesus (cf. [In. 12:31](#)) is significant here. In addition the thought of the 'keeping' and the protection of his followers from 'the evil one' forms an important part of Jesus' prayer recorded in [John 17](#) (cf. [In. 17:9](#)), which is aptly described as his 'high priestly' prayer.

These are some of the areas for us to investigate when we begin to reflect on the Good News from the standpoint of the world-view of our heritage. Some important insights are in store for us, not from isolated passages of Scripture, but from entire and significant bodies of teaching in the Word of God.

Dr. Kwame Bediako is Director of the Akrofi-Christaller Memorial Centre for Mission Research and Applied Theology at Akropong-Akuapem in Ghana. [p. 65](#)

The Finality of Jesus in Africa

Roy B. Musasiwa

*Printed with permission from Mission Bulletin, The Reformed
Ecumenical Synod. (Vol. vii No 2.)*

THE HISTORICAL AND CURRENT SITUATION

The traditional missionary came to Africa, which was then considered a 'dark continent' and in effect said, 'Be a Christian and cease being an African.' Christianity became almost synonymous with Western culture. For example, those who wished to be baptized first had to renounce their African names and adopt Western ones.

We are thankful for the missionaries of yesteryear who brought Christianity to Africa. But because Christianity came dressed in Western culture, it was as superficially adopted as the Western culture itself was. The result was a kind of syncretism. Deep down, the African Christian remained an African and he secretly continued to practise his African Traditional Religion (ATR), which was so much a part of his culture. We in Africa are still suffering from the aftermath of an unbiblical missionary approach. In Zimbabwe, not less than 60% of those who identify themselves as Christians have one foot in ATR and the other in Christianity.

Reactions to this situation vary. One group accepts this situation as normal. In fact one major denomination now accepts that a person can practise both Christianity and ATR. Its priests officiate at certain ATR ceremonies, notably the 'kurova guva' ceremony to bring back home the spirit of a departed family member. Their rationale is that, in order to remain relevant, the church needs to identify itself completely with the people it seeks to serve.

A second group, Christian fundamentalists, condemn as demonic both ATR and the culture which gave birth to it. Even though this group believes that they are proclaiming a cultureless gospel through a literal interpretation of the Bible, they are in fact advocating Judaism and Westernism.

I identify myself with a third group which uncompromisingly holds to the finality of Jesus Christ for salvation and his incarnation in the various cultures of the world. I am an African by culture and a Christian by faith. But since I am an advocate of an integrated life, I call myself an African Christian and a Christian African. [p. 66](#)

THE GOSPEL AFFIRMS THE SUPREMACY AND FINALITY OF JESUS CHRIST

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son whom he appointed heir of all things and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful Word. After he had provided purification for sins (i.e. by his substitutionary death and resurrection) he sat at the right hand of the majesty in Heaven ([Heb. 1:1-5](#)).

With this lofty affirmation of the glory and majesty of Jesus Christ, the Writer of Hebrew proceeds to demonstrate the supremacy of Jesus to angels, Moses, the Old Testament sacrificial system and the Levitical priesthood.

In Jesus, God made his greatest self-disclosure in human history. In Jesus, God did his greatest act to save man from the power and penalty of sin and reconcile him to himself. 'Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved' ([Acts 4:1-12](#)). Further, 'There is only one God and only one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus' ([1 Tim. 2:5](#)).

HOW DOES THIS RELATE TO AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION?

Before the gospel came to Africa, God had been speaking to our forefathers in various ways. God has always revealed himself in nature, in history and in man's conscience (cf. [Rom. 1:18-32](#)). This general revelation of God was combined with African religious philosophizing, speculation and superstition to produce what has now come to be known as African Traditional Religion. Because all people bear the imprint of God's image, we are not surprised to see some divine elements in ATR. For example, there is belief in one God, in life after death, and in an ethical system that closely parallels that of the Old Testament.

Indeed it pleased God to let ATR provide a dim, shadowy light in the past. Africa was not such a dark continent as the Western historians portrayed it.

But now that the sun (SON) has risen, the dim, vague candle light has been rendered obsolete. In Christ the evil elements of ATR have been abolished and the redemptive elements have been fulfilled and overtaken.

YES TO CHRIST, NO TO ATR

Because Christ is surpeme, final and sufficient, ATR has become unnecessary and must be put off by those who belong to Christ. There **P. 67** are additional reasons why we must not mix our Christian faith with ATR.

