

African Cultural Issues and Christian Worship – A Pastoral Perspective

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*“Man’s chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.”
(Westminster Catechism)*

1. Introduction

Man is essentially a religious being. This is certainly true of the African person. For the African, religion pervades every aspect of his life – whether gathering crops or sowing, whether hunting or looking for work, whether marking the coming of age or getting married, whether celebrating the birth of a child or burying the dead. There is no area of life that falls outside of the religious sphere. The secular and the sacred blend seamlessly into one life experience on a day-to-day basis. Not surprisingly so. Made in the image and likeness of God, man was destined to an active and dynamic relationship with the Creator, centred on the act of worship, the end of which act being to glorify God. Man, then, is made for the glory of God and exists and lives for this very end. John Calvin, one of the giants of the Protestant Reformation, was insistent that all human beings had in them a “*seed of religion*”. Calvin explains this to mean that every man had a need to worship something or someone. His conclusion is that this need leads, on one hand, either to *idolatry* and love and worship of the self; or else, to *piety* and love and worship of God. The fruit of the 16th century Reformation, the Westminster Catechism poses the question of human existence as the foundational basis for faith: ‘What is the chief end of man?’ The answer is emphatic: ‘*Man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever*’.

Segler and Bradley (2006:3) cannot help but to notice this divine intent in God’s creation plan: “Why do we worship?” they ask. And their answer is pointedly clear: “Because we cannot help worshipping. Worship”, they continue, “is not a human invention; rather, it is a divine offering. God offers himself in a personal relationship, and we respond. God’s offer of love elicits our response in worship. A vision of God demands a worship response because God is worthy of worship.” Their conclusion: “We discover that when we seek God, God has already found us.” (ibid). Segler and Bradley are thus correct in their opening observation that ‘worship is an end in itself, not a means to something else.’ The words of Karl Barth, cited by Segler and Bradley (ibid) resonate with this observation that the “*church’s worship is the opus Dei, the work of God, which is carried out for its own sake.*”

2. African Notions and Experiences of God.

African understanding and conception of the Divine Being predate the Christian era. In many instances, African beliefs, culture, practices, and faith traditions are strikingly akin to the biblical images and notions of God in the Old Testament, the faith practices, culture and traditions of Israel as God’s chosen nation. In the history of the Christian faith, Africa has once been home to a strong, vibrant, and dy-

namic culture and tradition of Christianity. For the first seven centuries of Christianity the northern third of Africa, including Ethiopia and the Sudan, became predominantly Christian. This region was later to become the epicentre of Christian faith and tradition over that time. Its theologians distinguished themselves as leading students and expositors of the Word. They have at one time taken the vanguard in the defence of the Christian faith against early heretical teachings. Their zeal for God made them true African spiritual ‘stalwarts’, true African Fathers of the Christian faith in their lifetime. Their churches spearheaded not only theological reflection, but missions, and produced liturgical traditions that would be influential and expressive of authentic Christianity in North Africa, Asia and the world over. As surprising as it may seem, eventually, most of the prevailing western thought on theology was greatly influenced by Africans of those days. The Christian faith they exhibited is described by John Mbiti (1986:1): “*It was a dynamic form of Christianity which gave us great names like Clement, Justin Martyr, Augustine, Origen, Athanasius, Tertullian, Frumentius, and Yared, to name but a few; and...“Christian traditions like asceticism and monasticism. It also engaged in theological controversies such as Donatism, Monophysitism and Arianism”*”. David Crutchley (2003:64) rightly concludes, “*In a real sense, Africa became the proud home of Christianity.*”

However, for three and half centuries of history, the African continent had fallen victim of the *transatlantic slave trade*. During this period and beyond, its people experienced colonial imperialism in all forms: capital, cultural, intellectual, spiritual. The culminating effect is that the African was striped of his pride, sense of *identity* and *dignity*; a loss of *spiritual compass* and *sense of purpose*. Shaken and reduced to the darkness of her misery and scorn, African history is at one instance shame and pride. To this day Africa, planted on the edge of the globe, faces the constant reality of being consigned to the margins of history and of humanity and of spirituality. Code-named the “Dark Continent”, she dwells on the fading memory of living traditions of all times and peoples of earth. Under the guises of global civilisation, Africa’s own culture and intellectual heritage is again and again discounted as merely pagan and demoniac.

