



## The Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization

The Whole Church taking the Whole Gospel to the Whole World

### Lausanne Occasional Paper 18 Christian Witness to People of African Traditional Religions

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*Christian Witness to People of African Traditional Religions*

*Report of the Consultation on World Evangelization*

*Mini-Consultation on Reaching Traditional Religionists (Africa)*

*held in Pattaya, Thailand from 16-27 June 1980*

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#### Prefatory Note

This report, *Christian Witness to People of African Traditional Religions*, is one of a series of Lausanne Occasional Papers (LOPs) emerging from the historic Consultation on World Evangelization (COWE) held in Pattaya, Thailand, in June 1980. The report was drafted by members of the "Mini-Consultation on Reaching Traditional Religionists," under the chairmanship of Rev. Tite Tienou.

The major part of this report went through a draft and a revised draft, which involved all members of the mini-consultation. It was also submitted to a wider "sub-plenary" group for comment, but the responsibility for the final text rests with the mini-consultation and its chairman.

The report is released with the prayer and hope that it will stimulate the church and individual members in reaching this large segment of the population.

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#### Introduction

This paper is divided into two major sections. The first deals with a general understanding of African Traditional Religion (ATR) and our attitude toward it. The second deals with a selected comparison between ATR and Christianity and suggests some strategies for the proclamation of the gospel in a meaningful and effective manner.

#### 1. General Understanding of African Traditional Religion

##### Preamble

God has not left himself without a witness (Acts 14:17). We believe, however, that he revealed himself in a special and unique way in the Judeo-Christian faith and supremely in our Lord Jesus Christ, outside of whom there is no salvation (Col. 2:9; Acts 4:12).

Apart from and in addition to this special revelation, God also revealed himself in more general ways:

- through the created order and the display of his goodness and power in the phenomena of nature (Ps. 19; Rom. 1)
- through man's conscience—the bedrock for morality both individually and corporately (Rom. 2)
- through the events of history (Is. 45; Dan. 5-6)

We believe that ATR derives from God's general revelation. This can be interpreted in two ways:

- Some believe that ATR is a product of God's general self-disclosure in nature, in the events of history as well as in man's conscience. This implies that while the revelation is *real* (Rom. 1:18-20), the product, *vis-à-vis* religion (ATR) is the design of man (Rom. 1:21-29). It further implies *limitation*, in the sense of its non-redemptiveness and *corruption*.
- Others believe that the root of ATR goes back to a direct revelation—however inadequate—of God to man in primeval times.

Perhaps the record and rudiments of this revelation were transmitted among the African peoples since pre-Abrahamic times. Stories about creation, paradise, the Fall, and judgment which are told in many parts of Africa could lend support to this view.

Whatever our understanding of the origins of ATR, we believe it has played, and still does, for its devotees, a special role among the peoples of Africa. It is believed that it, therefore, provides a point of contact or a sounding board for the message of God's ultimate revelation in Christ (e.g., in the traditional African idea of God). At the same time we believe that, in several crucial aspects, ATR is incompatible with the gospel. We, therefore, accept that there are both elements of continuity and discontinuity between ATR and the Christian faith.

In spite of what we have said above, we confess that God's revelation in Christ is incomparable, supreme, and final, and that we have the glorious duty to proclaim salvation through him alone to the peoples of Africa. The sun has risen, and the candlelight has become redundant. Yet, because of our recognition that, in some mysterious ways, God goes to a people ahead of gospel-transmitters, we approach the traditionalists with humility and respect—including respect for their religious heritage—not condescendingly, as the "haves" going to the "have-nots," but as sinners saved by grace.

## 2. Definition and Descriptions

**A. ATR is the indigenous faith and practice of African peoples which is the product of their perception, encounter, reflection upon, and experiences of the universe in which they live.**

**B. Generally the African world (i.e., universe) exists in two spheres**—the visible, tangible, and concrete world of man, animals, vegetation and other natural elements; and the invisible world of the spirits, ancestors, divinities, and supreme deity. Yet, it is one world, indivisible, with one touching on the other. As one African proverb says: "Our world is like a drum; strike any part of it and the vibration is felt all over."

**C. Elements of faith in ATR include:**

- belief in the existence of God and gods (or divinities)
- belief in spirits: both good and evil
- belief in cultic prohibitions (called taboos) and moral violations which can cause disruption of human relationship
- belief in sacrifices performed for various purposes, such as warding off evil, securing ancestors' support, appeasing divinities and supernatural beings, and expressing gratitude for plentiful harvest, deliverance from accident, or life experiences.
- belief in continuing existence of the dead in the invisible world, a position where they could be of help and assistance to the living. Some tribes see them as mediums. Libation and sacrifices are made to them—which some people consider as veneration, and others regard as worship.
- belief in reincarnation among some tribes, and in partial reincarnation among others.
- belief in judgment from God and/or from dead or living elders. This may take a form of reward for good deeds or retribution for evil/wicked deeds, essentially in this world and rarely after death. The idea of heaven and hell is not so clear.