First, the very basis of ATR is communication with the departed. God has categorically forbidden this, as we read in the Bible (e.g., [Isa. 8:19](#), [Lev. 19-31](#), [Deut. 18:9-13](#)). Further, if the dead can no longer be conscious of, or active in what happens on this earth ([Eccl. 9:4-6](#)), it follows that it is impossible to communicate with them anyway. Therefore the various spiritual manifestations in ATR (e.g., possession, accurate divination) have probably originated from the devil and his demonic forces. After all, if the devil can imitate the angel of light ([2 Cor. 11:4](#)) is it not natural that he would also want to imitate our forefathers to deceive us?

Secondly, the so-called ancestral spirits are false gods/idols in Africa just as materialism is the false god of the West. A 'god' is whatever your heart clings to and relies on. I know that advocates and sympathizers of ATR would argue that Africans do not worship ancestral spirits, but they worship God *through* the ancestral spirits. This is true in theory only. In practice, followers of ATR are more conscious of the spirits than they are of God, who is considered too remote to be concerned with our daily affairs. So it is the ancestral spirits who have to be appeased, invoked and prayed to. From them come blessings and curses. For all practical purposes, they play the role of gods. And since the true God condemns idol worship ([Isa. 42:8](#)), Christians must consider ancestor worship as belonging to 'times of ignorance', (which) God formerly overlooked ([Acts 17:30](#)).

YES TO CHRIST, YES TO AFRICAN CULTURE

One reason why more than 60% of Africans also practise ATR is that ATR and African Culture are inextricably intertwined. ATR is not tagged on to African Culture as Christianity has unfortunately been an add-on for many people in the Western societies. ATR is not only part of African culture; it is also the ground motive of the culture. The biggest question therefore is whether (and if so, how) it is ever possible to say 'yes' to African culture and 'no' to the ATR that is so much part of it. The traditional missionary opted for the easy solution—a rejection of both and the substitution for both with the so-called Western Christian civilization.

The African found it impossible to live genuinely on borrowed culture. There was much beauty in his own culture and its expression through music, art, dancing etc. But that culture also had ATR at its **p. 68** centre with spiritual phenomena which were as real to him as concrete objects.

On the other hand, Christianity brought hope of eternal life and a number of material benefits in the present such as schools and hospitals. At the same time Christianity had so much form without visible spiritual power. The inevitable result was, and still is, syncretism.

Is there another way? Can we minister the gospel so that it roots out ATR from the African believer but still leaves him an African? This is not only possible but imperative.

The Christ who became incarnate among Jews in Palestine nearly 2000 years ago wants to be incarnated in all cultures where he is preached. He does not come to destroy the beauty in culture but only its evil aspects. He transcends culture but he comes through culture. In short, it will take the contextualization of the Gospel in Africa to eliminate syncretism.

CONTEXTUALIZATION: THE KEY TO ELIMINATING SYNCRETISM

ATR is, as we said, the ground motive of African culture. If syncretism is to be eliminated, the gospel of Jesus Christ must be the substitute *ground motive*, for the same culture. This is possible because the gospel is super-cultural, yet has to exist within culture—any culture. This presupposition must influence our ministry in a number of ways.

First, the reality, supremacy, finality and adequacy of Christ must be emphasized in our evangelism. Otherwise those who become Christians in Africa will subconsciously assume that what they need is Christ *plus* their ancestral spirits in order to realize their total being.

If Christ is to be real and supreme he must be seen, through us, to have greater love and concern for people's total welfare than the ancestral spirits do. Further, our ministry must be one of power encounter with demonic forces through prevailing prayer and the exercise of spiritual gifts. Without this, the ancestral spirits will continue to appear more powerful than Christ. In Africa, a Christianity which exists only in form but not in existential power cannot eliminate syncretism.

Second, the gospel must be culturally relevant and must begin by addressing itself to people's felt needs in order to open the way for meeting their real needs. The gospel transcends culture and judges culture. But the gospel can make sense only in the cultural context of the people to whom it is preached. Africa's rich heritage of music, expressiveness, extended family, etc., is a great vehicle for worship, evangelism and Christian nurture. [p. 69](#)

When the gospel becomes God's power for individual salvation and for cultural renewal, syncretism has to die a natural death. If the people get from the gospel what they hoped to get from ancestral spirits, if God's power and protection surrounds the converts so that they need not fear spirits, if the Holy Spirit ministers in the depth of people's hearts in the context of the cultural being, syncretism must necessarily expire.

We conclude, therefore, that the existence of wide-spread syncretism in Africa reflects more poorly on how the gospel has been or is being ministered than on the people who are practising syncretism. Jesus is indeed final. But we must minister in a way that makes our converts understand, appreciate and embrace his finality for their lives.

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Rev. Roy B. Musasiwa is pastor of the Calvary Baptist Church, Harare, Zimbabwe, and missions director of the Baptist Union of Zimbabwe. [p. 70](#)