David Crutchley (2003:64-79) makes an appeal for a recognition of the rise of a new vibrant African Christianity that has been on the horizons for the last few decades (2003:64-79). Crutchley argues that such *A Christianity out of Africa* has much to teach the rest of the world in matters of faith, religion and humanity. Indeed, after years of alienation and marginalization, Africa is once more waking up to the dawn of a new form of Christendom. Together with this African reawakening to faith there arises a quest for finding ways to give shape and authentic expression of this new faith within the context of her own culture. In this way, one of the areas of this learning for the world is in the aspect of worship. It is in worship that true faith finds true, genuine and authentic definition and expression. Unless God can be worshipped in an authentic and spontaneous manner, faith cannot be expressed genuinely and God cannot be encountered, experienced and enjoyed meaningfully.

The quest for the giving form and expression to African Christianity seems to

be following three pathways. One is the historical route, through which African Christian scholars are appealing to the post-apostolic classic era of Christendom, during which time prominent African church fathers played leading roles in defining and shaping the thought, culture and traditions of Christianity. The second is the hermeneutical pathway, which seeks to discover biblical truth that can be instrumental in defining and shaping African Christianity. The third route is the contextualization of the biblical message to resonate with African culture, ethos and faith experiences.

But can God be worshipped by Africans in an African way? What is that African way of worshipping God? Revelation chapter 4 reveals a great crowd of multitudes gathered around the throne of heaven. From the great hall, an anthem rings, echoing the song of men from every tribe and race and nation and tongue, all joined together in the one transcending act of worshipping the Creator, Lord of heaven, earth, sea and sky. Here there seem to be no hindrance, either by culture or creed, by race or language. There's total, absolute freedom. Here, faith is genuine. God is real. This is worship in its purest form. Greater expression of it cannot be found elsewhere. As an African Christian, the issues of culture and tradition confronting us in the act of worship stand at the center of our faith and expression of our worship to God. Indeed, such issues touch the very core of who I am, what I have become and what I can yet be. They define me, essentially.

To address some of the questions that relate to this redefining and expressing of authentic Christian spirituality by Africans, I will isolate three key issues African Christians face when attempting to engage in the sacred act of worshipping the Holy One. These include the role of ancestors, the place of traditional sacrifices, and the pervasive, subtle issue of syncretism. I will conclude by drawing a contrast between the forms of African worship and biblical Christian worship. These issues are critical to African Christianity because of their very close affinity to the conceptions of God, especially as articulated in the Old Testament text. For this reason, it becomes important to understand the shared beliefs between African and Hebraic cultures and beliefs; but also it becomes important to understand the points of disjuncture that mark the two worldviews apart one from the other. Although closely related, the three issues present particularities of their own and confront African Christians at different levels. Overall, when interpreted from a biblical perspective, the first two issues furnish the *Homo Africanus* with a firm springboard for a vibrant faith and powerful tools to engage in spirit-led worship of God and experience a deeper life with Him. When, on the other hand, improperly understood, syncretism becomes the practice and an inevitable distortion of the biblical message of salvation is consequent.

3. The Role of the Ancestors.

Wilber O'Donnovan Jr. (1995) points out that in biblical thought death marks a point of separation, a definitive one – between the living and the departed. Yet, while the biblical worldview considers the separation between the living and the dead to be definitive, both physically and spiritually, African thought considers death to be a gateway, a transition to the spirit world, a portal to another realm of

existence, wherein the dead still interact seamlessly with the living. Thus, belief in and reverence for the ancestors is fundamental to traditional African thinking. It is believed that those who die at a mature age do not cease to be members of the community but continue to play an active role in the lives of their descendants. Thus those who are dying are sometimes asked to take messages to those who have died before and are expected to continue to communicate with the living. If burial ceremonies and rituals are not properly observed, the spirit of the ancestor is believed to be capable of haunting the living in unpleasant ways. Ancestors are believed to be the custodians of kinship, religion, morality, ethics, and customs and are expected to bless the community when traditional customs and beliefs are upheld.