**D. Traditional Religion gives meaning and direction to its adherents.** It is expressed and has expressed itself in the way the African has always regulated his relationship both with nature and with his fellow-men. Because of this, in some cases, some animals may be regarded as sacred to devotees of any particular divinity (such animals are called "totem animals"), some natural phenomena such as trees, hills or rivers may be deified, as well as some ancestral heroes.

**E. Traditional Religion, therefore, has not been neutral vis-à-vis history nor the interests of the African peoples.** In other words, the religious awareness of the African is not an abstraction, but rather a living component of his way of life.

**F. Since faith can only endure by being active, and since it can only remain a living phenomenon as it touches people's lives and makes its impact on their culture, it can be said that African Traditional Religion is alive today.** Evidence for this assertion can be seen in villages, towns, and cities—either directly in the devotees during their various festivals, or indirectly in thousands of those who seek the help of traditionalist diviners or priests in times of difficulty.

**G. Traditional Religion places the community of the living and the dead at the centre of its world-view.** Everything, as it were, exists for the benefit of man in the community. Man will submit to the unseen supernatural forces that he cannot control and he will manipulate, sometimes by magic or juju, those that he can. In other words, the traditionalist adheres to his religion in order to maintain a cosmological balance and enjoy the maximum benefits. Man, however, is not only an individual; rather, he belongs to the community of both the living and the dead. And such elements of "salvation" or "a fulfilled existence" include: acceptance in the community, wholesomeness, health, productivity, fertility, full or old age, and perpetual remembrance after death.

**H. While there could be a change from worshipping one divinity to another, either through marriage (especially for a bride), or conquest of one tribal god by another, or a divine granting of a request such as healing or childbirth, the Christian concept of conversion is foreign to the traditional system.** Traditional Religion is a family affair (in its extended form) which has been passed down from generation to generation. It has no Scripture, such as a Bible or Qur'an, except, "Thus said our fathers!"

## 3. Functions of Traditional Religion in the Society

**A. Religions have been used as a medium of education in the society.** For example:

- through the taboos, people have been taught certain dietary laws sometimes only at an elementary level.
- through various initiations and rituals in some cases, sexual morality is instilled.

**B. The respect for the sacred and for the worth and dignity of man has prevented waste (ecology) in some respects.** However, this has not always been true (consider the inter-tribal wars, slavery, and killing of twins).

**C. Traditional religion inculcates a life of communion, union, and responsibility.**

**D. Traditional religion has favoured art forms such as are found in dance, in music, in pottery, and in carvings.**

**E. The religion, in some cases, has served as the repository of the people's history and cultural values.**

**F. Religion has been used as a control of social organisations.**

**G. Since there is no conversion or proselytisation in traditional religion, it is generally tolerant and hospitable to people and other ideas.**

**H. Traditional religion promotes respect for elders in the society.**

## 4. Contemporary Situations

### A. Resurgence of ATR

While the statement that the gods died at any time in African history can be challenged, it is obvious that, within the past two decades, African Traditional Religion has enjoyed some measure of resurgence or revival. Reasons for this are diverse. They may include:

- The desire for a cultural and spiritual heritage (esp. by the "nationalists") uncontaminated by colonial or Western influence.
- The desire for a supposedly dignified historical and religious identity.
- A reaction against imposed systems.
- An aspect of the general revolution, or metaphorically, "the wind of change" blowing across the whole continent.
- In some cases, spiritual aspirations and needs of African people have not been satisfactorily met by Christianity.

## B. Influence of Other Religions on ATR

Another observation is that the Traditional Religion has been influenced in many areas. Examples will include:

- The idea of a supreme deity. Though among most of the African peoples the supreme deity was present in their pantheon before the advent of Islam and Christianity, since their advent and because of their emphasis on monotheism, the supreme deity in the traditional religion has become more prominent.

Today, the traditionalists are promoting regular congregational worship on fixed days of the week in some parts of Africa.

In contrast to the situation in the past, traditionalists today are seeking to make converts from Islam and Christianity.

## 5. Basic Theses of African Traditional Religion

In the following section is a summary of basic theses or principles about ATRs. Each thesis implies certain adjustments in our approach. Because of the extent to which the theses may vary from place to place, these practical recommendations must be understood to be tentative suggestions. Only by a careful evaluation of each situation can we estimate which suggestions may actually be wise to consider.

### A. Thesis I

Traditional peoples of Africa, and indeed all mankind in general, are "notoriously religious." While man's religious system may be corrupted and may be used by some men to evade God's demands, we feel people tend to be religious because God has revealed himself to them.

