

A THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION USING PENTECOSTAL NARRATIVES TO EXPLORE THE CONNECTION BETWEEN PENTECOSTALISM AND INDIGENOUS RELIGIONS OF MALAWI

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Key Words

Pentecostal Narratives, Spirit world, Enthusiastic Christianity, Ancestors, the world African Religion, and African Pentecostalism.

Introduction

This essay uses a theological reflection of Pentecostal narratives from Malawi in southeast Africa where I was born and raised to explore the connection between Pentecostalism and indigenous religions. It has been sparked and undergirded by several key events that I have experienced in my faith life. I am a descendant of a Pentecostal preacher (my father), a Presbyterian minister (my grandfather) who had two brothers, one an indigenous religion priest and spiritual healer and the other a founding apostle of an African Independent Church. Yet, I have taken on an academic journey in theological education with Pentecostal leanings. Chief among the events that sparked my Pentecostal curiosity behind the argument of this essay is the conversion of my grandfather's brother from an indigenous religion to Christianity and the myriad struggles he faced as he discerned what to do with his longstanding spiritual gifts as a medium for the community.

He had refused to convert to Christianity for a long time in spite of—or maybe because of—his Presbyterian brother's witness. He always said that Christianity (especially that of his Presbyterian brother) did not understand the spirit world with which he had dealt every day all his adult life. He refused to recognize it as a religion because for him, a religion must attend to the spirit-world. If it did not, like the Christianity of my grandfather, it was only fit to be a moral philosophy.⁹

⁹ Harvey Kwiyani, "Can the West Really Be Converted?," *Missio Africanus Journal of African Missiology* 4 (2019): 83.

The day he converted, he declared, (and I was there to hear him say this), that he had finally realized that the Spirit in Christianity was the real deal – every other spiritual authority and power out there that was not of God - was both inferior and vile. In his words, “compared to everything I have ever worked with, the Spirit of God feels like pure fresh air.” I would later understand that pure fresh air is actually a translation of Holy Spirit.¹⁰ The theological questions that flooded my mind on that day, in the 1990s, have stayed with me for decades. This essay is part of my lifelong quest to understand the relationship between enthusiastic Christianity and African indigenous religions.

The Spirit World of African Religions

I believe that the most cited statement describing the African people’s religious outlook is John Mbiti’s simple but complex opening sentence in *African Religions and Philosophy*, “Africans are notoriously religious.”¹¹ Of course, Mbiti was right. Africans, who had been misrepresented by Europeans for centuries as having no religion, were actually helplessly religious. In that one statement, Mbiti challenged decades of Western religious violation and mislabelling of Africa that had gone on for centuries. The African religion that had for so long been dismissed was to be recognised for what it really was – a religious heritage that had served Africans for centuries. Europeans had labelled it first as non-religion – this made it easier to justify slave trade. Without religion,

10 Heiligen Geist in German, *hagio pneuma* in Greek, *Spiritus Sanctus* in Latin and *ruach kadosh* in Hebrew. All these can be translated clean air or wind. I am certain that my grandfather did not know this. Of course, in Chichewa, the word “spirit” is translated *mzimu* (pl. *mizimu*) but spirits are generally spoken of as *mweya* or *mpweya* (trans. “air”) and *mphepo* (also trans. “wind”). People will often talk about *mweya/mpweya wabwino* or *mphepo yabwino* meaning “good spiritual atmosphere” when things are going well for them and *mweya/mpweya/mphepo zoyipa* to talk about a bad spiritual atmosphere when they face frustration.

11 John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1970), 1.

Africans were not human and could, therefore, be justifiably enslaved. When slavery became unsustainable, and Europeans came to evangelise Africans, the tone changed. Africans were recognised to have a religion that was totally different from Christianity, different enough to be the opposite of Christianity and, therefore, a devilish religion. This they pejoratively labelled animism and believed it to be idol worship, ancestral worship, evil, and anti-Christian. African indigenous religions were perceived as enemies that the missionaries needed to take down, forcefully, if necessary, if they were to plant Christianity in Africa. It was, in the eyes of the Europeans, worse than having no religion at all. It was good for nothing but anthropological and ethnographical research.¹² Mbiti sought to disrupt that belief by declaring that Africans had religion and that it was this African religion that prepared for the arrival of Christianity. He called African religion *preparation evangelica* suggesting that they prepared the way for the coming of the good news of Jesus to Africa.¹³ Of course, the African worldview that shapes most expressions of African indigenous religions is not too different from the one Africans read about in the Bible.