For these reasons, existential holism for many Africans depends on maintaining an ongoing interaction between the living and their dead. This leads to the practice of the invocation of ancestral spirits, who are believed to mediate between God and the living. Furthermore, like in the Hebrew concept, God is believed to be highly exalted and hence, distant, out of reach by mere mortals in flesh and blood. The African takes this further to conclude that the only way to reach the Creator is through the ancestors. Because it is also believed that ‘God is Spirit’, ancestral spirits are believed to be nearer to God, in the spirit world, and endowed with the ability to mediate between the realm of the living and the spirit realm.

Although many Africans perform certain cultural rituals for reasons of historical memory, heritage and identify, ancestor worship is almost always performed out of reverence and fear for the dead. This stands in stark contrast to the biblical concept of the fear of God. Africans do so out a fear of the spirit world and as an attempt to placate it in an attempt to elicit the enjoyment of the benevolence of good ancestors and ward off the malevolence of evil spirits.

In the majority of cases, ancestors are male. There are, however, exceptions, such as among the Kikuyu of Kenya and the Yoruba of Western Nigeria (Yusuf Turaki, 2006:480). Male or female ancestors are either the progenitors of a whole tribe, clan or community, or they are national liberators and defenders of the nation. They are symbols of tribal and ethnic unity, community cohesiveness and perpetuity of traditions. Many liberation fighters including Jomo Kenyatta (Kenya), Kenneth Kaunda (Zambia), Kwame Nkrumah (Ghana), Mnamdi Azikwe (Nigeria), Samora Machel (Mozambique), Walter Sisulu and Nelson Mandela (South Africa) will qualify as national ancestors. As fathers, these heroes suffered and sacrificed their lives to free their people. They are held in high esteem and some of them are sometimes venerated almost as gods (ibid).

It is believed that ancestors are capable of influencing the destinies of the living for good or ill, depending on how the living treat them. This belief has given impetus to ancestor worship, which ranges from a simple pouring of palm wine accompanying a petition, to elaborate animal sacrifices with festivities. For instance, when the Yoruba in western Nigeria experience a drought, the people say: ‘The ancestors are angry; therefore they have withheld the rain’. Consequently a national day of repentance is observed not in sackcloth, but with animal sacrifice.

Given the power and influence wielded by the ancestors some African theologians have proposed that Jesus be presented as an African ancestor. This idea is not without merit, for Jesus is like the ancestors in that people can take their problems to him and he does guarantee a better future for those who follow him. But there is a danger. Making him an ancestor may be tantamount to reducing his post-resurrection elevation as Lord of Lords (Phlp 2: 9-12) and may cause people to lose sight of his status as God.

The best approach may be modelled on the one taken in the book of Hebrews, which was written against religious background similar to that found in traditional African religions. Taking this approach, it can be said that Jesus has come to fulfill our African ancestral cult and has taken the place of our ancestors, replacing them with himself. Therefore, He has become the mediator between God and African society. Consequently, African veneration worship and respect for the ancestors should now properly be addressed to Jesus as the mediator. All the 'intermediaries' of African theology or of any other religion or culture are inferior to the person and work of Christ. He is the superior mediator by virtue of his deity and his work of redemption. And just as he fulfilled, transformed and supplanted the Jewish religious system, so he has fulfilled, transformed and supplanted the ancestral cult and traditional religions of Africa.

