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Sin v. Taboo Compatibility in Africa and the West:

Implications for inter-cultural Mission, Church, and Majority World Development

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I Introduction

The question; 'What happened to sin?' seems to be related to another question; 'What happened to God?' Neither sin nor God appears to be prominent in western discourse, especially in Europe, in recent generations. At one time sin and God were important concepts used by western people to make sense of life.¹ What has changed? What are some of the implications of the dearth of discussions on sin or on God? How have sin and God apparently disappeared from people's view and from their conversations?

I take up this discussion in relation to 'traditional' concepts of right and wrong, especially taboo. These seemed to 'disappear' before sin: in 1777 Cap-

tain James Cook 'discovered' *taboo* in Polynesia.² Following his 'discovery', the term *taboo* (or *tabu*) has been borrowed from Polynesian and incorporated into English and other European languages.³ A declaration of taboo is based on 'partiality that prevents objective consideration of an issue or situation'.⁴ Taboo is 'an interdiction that does not make rational sense'.⁵ It seems that taboo is closely related to traditional (extra-scientific) concepts of impurity that are to do with designations of wholeness.⁶

2 <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/taboo>

3 <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/taboo>

4 <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/taboo>

5 Robert J. Priest, 'Missionary Positions: Christian, Modernist, Post-modernist', *Current Anthropology*, 42(1), February 2001, 29-68, 32.

6 Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), 35-38.

1 Robert J. Priest, 'Cultural Anthropology, Sin, and the Missionary'. 85-105 in D.A. Carson, & John D. Woodridge, (eds.), *God and Culture: essays in honour of Carl F.H. Henry* (Carlisle: The Paternoster Press, 1993), 97.

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What I suggest ought to surprise us is *that Captain Cook's discovery of taboo was a discovery*. Such a discovery to have been a discovery implies that those who 'discovered' it found it foreign. Hence they described it using a borrowed word. This is particularly surprising because taboo concepts are replete in the Bible.⁷ The Bible was hardly unknown literature in Europe. How can the concept of taboo have been so much of a 'discovery'? How and why had taboo become such a foreigner to western society?

The meanings of some key words that I use in this article seem to shift and change sufficiently in these pages to make it at times difficult to pin down the arguments I am making. For example, my pointing out that sin is subtly being redefined by different groups of people makes it difficult to be clear just what I mean in subsequent uses of the term sin. It is as if this article looks at the way the ground shifts under itself.

My reference to 'the West' is to those communities / societies operating under profound influences arising from seminal changes brought to their people by the western Christian church. Key changes in the West seem to be particularly connected to papal activity in the 11th Century.⁸

II Anthropologists and Missionaries

Authorities generally have their oppo-

nents. Theologians are no exception. Developments in western thinking in recent centuries have been tying the hands of theologians. Theologians seemed to lose the position of being the presumed pace-setters in social thinking.⁹ Theologians struggled then to deal with the popular sweeping claims of modernity, much as they continue so to struggle. Much of this struggle is well known to secularists who consider themselves to be dominant in today's world and who like to undermine the legitimacy of the church. We could say that theologians had already lost their hegemony when what appeared to be a 'fatal-blow' that I want to examine here, struck home.

I thank Robert Priest for providing some insights that I want to build on into the question of why and how theologians have lost ground to anthropologists.¹⁰ Fear of sin and its consequences had been, it appears, very real¹¹ and very normal in western society for many generations. While perhaps not uniformly present, fear of sin resulting in attempts at avoidance of sin, were once foundational to western people.¹²

At the same time that theologians were losing their hegemony in western belief, the non-western world be-

⁹ My use of the term 'social' here seems to illustrate the issue that I am trying to address: The very term 'society' implies that sociology and not theology gives the best means of access to an understanding of the lives of people.

¹⁰ Priest, 'Missionary' and Priest, 'Cultural'.

¹¹ I assume, as did Hiebert, that the category of 'real' needs to be critically re-examined. (Paul G. Hiebert, 1999. *Missiological Implications of Epistemological Shifts: affirming truth in a modern/postmodern world* [Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1999].)

¹² Priest, 'Cultural', 97.