God speaks in many ways. We depend primarily upon how God has spoken in a uniquely fixed and supremely authoritative way in Scripture. We also trust that he is speaking through us as we live and preach. But we also need to recognise, in practical ways, that he has also spoken within the traditional culture and that the Holy Spirit is already speaking among the people as we meet them. If due to our cultural blindness we fail to see that God is already at work around us, we miss the foundations God has already laid for evangelism.

There are points of contact and introduction for our ministry which God has already planted. It brings confusion if we are found to be denying these true things. This may alienate and confuse the people, spoiling our credibility and creating needless opposition.

Therefore, early in our contact with a traditional people, it is essential to learn the nature of their religion. Key factors to learn are:

- name for gods, deities, and spirits
- the nature of high gods or of God as he is understood
- goals, aims of life, and things greatly valued within this system
- parallels and contrasts to biblical themes and truths

We are suggesting a clear approach of introducing Christianity by building from the known to the unknown. This may mean telling the Old Testament stories, and particularly those that are parallel to the local culture. Then the Christian messenger should work through those stories and compare the biblical concepts to the traditional stories—showing how they are the same, or how they represent different values. It is only by consciously working through the parallels and conflicts that the distinctives of the Christian message can be distinguished with clarity from the strong parallels which are close, but still very different from the scriptural concepts.

Another practical suggestion emerges, based on the idea of God revealing himself. In talking with Muslims and men from ATRs, one evangelist frequently asks individuals if they had ever talked to God or felt that he answered them. Many people reply that when they were very young it was so. Then he asks why they think it stopped, or why they may now feel far from God. They frequently feel it is because of sin. In these cases, it opens a very warm and sympathetic conversation about forgiveness and reaching God through Christ in an atmosphere free from a spirit of accusation or attack.

### B. Thesis II

While ATRs vary greatly, many of them often show a pattern of elements parallel to the Bible. Here is a small sample of some of the parallels.

(i) *The idea of God.* God is the creator and sustainer of the world and man. This concept stresses God's power and providence.

(ii) *Idea of man as a social and spiritual being.*

- as a "created creator" (see family, society, etc.) yet spiritually and morally vulnerable and therefore dependent on and in need of help from higher power(s).
- with potential for "good" as well as "evil" deeds.

(iii) *Idea of ways of communication between God and man—i.e., prayer, sacrifices, etc.* (at least in the Old Testament sense).

(iv) *A world in which exists not only the power of God and good, but also of evil (i.e., suffering and death)*—a world in which man is often caught up in the interests of the latter rather than those of the former. A world in which man tends to get caught up and often tormented by the evil beings, more often than he is comforted by the good beings. With it all, however, it is a world in which man is actually aware that the power of good is stronger than the power of evil.

(v) *Idea of life preservation and affirmation, which places man at the centre of the created orders.*

(vi) *The concept of covenant with a deity.* Among many traditionalists there is a lively concept of covenant with a deity, solemnised by a sacrifice and the taking of an oath with a severe curse. Without causing controversy over any one of the particular Protestant understandings of the biblical covenant or the terms of the New Covenant, we want to make the following points:

(a) If we do not deal with the indigenous concept of covenant and sacrifice, the people are likely to think of the biblical covenants in terms of those of the traditional religion. While they may be very appropriate in some cases, there may be others where this may cause confusion.

(b) Among the very positive points of contact as redemptive analogies for presenting the gospel, it may be useful to preach on some of these covenant themes.

- God calls upon all men to enter directly into covenant with him.
- God has a covenant of salvation, and there is a curse. Christ's sacrifice has fully paid the penalty of the curse caused by our sin.
- If we break a covenant with any god, by becoming a Christian, the curse or penalty of breaking that covenant has already fallen on Christ. Jesus has fully paid the price of that curse so that, in him, the Christian person is fully set free.
- We have all broken the covenants of the most high God and deserve the full penalty of breaking his covenant, but the full penalty has been paid in Christ.
- If the sacrifice of a chicken is of more value than that of an egg, but the sacrifice of a sheep or a goat has even more value, a cow still more value, a man even more, certainly that of a mighty spirit world would have much more. Then surely the sacrifice of God's own Son would be able to atone for all the sins of all the covenant breaking of all the men who call upon his name. This is but one of the many ways of relating the significance of the death of Christ and the atonement to the traditional point of view.

### C. Thesis III

African traditional religions frequently lack certain features which are peculiarly Christian, or contain other aspects which provide points of departure between the two. Some of these points usually are:

(i) *Idea of God*—He may not be seen as personally righteous and holy in the same way that the Scripture reveals him, or as the Judge of every man by his standard of righteousness.

(ii) *The idea of man*—He may not be seen as created in the image of God by a direct act of creation by the most high God. Man may not be seen as a rebel against God—which causes fallen man to sin naturally. His sin may be seen merely as a social matter rather than as a spiritual matter between God and man. The doctrine of original sin, or a sinful nature in man, is usually vague—when it is found at all.