4. Traditional Sacrifices.

Closely related to the practice of ancestor worship is the offering of traditional sacrifices. Almost every people group in Africa seems to have had some form of traditional sacrificial system. In general the things sacrificed are commonly cattle sheep, goats and chickens. The basic principle seems to be that there ought to be a close connection between the sacrifice and its worshiper, the person making the offering. Even in cases where wild animals would be offered, these qualified if they were the result of a personal effort of the worshiper in hunting them down. The animal or bird to be sacrificed had to be carefully chosen. Samuel Ngewa (2006:1502) lists the following as descriptive properties governing the selection of the sacrificial animal:

1. Source: Any animal offered on behalf of a whole community had to come from an honourable source.
There should be no possibility of that person presenting a stolen animal;
2. Colour: The animal offered had to be of uniform colour. While the exact colour preferred differs from group to group, black, red and white appear to be the most common colours for sacrificial animals; and,
3. Quality. The animal needed to be perfect, in every respect, with no birth defects or injuries. Provided that the person supplying them would be of good character, koala nuts, grains, beer and milk are also commonly offered in sacrifice on their own or as complete meals with the meat of a sacrificial animal

Ngewa (ibid) is adamant that contrary to some perceptions, human sacrifice has not been a common practice among Africans. The few instances this practice has occurred have been linked to circumstances of extreme calamity. An event such

as the 2004 tsunami that killed more than 200 000 people in Asia might have been thought to require human sacrifice in order to avoid any repetition of the disaster. Similarly, a crisis such as that caused by HIV/AIDS in many villages in Africa might have called for the highest possible sacrifice to appease God so that he would remove the plague. Ngewa (2006: 1502) concludes then that whatever the case, the thinking is that it would be worth sacrificing one human life so as to save many from dying. It is important to distinguish between the above-mentioned sacrifices from the offerings made by some modern cults using human body parts, the muti killings. Their roots are more in demonic worship than in any nobler purpose. Nevertheless, all human sacrifice, no matter what the reason for it, is abhorrent to God (Lv 18:21).

Most traditional sacrifices are linked to common human experiences. Thus they are offered to mark stages in life (conception, birth, naming, circumcision, and so on), the agricultural cycle (planting and harvesting), hunting (as hunters set out and as they return), and in times of distress resulting from such things as epidemics, droughts, sickness and barrenness. Sacrifices thus seem to have been offered in response to circumstances in people's lives or to request that some circumstance be changed. They were almost never made simply to worship God for who God is. While sacrifices today are seldom practiced and their significance and relevance to the Christian experience of God in worship may not be readily obvious, the manner in which African sacrifices relate to the concept of sacrifice in the Bible calls for our consideration. Ngewa (*ibid*) provides a list of similarities and the distinguishing traits between African and biblical sacrifices:

The *first* point to be noted is that the sacrifices may share the same origin as biblical sacrifices. In general the Bible gives God's special revelation while African traditional religions (ATR) are based mostly on general revelation. But the practice of offering sacrifices dates back to the start of the Old Testament (Gn 4: 3, 4, 20). Thus when Noah's sons dispersed to populate the earth after the flood, all three of them would have taken with them the concept of offering sacrifices.

A *second* point to note is that there are obvious resemblances between the requirements for sacrifices in ATR and the requirements spelled out in the Law of Moses. For example, in both cases the animal offered had to be perfect (in Leviticus 1-9 the instruction '*without defect*' is repeated thirteen times 1:3,10; 3:1,6; 4:3, 23, 28, 32; 5:15, 18; 6:6; 9:2, 3). In Deuteronomy 17:1, an animal with a defect is described as '*detestable to him*'. There are also similarities in the types of animals offered, which in the Old Testament included young bulls (Lv 4:3); male and female goats (Lv 4:23, 28), lambs (Lv 4:32), doves or young pigeons (Lv 5:7) and grain offerings (Lv 2:1).