⁷ James George Frazer, *Folk-lore in the Old Testament* (New York: Macmillan, 1923).

⁸ Harold Joseph Berman, *Law and Revolution: The Formation of the Western Legal Tradition, Volume 1* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), 529-536.

gan to be opened up to exploration. Missionaries often followed close in the wake of explorers. Often, anthropologists were not far behind. Most early anthropologists were missionaries who became interested in acquiring a more detailed understanding of the people they were seeking to reach. In due course, anthropologists tried to discredit missionary researchers so as to place anthropology on a 'secular' foundation.¹³

The line between 'missionary researcher' and 'anthropologist' was not always clear cut and singular. Missionaries are not unaffected by the contexts they are brought up in. On the contrary—19th century western missionaries must have been influenced, as were anthropologists, by the booming industrial/scientific societies from which they themselves came. These societies helped them to define what should be considered as 'progress'. Far from wanting to be left out of modern progressive schemes, missionaries wanted to share their ideas on 'progress' with those in the majority world whom they found to be poor and ignorant.¹⁴ They were borrowing from the thinking that was giving secularism a singular foothold in the western world.

Missionaries have always tried to teach their understandings of sin to

converts and potential converts in the 'fields' in which they worked. In the 18th and 19th centuries their understanding of sin was inevitably to an extent a 'modern' one. In this modern understanding, sins that were important were those that had real perceivable or predictable negative effects. That is to say that by the 19th century, missionaries had made a separation between sin and taboo. Early missionaries to Africa such as Dos Santos (1586-97) did not seem to clearly distinguish 'natural' from 'supernatural' causation. Dos Santos described many cures for illnesses that would these days be considered 'magical'; for example that 'night blindness could be cured by washing the affected eyes in the drinking water of pigeons'.¹⁵ 'Well into the eighteenth century, leading scientists in Europe compiled their findings from a range of sources in which later generations would find fables and magic', adds Harries.¹⁶ The pre-18th Century failure to perceive 'pure science' clearly paralleled the failure to perceive a clear difference between sin (related to science) and taboo (related to superstition). Taboo made less and less sense to those missionaries of the 19th century and beyond. It came to be associated with superstition, so was of lesser importance. The missionaries concentrated on 'real' sin. Perhaps

13 Patrick Harries, and David Maxwell, 'Introduction,' 1-29 in: Patrick Harries, and David Maxwell (eds.), *The Spiritual in the Secular: Missionaries and Knowledge about Africa (Studies in the History of Christian Missions)* (Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 20.

14 Fidelis Nkomazana, 'Livingstone's Ideas of Christianity, Commerce and Civilisation'. 44-57, *Botswana Journal of African Studies*, 12(1&2), (1998), 55.

15 Cited by Harries (Patrick Harries, 'Natural Science and Naturvoelker: missionary entomology and botany'. 30-71 in Patrick Harries, and David Maxwell (eds.), *The Spiritual in the Secular: Missionaries and Knowledge about Africa (Studies in the History of Christian Missions)* (Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 35.)

16 Harries, 'Natural', 39.

this was a great mistake? I ask in this essay; did missionaries' concepts of sin become so refined as to result in subsequent cohorts of anthropologists finding them to be absent in some majority world communities?

The link between notions of taboo and, to use Douglas' terminology, contagion,¹⁷ should be becoming clear. Taboo brings impurity, such as the uncleanness that the pre-modern world associates(ed) with leprosy, that is extra-scientific. Yet if, as I here suggest, notions of taboo are essential to human social history, questions of the importance of ritual purity would seem to require re-opening in today's world.

19th century anthropology saw itself as building on notions of objectivity and secularism as against theology, divinity and superstition. Hence anthropology can be considered a counter-cult movement. It came to define itself particularly in opposition to Christianity.¹⁸ Anthropology set itself up against the church.¹⁹ Its teachings opposed those of the church even as they echoed them and followed their contours, in reverse:

(A)nthropology came to believe without much qualification its own claims to be a secular discipline, and failed to notice that it had in

fact incorporated a version of Augustinian or ascetic thinking within its own theoretical apparatus, even in the claim to absolute secularism itself.²⁰

Cannell concludes that 'anthropology is a discipline that is not always as "secular" as it likes to think'.²¹ Anthropology's roots in Christian theology are deep.