(iii) *The idea of one mediator between God and man*—In the Bible, Jesus is seen as God's Son, man's liberator and Saviour—in a messianic sense. Because his death is the sacrifice for all sin, and yet he is risen again to life, he is the only mediator allowed between God and men. The traditional religions, of course, have ideas of priestly mediation; but these in no way approximate the biblical presentation of Christ's priestly ministries for the believers.

(iv) *The idea of evil*—The idea that evil is an affront to God personally, and that it violates the nature of his being and his unchanging standards, is not common. The idea that Jesus is man's ultimate means of coping with the problems of guilt between man and God and dealing with powers that disrupt harmonious relationship is unique to the Scriptures. The concept of sin being personified in one evil spirit may be alien, or the important characteristics of a being like Satan may be far removed from the biblical presentation. By the same token, the confusion of many different deities as devils distorts the indigenous concepts.

(v) *Ideas of death and life after death*—In many traditional world-views, death is not the end of existence, but rather a gate or a passage to the next world, in which each one is rewarded for what he has done. In Christianity there is the concept of Jesus as a personal judge, who shall judge the world in truth and righteousness. The climax of all things is the establishment of the kingdom of God.

(vi) *Concept of covenant*—As stated above, most traditional religions have a lively sense of covenants between men and spirits. These concepts of covenant may very likely be read directly into Scriptures, unless there is specific emphasis upon the fact that the Bible clearly condemns covenants between man and any other spirits than God himself.

(vii) *Idea of sin*—In most ATRs, sin is either ceremonial or moral. While ceremonial error could be individual violation of cultic regulation, the other is a violation against the community. Sin against God is rare. In the Bible, sin is primarily rebellion against God. It is also transgression of God's fixed moral standards, and indifference to other people.

#### D. Thesis IV

Most traditional religions define the people's life goals and give their meaning to struggles in life. It shapes their sense of need, or perceived needs. It shapes the occasions and situations in which it is wise to watch for moments in which people normally seek spiritual help, when they practise their rites, affirm or transmit their traditions. These are the occasions best suited for communication of the gospel, the situations most open for transmitting religion and the points of need at which the people will require pastoral care.

We could profit from several illustrations of the profit of working from within the religious world-view of the people we serve.

##### (i) *Concept of time*

One particularly interesting contrast is that in many traditional concepts time does not progress into a future bliss in which the past is put right. Rather than having hope in the future, people may identify with the past and hope to attain unity with generations past. But most of people's real attention is focused on the present, upon the immediate physical realities of this life as the important indicators of spiritual reality. It has been suggested that, in some cases, the future takes on a quality of non-reality. In these cases, it is exceedingly unwise to present our major appeal for accepting Christ upon the possibility of receiving future salvation in another world. Defining salvation as going to heaven after death in such circumstances may provoke resistance to the gospel rather than attract people to Christ.

##### (ii) *Salvation now*

Salvation in Christ, however, has many aspects. Some benefits of the blessed hope in Christ will be realised only in the future. But some aspects of salvation are also realised now in our present circumstances. We have every right to emphasise the redeeming work of Christ in our hearts now, and his present protection from forces of evil. After these appeals have been firmly established, it is time to go on to proclaim the more alien concepts of future blessings yet to come.

The question of how the acceptance of Christ as Saviour and Lord can affect a person or a people's past seems to be a shocking concept. But it may be a topic worth thought, for a people who focus much attention on the past.

In many societies religious practises are directly aimed at securing the blessing of the spirit world upon their crops, their families, business ventures, and life's crises, such as, birth, puberty, marriage, and death. While it may occur to some Christians to provide spiritual ministries at some of these points where the people are accustomed to receiving religious help, it may even be repulsive to other Christians to provide spiritual ministry for these occasions. Yet if we fail to show how our God meets them, we should not be surprised if the people think our religion unattractive or merely seek traditional help for the situations in which we do not provide it.

#### E. Thesis V

The traditional religions are essentially social, practical, and anthropocentric. Their views of life tend to be holistic.

(i) *They stress man's origin (cf., creation myths), nature (dependence), and hope.* Such hopes, which often are eschatological in nature, have little effect on primal man's anthropocentric ontology, and this confines primal religious practise to man as a point of departure as well as an end—a fact which can only be accounted for by appealing to lack of "Christology" in primal eschatology!

(ii) *Social life of a people is closely interwoven with their religion.*

(iii) *It is, therefore, often difficult for a person to take an "individual" stand against the "group"—for as Prof. Mbiti points out—for primal man, "I am because we are" summarises one's identity and world-view. Those world-views strongly emphasise "being-in-relationship."*

(iv) *This leads to a sense of "conservatism" in primal societies.* It is harder to accept change here than in communities where custom ("tradition") and general consent is less supreme. Consequently, when change comes, it affects (for good or ill) the whole people including their world-view.