But there are also important differences between sacrifices in ATR and sacrifices as found in the Old Testament. The differences can be traced to the time of Moses, when biblical sacrifices received a new meaning within the covenant relationship established between God and Abraham (Gn17:7) and the covenant demands laid down in Exodus (Ex 19-24). The offering of the sacrifices is now to be done on the basis that the children of Israel were God's chosen people and were expected to conduct themselves in ways that conformed to God's holy nature. What had

been offered to express gratitude, now also had the dimension of dealing with sin. Burnt offerings (Lv 1:1-1, 7), grain offerings (Lv 2:1-16), fellowship offerings (Lv 3:1-17), sin offerings (Lv 4:1-5:13) and guilt offerings (Lv 5:14-17) become different ways of stressing the focus of an offering. But central to them all was the recognition that God is holy, that men and women fail to meet His divine standards, and that only God-given rituals can correct the situation. The rituals that God prescribed in the Old Testament came to their final fulfillment in the supreme sacrifice of Christ as the Lamb of God. The writer of Hebrews relates Old Testament sacrifices to the work of Christ and shows how Christ represents the ultimate fulfillment of all that they were meant to accomplish (Heb 9:11-10:18). In Hebrews, Christ's blood poured out once, is sufficient to take care of the sins of man of all times. There is no further need for daily, weekly, monthly or yearly sacrifices any longer. The needs they sought to fulfill have been met once and for all by Christ, who was 'sacrificed once to take away the sins of many' (Heb 9:28).

Ngewa (2006: 1502.) is of the opinion that in the light of Christ's sacrifice, traditional sacrifices have value, limitations and dangers in our presentation of the Christian faith today and the experience of authentic African Christian worship. Their greatest value, he points, is in that they serve as a bridging point in presenting the Gospel. The good news is that Jesus died to take away our sins (1 Cor 15:3 Gl 1:4), an act without which there would be no fellowship with God. As such, Jesus died as the '*Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world*' (John 1:29, 36). The concept of a dying sacrifice to take away sin is not 'a stumbling' block or 'foolishness' (1 Cor 1:23) to African worshippers, but familiar ground. For worship and mission purposes, the traditional sacrifices then become rich ground from which to draw teaching parallels for presenting *Christ as the ultimate sacrifice* and for the deepening of truthful and spirit-led worship of the risen Christ (2006:1503).

Still, Ngewa (ibid) concludes, we have to recognize the limitation of their usefulness. It is not right, as some have tried to do, to equate sacrifices in ATR with the sacrifices in the Old Testament. Though there were regional differences, the chief reason for offering sacrifices in ATR has always been to make sure that things would go well with the living. The notion of offering sacrifices just to acknowledge that we are by nature sinners and God is by nature holy, as we find, for example, in the Old Testament fellowship offering, was and is largely foreign in ATR worship. In fact, for some African people groups, as long as things go well with them, there is no need to disturb God by offering sacrifices. But when He sends troubles, drought and disease, appeasing Him leads to a physical salvation that is celebrated in terms of newness of life and joy. It is also often felt that where there is a blessing it must be acknowledged, lest God withholds similar blessings in future. This attitude leads to sacrifices expressing appreciation for benefits. This is another case of utilitarianism. But in both this case and the previous one, fear is the major motive for sacrifices, not God's holiness and our desire of fellowship, oneness and communion with Him.

While the Old Testament sacrificial system also accommodated the need to ap-

please God and to show appreciation for His blessings, it went beyond that to include sacrifice as a way of worshipping God for who He is. Yes, He has done great things, such as rescuing His people out of slavery in Egypt, but the reason for His actions is to be found in His relationship with His people. He is 'I AM whom I AM' (Ex 3:14), meaning that He never changes and is always there for His people. In this sense, the Old Testament sacrifices are richer than the sacrifices offered in ATR practices. Just as the Old Testament sacrifices have been replaced by the 'once and for all' sacrifice of Christ, so too the sacrifices in ATR have ceased their relevance. We should not fall for the argument that since our traditional sacrifices are so close to the Bible, they are our way of salvation. All the good in all traditional sacrifices is merely a *foreshadowing* of the reality that is Christ. He is the God-given way to have fellowship with God.