Meanwhile, at a time when definitions for sin were narrowing (i.e. excluding notions of taboo, see above), anthropologists acquired access to peoples who had been almost unaffected by 'modern progress'. This combination of events enabled them to turn the tables on the theologians. Tylor pointed out that: 'discourses about "primitive" (not-modern) man had utility for discrediting the view of theologians'.²² We could say: anthropologists had theologians surrounded!

Not only did anthropologists and other academics become leaders in promoting the modern, but now they also became leaders in defining the pre-modern. Missionary and church were sandwiched, painfully, in the middle.

Modernist discourses endlessly exploited the theme of social others who enjoyed freedom and pleasure without guilt precisely where European 'Christian' morality imposed restraint and inculcated a sense of sin. By implication, Christian interdictions were not inherent in universal morality but an unnecessary and

¹⁷ Mary Douglas, 'Sacred Contagion,' 86-106 in: John F.A. Sawyer, (ed.) *Reading Leviticus: a conversation with Mary Douglas. Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series*, 227, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996).

¹⁸ Priest 'Missionary', 94 and Priest 'Cultural', 32.

¹⁹ Fennella Cannell, 'The Christianity of Anthropology,' *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 11, 2005, 335-356, 341.

²⁰ Cannell, 'Christianity', 341.

²¹ Cannell, 'Christianity', 352.

²² Cited by Priest, 'Missionary', 32.

unhealthy imposition.²³

You are warning us of the horrors of sin, anthropologists seemed to tell the theologians, but we find primitive people who have no sin, and who seem to be doing better than us!

Christian missionaries were less proficient in contemporary academic discourse than were many professional anthropologists. As a result, they were little match for what was quickly to become recognised as a hegemonic message. It was as if sin was reified out of existence, and many were overjoyed by this circumstance:

For many a Westerner raised in a culture that emphasised sin and guilt the notion that there were people without such a consciousness of sin and guilt was electrifying.²⁴

III Sin / Taboo Transformations

I am suggesting that the concepts of 'sin' amongst 'primitive peoples' were (are) more akin to taboo than to western concepts of sin. That is to say: the connection between an act of sin and its negative consequences are for non-modern people more mysterious than rational or functional. In the hey-day of functionalism in anthropology (from the early 1920s until the 1960s),²⁵ in which notions of 'sin' were particularly likely to be valued according to their functionality (even by non-anthropologists), the connectedness of sin-equivalents to the functioning of mystical

forces in non-western communities being explored by anthropologists could render 'primitive' people's notions of sin invisible.

As a result 'primitive' man was not found to be labouring under sin as was modern man. Missionaries were accused of bearing not good news of joy and salvation, but guilt-provoking messages said to bear misery and pointless rules to those who had once been joyous and free! To use Priest's words: 'Lacking the European's sense of sin, such people were thought to enjoy a happiness that escaped the guilt-ridden European', a happiness that missionaries seemed to be setting out to destroy.²⁶

Secularists have been slow to realise how this state of affairs has been deceiving them. Philip Jenkins popularised the realisation that the church is booming in the global south.²⁷ If missionaries were spreading a useless faith, promoting guilt and misery that were destroying people's happiness, then why should people reached adopt that faith and run with it? 'Whatever their image in popular culture, Christian missionaries of the colonial era succeeded remarkably', wrote Jenkins.²⁸

In practice, in many ways, what has happened is that when given the freedom to do so, 'primitive people' have redefined biblical sin in line with their own conceptions of the damage done through breaking of taboo.²⁹ Hence

23 Priest, 'Missionary', 32.

24 Priest, 'Cultural', 87.

25 http://www.cultureandpublication.org/conference/cc_functionalism.htm

26 Priest, 'Cultural', 88.

27 Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: the coming of global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 2.

28 Jenkins, *The Next*, 56.

29 Observation made largely on the basis of

they join churches when under pressure 'from the entanglement and ordeals of persecution of evil spirits'.³⁰ Thus they have found release in a way that bypasses post-enlightenment and rational guilt-inflicting western notions of sin.