##### (v) *Practical and holistic*

Many of the practical causes for resistance to the gospel stem from the fact that people do not see Jesus Christ as the answer to all their pressing social, economic, practical human needs which are addressed by their traditional religion. Rather, they see Christianity as a possible threat to their existing means of meeting their needs. These are frequently seen as "irrational" reasons for rejecting the logic of the gospel, yet they are exceedingly logical considerations.

We present our message to natural men with spiritual concerns. Because of a holistic basis of an ATR, we must expect social, economic, and political factors to impinge on religion. If people feel that the way we present Christianity is a direct insult to their social identity, a threat to their unity as a people, the stability of the economic order, or the political strength of their unit, we should expect resistance and possibly accept blame for causing resistance to the gospel.

If, on the other hand, we point out the social and economic advantages of accepting Christ, we will be accused of manipulating people on a carnal basis.

We face, then, two opposite dangers. An extreme emphasis on the practical, economic advantages of accepting Christianity is indeed open to the dangers of manipulation and a harvest of immature Christians. Failing to do so brings the danger of provoking resistance.

Therefore, no one approach or balance between earthly issues and a purely spiritual approach can be recommended. But these factors must be examined so that

the evangelist can anticipate these human concerns. He must plan specific answers to practical questions and also plan a range of activities to be supported by church people to meet these particular needs. Here are some examples:

*(a) Unity*

In some societies, members resist Christianity because they feel it may weaken their social and political unity if people start to abandon the ethnic deities or ancestors in favour of Christianity. It is, therefore, possible for the evangelist and church members deliberately to devise ceremonies or activities which pointedly contribute to local civic projects or show social solidarity with the group.

One team of young evangelists helped local farmers thatch their roofs in rainy season. A group of persecuted church elders voluntarily improved the road through town as a service to the town. In both cases, hostile unresponsive towns opened dramatically to the gospel. In a Muslim area, an evangelist regularly visits the chief, prays a blessing on the town, asks permission to preach, and promises to call any converts to increase their loyalty to the chief and to the town. He regularly meets with openness, and he harvests in fields others find resistant.

*(b) Holism*

In many traditional societies, life is not divided into logical compartments but is seen holistically. Hence, religion is not restricted to one area of life. It is expected to permeate and condition all of life. No areas of life are put outside of control or influence from religion. But in the tradition of many forms of Western Christianity, life is subdivided into separate categories, some of which are not supposed to be combined with religion. Hence, in a traditional system, religion may openly perform many social and economic functions. When an evangelist introduces a form of Christianity with narrow religious concerns, many functions met by traditional religion are not met by the new faith. The traditional religion may be called in alongside of Christianity to perform these necessary functions. It is, therefore, necessary for the wise evangelist to observe the traditional religion and understand how it functions in many areas of life. He must either plan Christian ministry to meet these needs, or provide non-religious structures outside of church life to care for the "secular" needs which he chooses to meet outside of the church.

Often resistance occurs on a less analytical level but is affirmed at a general level of ethnic identity. Things not identified with their culture are assumed to be alien, threatening, and evil. Things identified with their culture are assumed to be practises, objects, or beliefs which may possibly be of use. Hence, the Masai people of Kenya tend to reject messages not presented in their own tongue. But a man who speaks their language and eats their distinctive foods is acceptable as a possible group member. It is essential that an evangelist among them identify with them on these two counts. In every group there are tokens of cultural loyalty which are held to be pivotal. By discussion with group leaders, it is wise to see which culture practises or emblems are appropriate for outsiders or good people to adopt. As long as there is not explicit scriptural teaching against these suggested emblems, it is generally good to use those recommended by the people.

*(c) Identity*

For instance, Scripture verses sung to indigenous tunes or chanted in the styles of Islamic chants are understood to be distinctly Christian and also good for general use. Instead of a feeling of foreignness working against the gospel, patriotism and nationalism work in favour of hearing and accepting the Christian content. Western hymns may offend some people, while the same words set to indigenous music and sung with carefully selected traditional instruments may evoke exceedingly positive attitudes toward the gospel. While these devices are not part of the gospel or its specific verbal content, they do condition the way people listen to the gospel itself.

Another dimension of the holistic approach which expects religion to contribute to social unity is that, in some cases, the community expects to take part in important religious discussions. When Gottfried Osei-Mensah gave his testimony, he told how his father heard the gospel and believed. When the elders met, he asked permission to become a Christian. He asked repeatedly and was finally given permission. He believed in his heart one day, but remained politically obedient for a time until he made peace with the group. By working within the indigenous pattern of making a major decision, he maintained his social unity and reduced the political and social threat of his conversion.

Instead of being rejected personally and causing his people to perceive a greater threat to their unity, he was accepted and opened the way for many others to follow him into Christianity.

There are situations in which God may want us to press for individual decisions against the resistance of social pressure which these methods may heighten. But there may also be situations in which it is the Lord's will to open the door through which many may pass with a minimum of resistance caused by factors not inherent in the gospel itself. Rather than blunder ahead according to immediate circumstances, we are asking that the people of God pray systematically concerning the alternatives in each case, and then act as the Lord may lead them.