Ngewa (ibid) comes to the conclusion that we certainly need to know about our heritage, including the sacrifices in our traditional religions. We must, however, he emphasizes strongly, always keep the right perspective. For practical purposes, these sacrifices are a contact point for the presentation of the supreme sacrifice that is Christ. The fact that many of them involved animals whose blood was shed provides a wonderful opportunity to present Christ to the African man as sacrifice for sin. It is on this very basis and same principle that the writer to the Hebrews said emphatically, '*He set aside the first to establish the second. And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all*' (Heb 10:9b 10). Ultimately, this is the message for Africa, as it is also for the whole world, no matter how rich our traditional beliefs and practices may be.

5. Syncretism.

Syncretism has its roots in two potential sources. The one is hermeneutical, arising out of a misapplication of biblical truth due to (intentional or not) a misunderstanding or misinterpretation of its meaning. The other arises out of the contextualization or relevance quest, a desire to harmonise biblical truth with cultural trends, norms and practices of modern society.

The word itself is derived from a Greek word that means 'to mix together' or 'to unite one thing to another', and does not always have a negative meaning. It is used by Paul to describe how God put together different parts of the human body to function as a whole (1 Cor 12.24). It also appears in Hebrews 4:2, where it is said that most of the Old Testament saints did not enjoy the promised rest in the land of Canaan because, although they heard the Word spoken to them, their hearing was not 'mixed with faith and trust in God'. Today, syncretism is defined as the mixing of different religious beliefs and systems into one form of worship or expressing one's belief. Many religious movements in Africa have been called syncretistic folk religions, since their adherents integrate traditional elements with more recent alien faiths such as Islam, Christianity and others.

Historically, Western writers and church leaders have been hostile to syncretism and have used the word pejoratively to describe some of the innovations and initiatives of African indigenous churches (AIC). These churches have been accused of distorting the gospel and/or watering down the essentials of the Christian faith.

But careful examination of some of the motives behind the integration of African traditional themes and elements with the Christian faith reveals that it is misleading to label every indigenous movement as syncretistic, although some undoubtedly are, especially those resulting from a misapplication of biblical forms of worship with erroneous African practices as discussed above.

The question that arises is whether faithfulness to orthodox Christian beliefs forbids one from adapting any traditional elements that make one's faith more culturally relevant. Christians sometimes forget that traditions and customs have shaped the Christian message over the centuries. Lawrence Lasisi (2006:900) is of the opinion that the church has either consciously or unconsciously accepted some form of cultural syncretism ever since her beginning in Jerusalem and in the wider Graeco-Roman world. Examples of this include the pagan roots of Christian festivals such as Easter and Christmas, the design of our church buildings and the forms of our funeral and marriage rites. Most of the hymns quoted in the New Testament, he continues, are clearly Jewish or Hellenistic in form although their content is strongly Christian (see the hymns in Philippians 2:6-11 and Colossians 1:15-20 and the Logos poem in John 1:1-16). Concluding his argument, Lasisi (*ibid*) points out that the early church leadership was certainly mindful of the culture of Gentile Christians when it met to finalize the church's missionary policies in regard to the thorny issue of the extent to which Gentile believers should be required to adopt Jewish customs such as circumcision (Acts 15:1-35). Since then, the presentation of the Christian message has been shaped not only by Scripture but also by church councils and creeds, the events of church history, and the writings and lives of saints and theologians. According to Lasisi (*ibid*), such influences as these have led theologians like Wolfhart Pannenberg to argue that rather than there being a sharp divide between God's special revelation in Scripture and his general revelation in culture, God is at work in both areas, so that they influence each other.

The creative diversity expressed in the Christian faith should help us to realize that the church needs to relate to a world that is increasingly religiously and culturally pluralistic. The church in Africa should strive towards making our faith grounded and relevant within our cultures. Evangelicals must strive for the contextualization of their faith to allow for meaningful local expression of it. However, such contextualization must be accompanied by a firm stand for the absolutes or core beliefs of the gospel message. We need to be rigorous in guarding against any form of Christo-paganism, but there is nothing wrong theologically and missiologically with integrating culture and the gospel, as long as the finality and supremacy of Jesus Christ alone as our Lord and Saviour is not sacrificed at the altar of multicultural and religious relativism.