This tendency to re-define sin is widely evident in the mushrooming of independent Christian movements that can be witnessed around many parts of the world.³¹ A redefining of 'sin', that moves away from the very modern interpretation that allowed sin to be rejected by anthropologists is, I suggest, one of the foundation stones of the success of these movements.

I reported a classic instance of the above 'transformation' of sin in my PhD thesis.³² Missionaries finding no word for sin amongst Luo speakers of Kenya adopted the Luo term *richo* (also the plural of 'bad') to translate biblical terms for sin.³³ Usage of the term *richo* as early as 1978 gives clear evidence

that understanding of *richo* quickly changed from this missionary-imposed one and came to mean a breaking of taboo.³⁴

Parallel to this is a confusion I often hear expressed in terms of biblical references to 'law'. Many Luo people, when they hear or read such reference, interpret biblical references to law as being with regard to their law, which is very much rooted in 'taboo', and not to the Mosaic law that is arguably more clearly rooted in rational notions of 'sin'.

The discovery of the existence of taboos in the Bible was apparently thought to discredit the Bible.³⁵ The notion that Christian missionaries, on the basis of some misguided notion of taboo, prescribed any but 'the missionary position' for sex became 'a symbol synthesising modernist objections to Christian morality'.³⁶ This 'myth of the missionary position' went on to essentialise 'Christian morality as taboo morality [which became] justification for imposing a taboo on speech from an explicitly religious subject position in academic discursive spaces'.³⁷ When 'speech from an explicitly religious position' was marked as disallowed, this was akin, because moral discourse is implicitly religious,³⁸ to a bar on moral

personal experience in ministering in churches in Eastern and Southern Africa from 1988 to date. See also comments on *richo* below.

30 <http://www.dialogueireland.org/dicontent/resources/dciarchive/ztypologyafrica.html>

31 David, B. Barrett, 1968, *Schism and Renewal in Africa. An Analysis of Six Thousand Contemporary Religious Movements* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1968).

32 Jim Harries, 'Pragmatic Theory Applied to Christian Mission in Africa: with special reference to Luo responses to "bad" in Gem, Kenya.' PhD Thesis, 2007, The University of Birmingham. <http://etheses.bham.ac.uk/15/> (accessed 2nd January 2010), 132.

33 Roy Stafford, 2003, '*Richo*'. Email received on 14th August 2003. Roy was part of the team responsible for the 1976 translation of the Bible into *Dholuo*.

34 This is illustrated by the title of Mboya's book, which could be translated something like 'It is Sin [i.e. breaking of taboo] that brings the Curse'. (Paul Mboya, *Richo ema Kelo Chira* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House Ltd, 1978).)

35 Priest, 'Missionary', 32.

36 Priest, 'Missionary', 36.

37 Priest, 'Missionary', 45.

38 William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: secular ideology and the roots*

discourse as a whole on the side of academia.³⁹

1. Taboo and sin disappear

This combination of circumstances has had a very interesting impact on the thinking of western populations. First, taboo as a category disappeared from sight, as all sensible/necessary morality was considered to arise from rational and not sub-rational prohibitions. Inevitably western theologians would have followed this trend and shifted to defining sin that is of any importance as being that which can rationally be seen to potentially cause some harm. Even some theologians joined in the chorus 'mocking' anything but rationally based morality.

Later, Christians being forced to realise that biblical sins were often inherently of taboo nature, meant that they had shot themselves in the foot! Because the sanitised non-taboo understanding of sin was not to be found amongst people being explored by anthropologists (classically the Samoans according to Margaret Mead⁴⁰ whose work was subsequently largely discredited according to Freeman)⁴¹ the modern West seemed to have found itself a means to escape both taboo and rational prohibitions on behaviour. From this developed a notion of

the taboo-free and sin-free Westerner that still seems to be very much with us today.

2. Creating unhealthy dependency

I want to explore further the notion of the sin-less and taboo-free Westerner. Recognition of this taboo and sin-free Westerner may require an alternative locus of perception. That is to say—within the West itself people's 'taboo-free' and 'sin-free' existence may, because of its very normality, not be at all noteworthy or even noticeable. One perspective through which it becomes noticeable is an African one. While highly subjective, this claim does seem to be supported by various sorts of evidence. That is: it can be striking from an African perspective that Westerners seem to live without taboos, and without seeing themselves as committing 'sins'.