**F. Thesis VI**

In spite of all the above, one sees three (and perhaps more) "persistent problems" in Traditional Religion.

*(i) A sense of fear, arising mainly from constant threat of "principalities and powers" on the ontological "balance" which primal man has to maintain if he is to survive.* On a practical level, it is the fear of illness and death—hence the preoccupation with "protection" (charms, anti-witchcraft medicines, etc.). A particularly useful approach, in a situation where fear of the spirit world is a problem for the people, is to make use of Hebrews 2:15, which talks about how an unsaved man may live "all his lifetime in bondage because of fear of death..." The knowledge of the resurrection and the One who conquered death must be a practical and helpful approach to the traditional religionist who suffers from fear. The concept of the protection of the Holy Spirit for believers, and the concept of power encounter, should be emphasised in these situations.

*(ii) A sense of powerlessness because of the unpredictable human helplessness*—a feeling that one might just "not make it" in spite of all the available means and measures towards self-protection.

*(iii) A sense of ultimate hopelessness.* This arises, at least in part, against the background of the numerous creation myths in primal societies:

*(a)* Man is seen as having been created to live in some "paradise" or, in some cases, where death is foreign (e.g., the Akamba), created with potential possibility for "everlasting life."

*(b)* Then something went wrong and the hopes of "paradise" and eternal bliss were either frustrated or shattered. What went wrong is usually linked with food and drink, a fact which accounts for common food prohibitions and totemic animals in primal religion (cf., Orisa-Nla and palm-wine in Yoruba religion).

*(c)* Death and suffering were introduced and, with them, "evil" of every kind became a reality in man's experience in the world—a world in which the activities of evil spirits are more pronounced than those of God or benevolent spirits.

*(d)* Hence man's attempt to maintain a balance and harmony within this context—a context in which (perhaps due to a lack of clear formula) restoration of paradise has become more and more enigmatic and elusive. This leads man almost to resign himself to the view that "whatever will be will be," while at the same time doing his best to survive.

From these considerations it is obvious that, in the general tradition of much of the theological training done in the west, God is taken to be real, but the world of angels and intermediary spirits is treated as if it was unreal. Yet in many traditional societies and even in some modernising societies, these intermediary spirits are those which most influence life. They are actually part of the biblical world-view. We, therefore, suggest that it is exceedingly unproductive to deny the reality of evil spirits which threaten the lives of men. Rather, it is wise to take them seriously and compare each local tradition to the Scripture portion. It is good to make some of the following points in evangelistic ministries:

- The spirits are real, but Christ is Lord of them all.
- Worship, sacrifice, and glory are to be given to God alone—through Christ, who is the only acceptable mediator between God and man. He forbids us to

use any spirits as mediators.

- In Christ, the righteous man need have no fear of them, because Christ is in us and he is greater than any of the spirits that are in the world. Jesus Christ came to set us free from bondage to these.
- It is also essential to recognise, that in many traditional societies fear of the spirits may have held men in bondage as did the Hebrew law (cf., Ephesians, Galatians, Hebrews). It may be a disaster to fling aside traditional spirit-related means of social control without a plan for Christian discipline to take its place. Hence, along with a message of liberation from dangers of spirit powers through the protection of the Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, there needs to be a programme of teaching on Christian discipline and possibly structures of church discipline.

The main point being made in this section is that there are a number of themes in the Bible that are particularly meaningful from the point of view of many of the people from many traditional religions of Africa. Even as each culture is different, the values that most people talk about, care about, or cherish may be different. These key issues can be called culture themes.

An evangelist with the outlook of much of our Western-oriented schooling may miss these key themes and cultural values. But a deep study of the traditional religion and world-views can sharpen and vividly bring to life some biblical themes, which the best of Western scholarship may be unable to detect in its study of biblical cultures. As peoples of Africa come to Christ, they are uniquely prepared to see some of these dimensions of biblical truth. These truths are not only useful as approaches to practical evangelism, but also for the enrichment of the entire Christian community. It is possible to view the traditional religions of Africa primarily as a potential for evil forms of syncretism. But the churches of Africa are also a source of enrichment and correction for the larger Christian community. It is our prayer that the churches of Africa will not fail to be true to this calling. Even as each culture is different, the values that people talk most about, care about, or cherish may be different. These key issues can be called culture themes.

### G. Thesis VII

Rightly presented and understood, the gospel of Jesus Christ is capable of meeting the primal man at the point(s) of his greatest need, providing him with ultimate answers to his longings and effective ways of coping with the persistent problems in his life. Sometimes this will happen suddenly; but, more often than not, it is a process or processes of "power encounter" between the Christian and the primal world-views in which the former transforms the latter's view of God, man, and the "power" through Jesus Christ. How?