The world of African indigenous religions is built on the belief that the universe is full of invisible beings – spirits – that are immensely more powerful than humans. This spirit-world includes God and spirits (including those of ancestors). Of course, God is, above everything else, the all-powerful (or almighty) Spirit, the source of all (spiritual) power.¹⁴ Spirits are believed to have the ability to affect and shape the material world in which we live. God created and gave power to many spirits, some of them work for God's cause for all creation while

12 Kwiyani, "Can the West Really Be Converted?," 83.

13 John S. Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa*, 2nd ed. (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2012), xiii.

14 "For thine is the power, the kingdom and the glory for ever and ever." Also, as Jesus said, "All power is given unto me." Indeed, my grandfather would often say that *all power is spiritual power*, that one cannot have power that is not of the spirit first, and that spiritual power is always delegated and designated and must be used in harmony with the rest of what is happening in the spiritual world.

many others seek to frustrate God's desires in the world. The primary purpose of human beings is to serve the spiritual world and, thereby, maintain a harmonious order in the universe.

In addition, humans are essentially spirit-beings with bodies.¹⁵ When humans die, their spirits continue to exist, joining the spirit-world as ancestors (the most prominent of these will continue to be invoked, often by name until they are forgotten, at which time they join the world of unnamed ancestors that are believed to be still engaged in the human world). Often, good and generous ancestors are invoked to help protect the communities of their descendants from opposing spiritual forces (as they are believed to be even more powerful after death). As a result, many Africans believe that human life, as we live it in this physical realm on earth, mirrors developments in the spirit-world. Life will go well when the spiritual powers on our side are stronger than those seeking to frustrate us.

The Spirit in African Independent Churches

In the early years of the Western missionary engagement in the 19th century, mainline missionaries attempted to convert Africans to a religion that looked nothing like their own indigenous religious heritage. The missionaries lacked the spirit-language that was, to Africans, the hallmark of religion. They did not understand the spirit-world of the Africans and, thus, right from the start, there was a theological miscommunication between the Europeans and the Africans. Explaining the African perspective of the conflict, Jacob Loewen states:

Verbally, missionaries tend to confess a belief in spirits, especially the Spirit of God. But it seems to be more lip service than anything else, because most of them have never seen or experienced an evil spirit. Their knowledge

15 I heard it numerous times among my grandfather's circles that the spirit-world is more real than the physical one and that everything that happens in the material world is a result of something that had already taken place in the spirit realm. Curiously, this language, almost verbatim, shaped Malawian Pentecostal theology and served as an impetus for evangelism and spiritual warfare.

is entirely conceptual, rather than experiential. In fact, their whole educational system in the Western scientific world has taught them that there is a deep cleavage between the material and the spiritual, and whether they want it or not, they tend to accept the material as much more real.¹⁶

The encounter between Western Christianity and local spiritualist religious systems (whether in Africa or in other parts of the world) has always been tense. For the Africans, for instance, it was difficult to imagine a religion in which the spirit-world remains merely an abstraction. It was understandably perplexing for Africans to imagine a religion – Christianity – whose Spirit was allegedly stronger than the spirits of the ancestors but was not active. Consequently, they concluded the Spirit in Christianity was either too weak or non-existent.¹⁷ It was believed to be a spirit only in name. It could not bring down rains. It could not heal the sick. It could not foretell of future events. It could not perform miracles. In fact, some of the missionaries did not believe in miracles. All these were activities that were associated with spirits and spiritual power in traditional religion. Paul Pomerville observes that,

The excessive impact of western culture on the theology brought by the missionary to non-western cultures resulted in an extremely naturalistic, rationalistic, and abstract-oriented theological product being introduced into supernaturalistic, intuitive, and concrete oriented societies.¹⁸

Many people who converted to Christianity continued to believe in the efficacy of the spirit-world of God, other spirit-beings, and spirits of their ancestors. This was in addition to the faith they found in the God of Christianity. It would be too much of a challenge for them to live without the connection

16 Jacob A. Loewen, "Mission Churches, Independent Churches, and Felt Needs in Africa," *Missiology* 4, no. 4 (1976).

17 For more on this, see David B. Barrett, *Schism and Renewal in Africa: An Analysis of Six Thousand Contemporary Religious Movements* (Nairobi: Oxford, 1968).