While an association between black skin and evil may also go back a long way⁴² the contrast seems to have increased in the modern era—so much so in fact that many African societies that are all too aware of their own taboo and sin-ridden natures have capitulated completely (in theory at least) to trying to order their lives following western role models. Notions of both taboo and sin are rejected, or at least devalued, the justification being 'look,

of modern conflict (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). (kindle version)

³⁹ 'The term religion comes to cover virtually anything humans do that gives their lives order and meaning' (Cavanaugh, *The Myth*.)

⁴⁰ Margaret Mead, *Coming of Age in Samoa* (London: Harper Perennial, 1971).

⁴¹ Derek Freeman, *Margaret Mead and Samoa: The Making and Unmaking of an Anthropological Myth* (Gretna, LA: Pelican, 1986).

⁴² Just one example, the colour for Judas in the Coptic Orthodox church is frequently black, for example see: <http://fulbrightg.blogspot.com/2009/11/coptic-christianity-in-egypt.html> Coptic images of the last supper frequently portray Judas, the one who betrayed Jesus, as being black skinned.

that's what Europeans are doing, and they are (materially) doing very well out of it'.

This means of running one's country or community in which notions of sin and taboo are ignored is widely known as secularism. In practice what seems to be happening in the majority world to compensate for secularism is that religious institutions and practices flourish in what we might call the informal or non-government sector. Much analysis by anthropologists and other scholars has undervalued or even been totally blind to this sector, falsely perpetuating the notion of the out-datedness and non-essentiality of notions such as taboo and sin for human social existence. (Various authors point to the blindness of anthropological researchers to 'religion' in general. Evans-Pritchard points out that a disproportionately large number of anthropologists are 'non-religious'.⁴³ Kate Meagher, by way of example, points to a proliferation of 'religious movements' in Nigeria⁴⁴ whose impact she had 'largely unanticipated' as she began her research.)⁴⁵ If the Westerner can run his society without 'religion', then it is thought that the majority world should be able to do so. This notion unfortunately ignores the peculiar history of the West whereby secularism is a part of western 'religion' and has very religious roots.⁴⁶

At least two things should be evident here: first, the raising of the European to a status in which he is not dependent on taboos that are of divine origin, he has pretty much come to be seen as a god himself.⁴⁷ Secondly, a project of majority world development is led by Westerners and western thinking that ignores vital components of a community's socio-economic development. If these are so naively ignored—what serious hope is there for the success of the kinds of development models that are these days being advocated?

It ought by now to be recognised in hindsight that the 'electrifying' euphoria felt on being told that one can live without sin and guilt was misguided.⁴⁸ The very enormous and very evident success of the missionary project should tell us as much. While secularists back at home may have mocked their missionary compatriots the majority world has become replete with churches. That is to say—the ground on which 'secular' society is being built has necessary religious roots without which the attendant superstructures could not be supported. It should be no surprise at all that African development, in so far as it is sponsored by secular thinking, is waxing, waning and progressing only through great de-

⁴³ Evans-Pritchard, 'Religion', 162.

⁴⁴ Kate Meagher, 'Trading on Faith: religious movements and informal economic governance in Nigeria'. 397-423, *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 47(3), September 2009, 399.

⁴⁵ Meagher, 'Trading', 406.

⁴⁶ Richard Mohr, 'The Christian Origins of Secularism and the Rule of Law.' 34-51 in: Na-

dirsyah Hoden, and Richard Mohr, (eds), *Law and Religion in Public Life: the contemporary debate* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), 34.

⁴⁷ I mentioned above the foundation of taboo in precedent set by previous generations which comes to be understood in animistic communities as being upheld by ancestral spirits, that are themselves very much akin to gods.

⁴⁸ Priest, 'Missionary', 33 and Priest, 'Cultural', 88.

pendency on the importation of outside resources and thinking.