(i) *By affirming God's love and power not only in creation but also in subsequent human history.*

(a) He is the powerful creator and sustainer of mankind and all the world. As such, he is actively involved in all that happens in the world and keenly aware of what happens to those who live or die therein. Nothing passes his notice, whether good or bad.

(b) He rewards good and punishes evil.

(c) He is prepared to be the protector of those who acknowledge his *Lordship* and trust him.

(d) He is able to deliver us from those who wish us evil, including the spiritual forces that often buffet us. This he will do through Jesus Christ.

(ii) *By lifting Jesus Christ not only as God's Son but also as the Lord of history and the liberator of mankind.*

(a) Jesus was God's Son who, though being God, became man and came to earth to live like man and with men some 2,000 years ago. *Note* idea of Jesus Christ as God's servant (prophet) and representative before men.

(b) He confronted suffering, evil forces, and death—problems that tormented the men of his day, as well as today, and defeated them all.

(c) Those who believed his message and followed him were also enabled by God to overcome these forces as well.

(d) Although we do not see Jesus Christ today, his Spirit of power is still present and available to those who trust and follow him. He is just as able to protect and deliver us as he was 2,000 years ago.

(iii) *By demonstrating that the gospel of Christ not only offers a living God and deliverance to all who trust and follow him, but that it offers abundant and "eternal" life as well.*

(a) "Eternal life" is what man was originally created to enjoy with God. And that begins the moment one believes on Jesus Christ.

(b) Unlike popular myths in primal religions, man's "disobedience" (to God) which resulted in man's forfeiture of the joys of divine paradise brought about God's "curse" on man and nature.

(c) Toil, suffering, sin, death, and eternal judgment were the contents of this curse. This answers the dualism of primal world-view which credits undue power, position, and place to malevolent spirits.

(d) Then God, in his mercy and love, took the initiative and sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to the earth to "lift the curse" on man by giving himself as a sacrifice to God on man's behalf (an idea which is not foreign to primal world-views).

(e) By his death and resurrection, Jesus inaugurated a new era of relationships between God and man. Not only would the old broken fellowship be restored between God and man (i.e., for those who saw Jesus' death and resurrection as "for" them), but the way to eternal communion with God was paved as well.

(f) This means that death, while inevitable for those who believe as well as those who don't (Heb. 9:27), has its power and finality stripped by Jesus' resurrection.

(g) It further means that God's care, protection, and providence are not limited to our earthly existence, but extend to "life after death," which believers shall share with him. This does not mean that "faith in Christ" serves as an opium to keep the poor in their oppressed state; but rather, it gives both assurance for the future, and meaning plus dignity for the present.

(h) It finally means that, although here and now God's children struggle, suffer, hunger, thirst, and even die, they have an assured inheritance of eternal life in God's presence where they shall rest, worship, adore, and enjoy God forever. Without this hope, the gospel of Jesus Christ would, in the end of the day, have little to offer to primal man.

## 6. The Gospel in Traditional Societies: An Appraisal

**A. The significance of the approach outlined above lies in the gradual unfolding of Christian truth in a primal context.** It is a process in which:

(i) *The idea of sin in relation to redemption and deliverance begins to open up.*

(ii) *This idea of divine deliverance is put in a new Christological context by elaborating on why and how God in Jesus Christ had to go to all this length to deliver, protect, and care for mankind whose world-view and preoccupations gave little or no attention to the Supreme Being.*

(iii) *Man begins to see himself as a child of God's creation who had "gone astray" to his own way.*

(iv) *Man begins to see this "straying" in terms of rebellion against God, and Christ's coming, death, and resurrection as God's way of offering "a way back home" to man, a "prodigal son," who has put himself into a "mess" out of which he cannot free himself, however hard he tries.*

(v) *Belief and trust in God, as revealed by and in Jesus Christ—and Christ's power to set one free from all those forces which oppress and dehumanise*

man—begin not only to be apprehended, but also appreciated.

**B. The significance of the "power encounter" in this process is far-reaching.** The believer may not at first understand the relationship between deliverance and forgiveness of sin. Indeed, the believer may go on believing in the power of evil spirits, witchcraft, etc.; but the introduction of God's power in Christ (to deliver and protect him or her) must surely be seen to begin to make an immense difference in his or her world-view in that:

(i) *He has given his allegiance to Jesus Christ, who is more powerful and much stronger than all the "powers" which may have hitherto troubled the believer.*

(ii) *It is made clear that these "powers" have not vanished, but the believer has been connected to a person whose power will prevent any other powers or forces from having "dominion" over him.*

(iii) *As the character, power, and love of God in Christ continue to take hold of the believer, he begins to realise just how "unworthy" and undeserving he is of such divine mercy and grace.* (Incidentally, this is where most missionary teaching and preaching to primal peoples fail greatly. Most of them start by presenting primal peoples with a moral code from a "God" whom they hardly understood or trusted—thus producing "Christians" who spent the rest of their lives trying to obey God and be good by pleasing the missionaries or pastors, only to fail at every turn!)