18 Paul Anthony Pomerville, *The Third Force in Missions: A Pentecostal Contribution to Contemporary Mission Theology* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1985), 74.

with the spirits.¹⁹ Citing Gottfried Ooster's reflection on this problem, Pomerville adds that:

For it is precisely the absence or lack of the power of God as a reality people can live by that has been a precipitating factor to these movements. In African traditional religions, power is as the center of their thinking. And the spirit – of God, the gods, or the ancestors – was a tangible reality. How remote, how intellectual, how powerless seems to be the God and the Spirit the missionaries preach about, or the Westerners show in their lives. As one leader once expressed it in a conversation with the missionary, “you have held back the Spirit!”²⁰

From African Indigenous Religions to African Pentecostalism

In addition to bringing in a religion in which the Spirit was detached from the experiential aspects of life, the missionaries denied and strongly criticized the supernatural dimensions in traditional societies. All the indigenous spirit-talk was evil and had to cease for fear of syncretism. When African Christians began to access vernacular translations of the Bible, they read for themselves what it says about spirits – God is a Spirit, the Spirit anoints Jesus for ministry (that actually looks like that of the spirit mediums of their society) and that the Spirit of Jesus lives in his followers, empowering them to do greater works than the miracles he performed – again, miracles that looked like the ones they saw in their indigenous religions. In the Scriptures, African Christians found the Spirit which seemed similar to the spirits in the indigenous religions.

In response to the pneumatological hiatus in Western theology, Africans started their own independent churches. As a result, enthusiastic indigenous movements, later labelled Zionist or Ethiopian, came into existence largely due to this theological misunderstanding.²¹ The Africans were drawing

19 Even today, some studies suggest that many African Christians still depend on African spiritual consultants for their spiritual needs. See Ogbu Kalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

20 Pomerville, *The Third Force*, 76.

21 See Allan Anderson, *African Reformation: African Initiated Christianity in the 20th century* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2001).

from their spirit-centered worldview to inform their learning about the Spirit in the Bible. The general outlook of the African independent churches that emerged out of this encounter show a form of Christianity that bypasses the European middleman to engage the Bible using African cultural sensibilities. AICs are the foundation upon which African Pentecostal movements build.

In a nutshell then, African Pentecostalism has its roots in African indigenous religions. It has Christianised the African worldview by replacing the myriads of spirit-beings of African indigenous religions with God and the Holy Spirit. This Spirit, as my grandfather suggested, is the clean spirit that has infinite powers compared to anything else. My grandfather would allude to the fact that the power of the Spirit of God is in its cleanness – without holiness, we cannot see God (Matt. 5). Any spiritual power that is not holy, (and, therefore, not of the Holy Spirit) is suspect. In addition, the blood that was at the centre of African religion (which was also at the centre of the Judaism that we see in the Old Testament) has been replaced by that of Jesus, doing the same primary work as the blood of the sacrificial animals in the Old Testament – touching the spirit-world on behalf of humans to appease and entice God or the spirits to forgive, bless, and protect them.

Thus, the omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent Spirit of Jesus in African Pentecostalism continues the work of the spirits in African religions, doing everything as it should be done, in holiness and truth. The Spirit continues to breakthrough into the world of humans as expected, to intervene and set the world in order according to the kingdom of heaven in which God is king. The medium and priest of indigenous religions is replaced by the Pentecostal prophet or apostle and their world marches on. A Christianity that is shaped by African cultural sensibilities must, out of necessity, wrestle with the spiritual and spirit-centred concerns of Africans. It ought to offer answers to their spiritual problems and not treat them as superstition that must be ignored. Such a Christianity will have

to be enthusiastic. Indeed, a non-enthusiastic (non-Charismatic, non-Pentecostal) Christianity will be strange and, to a great extent, useless.

Conclusion

I have argued within the limited space of this essay that African indigenous religions provide the foundational building block upon which African Pentecostalism stands. Indeed, African Pentecostalism is, in the words of David Ngong, a thinly disguised African indigenous religion.²² As a matter of fact, it appears to me that Pentecostalism is what happens when Christianity encounters spirit-centred religions of the world. Jesus enters the world of indigenous religions and offers himself as the more excellent way.²³ He comes with all power in heaven and earth and, through his Spirit, gives gifts to his followers to walk in the same spiritual power. As this happened in Africa, indigenous religion gave way to spirit-centred Christianity. I propose that in the African continent, the Africanisation of Christianity has also been its pentecostalisation, bringing it closer to African cultures and religions.

22 David Ngong, on Twitter, @ProfDNgong, <https://twitter.com/ProfDNgong/status/1456637499619565574> posted on 5 November 2021.

23 Through his Spirit, he is the sacrificial lamb without blemish, the high priest who brings the sacrifice before the Mercy Seat, and of course, the God who receives the sacrifice (see Heb. 8).