3. False foundation

The words of anthropologists sounded a clear note of rebellion in a western society in which the church had come to assume a hegemonic role over certain areas of people's lives. The churches' critics seemed to have firm ground to stand on. There was an electrifying crescendo of voices proclaiming an enlightened wisdom.⁴⁹ Yet recent developments have shown that anthropologists Melville, Maugham, Tippet, Mead and others were seriously misguided and seriously misleading.⁵⁰

After-the-fact realisation of their error does not yet seem to have undone the enormous, albeit misguided, movement that they brought into existence, viz, a movement of anthropologists who claim not to be religious, yet the roots of whose discipline are deeply if perversely embedded in religious soil.⁵¹ The euphoria and associated indignation (suggesting that the church had been keeping people tied to false notions of guilt and unnecessary burdens of sin) has continued to contribute to widely spreading movements, in western society, of assumed freedom from the need to take account of sins and taboos.

Having recognised the basis of this as misguided, it remains to be asked what is actually going on in the con-

temporary West? And for our purposes especially, what are the implications for inter-cultural relationships with other parts of the world?

4. The absence of collective means of dealing with sin

I want to address part of the answer to this question below. We need to note that failing to deal with a key side to human existence had and has implications for other areas of life. It may be true that burdens of guilt and sin are reduced in western nations. It could also be true as a result that other issues—such as divorce, loneliness, fear of death, abortion, depression, and so on—have as a result come to the fore.

It seems a fair hypothesis to suggest that collective arrangements at dealing with guilt and sin, i.e. church attendance, contribute to a reduction in the prominence of these other maladies, thus resulting in a net gain in social harmony and personal well being. Certainly in many parts of Africa the prominence and widespread popularity of the church and the Christian message, point in this direction.

IV Life Without Sin or Taboo

The question of the effect of an apparent sinlessness and religionlessness (i.e. taboo-lessness, as religion and taboo are intimately connected) life on the impact of the West in the majority world is one that I now want to address in brief.

One impact has been for Westerners to appear to majority world people as being themselves somewhat like 'gods': their taboos are self-reasoned and self-appointed. Their self-acknowl-

⁴⁹ Priest, 'Missionary', 33, as cited above.

⁵⁰ Priest, 'Cultural', 88-89.

⁵¹ E.E. Evans-Pritchard, 'Religion and the Anthropologist', 155-171, in E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Social Anthropology and Other Essays* (New York: The Free Press, 1964), 162.

edged faultlessness and the confidence they have to blatantly ignore spiritual threats that arise from their failure to acknowledge the impact of sin on their lives adds to this reputation for Westerners.

An example of this is Westerners' ability to flagrantly display wealth without regard to any fear of the jealousy that this might evoke in others. Without guilt or sin leaving chinks in their spiritual armour, flagrant displays of wealth seem to bring no concern. This is by contrast with parts of Africa and presumably more widely in the majority world where fear of the jealousy of others can radically constrain people's behaviour. Maranz mentions this with reference to *hiders*.⁵² Witchcraft beliefs, of which Maranz makes only brief mention,⁵³ have an extremely widespread and powerful effect of restricting certain kinds of behaviour in many majority world communities.⁵⁴ Their absence in some western communities can be striking.

I suggest that witchcraft beliefs can helpfully be replaced by beliefs in *sin against God*. Belief in sin against God is much less socially damaging than is

witchcraft. (I here reflect Douglas' position, where she says that 'the [Levitical] priestly doctrine of uncleanness is like a general amnesty'.)⁵⁵ Essentially this is because whereas witchcraft beliefs direct people's enmity and suspicions against one another, faith in the activity of one almighty God neutralises such enmity through redirecting attention to the divine. The absence of either taboos or sin can be very confusing to people in the majority world who wonder how the more negative sides of human social behaviour can possibly be being dealt with or understood.

Not considering themselves subject to proscriptions based on notions of theological sin or taboo has given Westerners an incredible freedom. I suggest that this freedom is often more than majority world communities can cope with. Such lack of coping is related to economics: western nations with their burgeoning economies have means and resources at hand to help them cope with an atomisation of human existence. For example, they have resources available to support single mothers, divorcees, men addicted to alcohol, people infected by sexually transmitted diseases etc. These conditions can in poorer parts of the world be death sentences.