(iv) *This experience of God's love and Christ's power then opens the way for one's understanding and appreciation of the moral demands which are concomitant with belief in God and Jesus Christ.* One is able to appreciate the reality not only of the external forces of evil but the internal ones as well, which still contrive to hinder believers from doing what they know they ought to do. One is able to appreciate the reality of SIN within as well as without, and thus become more accurately aware of one's need to be on guard continually and to trust in and lean on Jesus and his power.

## 7. Practical Recommendations

**A. Repentance which demands a turning from worshipping idols to worshipping the only living God should be clearly proclaimed.**

**B. Not only pastors, teachers, theologians, and evangelists need be encouraged to conduct research locally.** Use of locally available media should also be encouraged in evangelism.

**C. The advantage of training national church leaders at home (i.e., Africa) cannot be overemphasised.**

**D. Local consultations should not only be encouraged but supported by prayers and funding.**

**E. Before any material on evangelism intended for local consumption is published, it is suggested that it be rehearsed locally.**

**F. Sometimes a direct power encounter is called for.** A study of independent movements in Africa (e.g., Prophet Harris) could be advantageous.

**G. A network be set up for dissemination and distribution of materials and ideas which come out of consultations.**

**H. We utilize biblical approaches as contained in such passages as 2 Tim. 2:2; Eph. 4:13.**

**I. In our proclamation, use stories, parables, and analogies which readily appeal to an African audience.**

**J. Language.** The names, terms and vocabulary of a people's language form a unique system, which reveals their basic concepts, beliefs, and values. Similarly, the most effective communication of the gospel takes place through a people's language. Unless a person is bilingual to the extent that he can think about spiritual matters and express his basic concepts in the second language, his teaching can only be partial; and all too often leads to a type of compartmentalisation which may result in syncretism.

**K. Translation.** It is also recommended that priority be given to the translation of the Bible in those languages where this has not yet been done, and that new translations be made where existing translations are inadequate or out-of-date.

**L. Love.** We have to love them. Christ did love sinners, but he did hate sin.

Note: It is when men (ATR) see that we are prepared to suffer something for the faith which we say we hold, that they will begin to believe that we really do hold it. (People see us, and if what they see is positive and attractive they will also be interested in what we proclaim.)

**M. Prayer.** This should play a strategic role in leading followers of ATR to Christ.

**N. Self-knowledge.** Separate the gospel from culture. A cross-cultural communicator should make every effort to understand himself and his culture, so that he does not pass on to his hearers those "good" aspects of his culture, which are not part of the gospel; and therefore get people to behave in the way he does and not as Christ would in the recipient's culture.

**O. Make friends.** A cross-cultural communicator, in trying to identify with the people with whom he shares the good news of Jesus Christ, should try to live close to them (not living about a mile away from the people, as was the custom decades ago). This will make it easy for the people to see how he lives his daily life, settles his differences, if he and his wife quarrel, or if he beats his children when they are sick. In this, he can set them an example, as Paul did to his hearers.

**P. Select best people.** As we have emphasised the importance of recognising the limited revelation of God in traditional religions, and further, the importance of being able to appreciate the essentials and cultural realities of a people's "world-view" in our approach to them, it follows that people whose traditions and background are closest to the unreached people may be best suited to reach them.

Always allowing for the Holy Spirit's overruling, we should survey the unreached areas of Africa and, at the same time, survey the Christian groups most suited to reach them. Those groups could be challenged to the task.

### Appendix A: In Attendance

Adeyemo, Tokunboh	Nairobi, Kenya
Bhengu, Siphon N.	South Africa
Boakye-Yiadom, Stephen	Nairobi, Kenya
Djongwe, Daidanso	N'Djamena, Tchad
Dube, Phineas	Massachusetts, U.S.A.
Frempong, Justin A.	Ghana, Africa
Gumede, Cornelius P. M.	Swaziland
Hay, Ian M.	New Jersey, U.S.A.
Ibrahim, Siman A.	Nigeria
Jeraredu, N.	Cameroon
Kachaje, Hardwick Adam	Malawi
Kantzer, Kenneth S.	Illinois, U.S.A.
Klem, Herb	Illinois, U.S.A.
Miller, Lois C.	New York, U.S.A.
Musopole, Willie C.	Malawi

Mutala, Mpundu	Zambia
Mutombu, Kayij A.	
Noel, Claude	Haiti
Ruhumuriza, Aaron	Rwanda
Samuel, John Bendor	Ghana
Strong, Gary	Harare
Tata-Peba, Kabuya Masanka	Central African Republic
Touangai, Thomas	Central African Republic
Tienou, Tite	Fuller Seminary, Upper Volta
Yaneogo, Samuel	Upper Volta

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