One result of doing away with sin and taboos is a massive rise in the cost of human existence: The above people, e.g. divorcees, alcoholics etc. often live alone, bringing higher costs than would shared housing. They use a lot of bio-medicines, spend a lot of time in the hospitals, engage in criminal activities, and so on. Such is beyond the lev-

⁵² David Maranz, *African Friends and Money Matters: observations from Africa* (Dallas: SIL International, 2001), 138.

⁵³ Maranz, *African*, 111. The reason he does this may be so as not to put off a secular readership, in order to get wider sales for his book.

⁵⁴ Jim Harries, 'Witchcraft, Envy, Development, and Christian Mission in Africa', *Misology: An International Review* 40(2), (2012), 129–139, 130. This has been recognised for a long time. For example see M. Gluckman, 'The Logic of African Science and Witchcraft' (321–331) in Max Marwick, (ed.), *Witchcraft and Sorcery* (Middlesex: Penguin Education, 1970), 330.

⁵⁵ Douglas, 'Sacred', 98.

els of economic productivity that many non-western human societies can cope with.

The West can be seen as the source of much evil in certain parts of the world. Hence Mbatiah tells us in his novel that '*elimu ya juu ndiyo hasa hotline ya kuwasilisha uchafu wote wa utamaduni wa kimagharibi kutoka huko kwenye asili yake, hadi hapa*' ([Western] higher education is indeed the hotline to connect all the dirt of the culture of the West from there from its source, to here [in Africa]).⁵⁶ Much of such evil is that which arises from human communities in the West having thrown aside taboo and sin-constraints on behaviour.

The greatest problem in the current global westernisation project is quite likely *above and beyond* the above. It is that *the non-West does not and cannot 'get it'*. The notion that life can be lived without the application of taboos is so incredible that it is beyond many people's imaginative grasp. Hence what the West considers as secularism is ironically often re-interpreted outside of the Western world as being 'tabooism'.

Such re-interpretation leads to considerable confusion. 'Many people in Nairobi are these days rejecting the Gospel in favour of secularism', an African colleague told me recently. I felt that I had more to learn of this situation so I continued to listen carefully as he talked. What he was calling secularism, I discovered, was people's returning to their traditional taboos. I would propose that even in so far as secularism could be a desirable aim,

that it is best reached through means of a displacement of taboo by sin, and not through a simple abolition of taboo and replacement with nothing.

Whereas traditional societies interpret the results of various human behaviours in their impact on the wider community through beliefs in taboo, the biblical notion of sin redirects this to God. This reduces, in theory at least, endless inter-personal suspicions and conflicts and so could be seen as a means towards the kinds of so-called secular principles that underlie a lot of functionality in today's world.

V The Necessity of Taboo

It is appropriate at this point to consider in more detail just what the categories are that we are considering. We are looking at three possible foundations for directing human behaviour. One of these is opposition to sin, which we can define as prohibition of behaviour based on an understanding of the requirements of an almighty sovereign God. (As discussed above, such a notion of sin cannot be entirely distinct from human thought and rationality, into which category it is subsumed to various degrees.)

Another is taboo; prohibitions of behaviour based on traditional experience of what leads to prosperous living and typically an assumed preference of the 'living dead', i.e. ancestors, who still have a determinative impact on living communities.

The third category is that of rationality. This is considered for some good reason by secularists to supersede the other categories. People who assume such supersession, however, can err in some of their understanding regard-

56 Mwenda Mbatiah, *Upotevu* (Nairobi: Standard Textbooks, Graphics and Publishing, 1999), 52-53, my translation.

ing the origins of rationality. Berman makes it clear that the origins of rational law are in the church.⁵⁷

This is a topic in itself that falls beyond this essay, but in brief we can say that the widespread and deep penetration of the church into Europe enabled a hegemonic understanding of sin to take root, that included and increasingly was defined by rational understanding. This understanding came to exclude 'taboo' topics from within the category of sin.

The taboo nature of the Bible⁵⁸ I would suggest to be inevitable if we take an enlightened view of human existence. That enlightened view I take as being (using Plantinga's terms) a post-foundationalist view.⁵⁹ Foundationalism that seemed to rein supreme in the West until the mid 20th century supposed that there is a secular foundation for secular law, i.e. a *natural* foundation for rational thinking.

In the more recently 'enlightened' view it has had to be realised that this cannot be the case. There is nothing foundational in any presumed atheological view of human existence that necessarily points to rationality. Instead, it has had to be realised that rationality is by necessity a product of particular peculiar theological assumptions, or we could say that it is a product of taboo.

Because rationality itself is dependent on notions of taboo, it follows that

all necessary conception of sin cannot be based on rationality alone. That is to say that there must be restraints on human behaviour based on other than rationally founded notions of right and wrong. That is that certain restraints on human behaviour must be rooted in fear of taboo. Taboo hence is not a primitive, illogical, counterproductive and entirely negative aspect of human existence. Rather, it is a foundational necessity. If indeed it is so, then criticism of the Bible on the grounds that its prescriptions are rooted in illogical taboo (cited above) is baseless.

We are being forced towards the realisation that far from being a primitive and unnecessary vestigial part of human thinking and existence that we have thankfully more recently displaced with reason, taboo is a necessity. Yet taboos by definition appear, humanly speaking, to be arbitrary. Indeed humanly speaking they are arbitrary. In other words—following the mechanical worldview—their origin could be considered to be based on chance. In such a case whatever are the benefits of modern life, those benefits are rooted in chance.

Alternatively, and this seems a much more reasonable option to consider—the right kinds of taboos are those that are put in place by God. In this case, the foundations for the 'good life' in human terms, being theological in turn, means that the foundations for effective majority world development must be rooted in 'correct' theology.

Our discussion above has thrown up many challenges to what has become conventional and secular thinking that I do not go into in this essay. I encourage other scholars to pick up and to explore some of these challenges.

⁵⁷ Berman, *Law*, 165.

⁵⁸ Frazer, *Folk-lore*, already alluded to above.

⁵⁹ Alvin Plantinga, 'Reason and Belief in God' 16-93 in: Plantinga, A., and Wolterstorff N., (eds.) *Faith and rationality: reason and belief in God* (London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 62.

VI Summary and Conclusion

The modern era has brought attacks on traditional Christian theology, including an undermining of the notion of the centrality of sin to human society. Modern anthropology made an effort to separate itself from Christianity, and missionaries, themselves were profoundly influenced by modern thinking. Anthropology, a counter-cult movement, tried to turn the tables on missionaries, considering them unhelpful kill-joys, an accusation glaringly misguided in light of the booming church in Africa and the majority world today.

African Christianity is very aware of taboo, often having redefined 'sin' as taboo. African and other contemporary developing nations imitate western secularism, while through re-interpreting it as taboo'ism, causing much confusion. Development waxes and wanes in Africa due to a foundational deception related to the above still being perpetuated by anthropologists and others. The strength of churches confirms the foundational need for something more than 'secularism'.

The euphoric celebration arising from recent supposed discovery of happy-contented non-western people free of burdens of *sin* was in hindsight misguided. Collective dealing with sin and guilt, i.e. the church, seems after all to be beneficial. Westerners coming across as gods with immunity to witchcraft, continue to amaze the majority

world. At the same time Westerners' contributions to non-western cultures are often assessed as unclean or dirty.

Whereas in the West secularism is supposedly rooted in reason, it can be understood in Africa as rooted in taboo. Reason, that attempted to separate taboo from sin, has itself been found to be rooted in taboo. Taboo, then, is not only a primitive vestige, but also a contemporary necessity.

A key question is—whether God or whether chance underlies taboo. If it is merely chance, then it could seem that human society is in a sad position indeed. This implies that there is no authoritative basis on which to choose between taboo-options, thus seeming to condemn humankind to ongoing division, dissension, unhappiness, and strife. If on the other hand God is and has been there to orient people through a minefield of a maze of possible taboos, then there is hope.

In conclusion we can say that removing taboo-sin from the category of sin seems to have led to the rise of secularism on the back of an apparently sensible objectively-rooted anthropology (and philosophy). The effects of this misunderstanding, that was glibly welcomed by many, continue to reverberate in the global community. The apparent solution is to return to a position, in academia and beyond, of theological rather than supposed 'objective' hegemony.