6. The Relationship between ATR Worship and Christian Worship

As can be seen from the aforesaid, Africa bears much resemblance in belief and tradition to the biblical worldview when it comes to matters of the spirit world. "Most primitive pagan peoples believe in the existence of spirits, good and evil, and many consider that among these are the spirits of the dead. The desire to

provide for the comfort of the benevolent spirits, and to placate the ill-will of the malevolent spirits, among these, often leads to a ‘cult of the dead’, where practises such as a fitting burial and provision of food and drink are often performed to achieve these ends” (New Bible Dictionary).

In the African context, as in most of the biblical narrative, worship and praise are inseparable. To praise is to offer thanks and honour to God, to glorify him, especially with songs and dancing. It can be as simple as the everyday greeting *Xikwembu Xamatimba*, meaning ‘God Almighty’. Praise can be expressed through poetry and dramatic representations. It can also be as elaborate as a three-hour festival of praise featuring presentations by Christian artists and choirs. In a typical African church, worship also includes acts of homage such as bowing down, kneeling with hands raised above one’s head and prostrating oneself before God (cf. Neh 8: 5-6; Rev 4: 9-10).

Despite these similarities, there are definitive differences between the biblical concept of worship and that of African Traditional Religion (ATR). Tokumboh Adeyemo (2006:251) lists the following departure points between African and biblical worship:

African traditional religion (ATR) has no tradition of corporate worship in a building like a church or mosque. Rather, worship takes place in the open at a sacred place such as a particular tree or stream. But these places are not used for weekly congregational worship. A congregation is involved only during annual or seasonal festivals. At home, the head of the family normally leads or performs basic acts of worship by chanting the names of a god or ancestor and pouring a daily libation to a household spirit or idol. Whether simple or elaborate, worship in ATR is incomplete without sacrifices and offerings.

ATR also differs from Christian worship in that the Supreme Being is rarely worshipped directly. Instead, sacrifices are offered to the divinities and ancestor spirits believed to be mediators between God and the living. This worship, according to John Mbiti (ibid) is utilitarian, ‘African peoples do not thirst after God for his own sake alone; they seek to obtain what he gives, be that material or even spiritual; they do not seem to search for him as the final reward or satisfaction of the human soul or spirit’

In ATR the gods exist for humans and the main goals of worship are to restore the balance between humanity and the spirit world; to ward off evils such as sickness, failure and barrenness and to enhance success. Many of these traditional concepts have been brought into Christianity whereby so many African Christians would consult a herbalist about money that is owed to them. The herbalist gives a concoction with assurances that the money would arrive soon. When the cheque comes, the person celebrates singing, ‘He is a miracle working God!’ Here then is someone who has one foot in Christianity and the other in ATR, a type of syncretism explicitly forbidden in Biblical worship.

The key to the meaning and purpose of worship in the Old Testament is found in Exodus 20:1-8. Jesus quoted this passage when the devil tempted him with an offer of all the kingdoms of the world in exchange for worship. Jesus responded with ‘Away from me, Satan! For it is written: worship the Lord your God, and serve him only’ (Mt 4:8-10). It is clear that the object of biblical worship is God alone.

7. Conclusion

Biblical worship is rooted in redemption, relationship and representation. All three are included in Christ's definition of worship: 'God is spirit and his worshippers must worship in spirit and in truth' (John 4:24). Worshippers of Yahweh have been redeemed by the blood of the Lamb. They have a dynamic relationship with him as his sons and daughters (Jn 1:12) and represent him in the world as his ambassadors (2 Cor 5:20). Christian worship thus, flows from gratitude (Rv 5:9-10), proclaims God's greatness and glory (Ps 19:1) and anticipates Christ's return (1 Cor 11:26).

The *concept of God* as immanent, distant and out of reach without mediation offers a great place to start presenting the Gospel. Paul used to teach the Athenians' about the 'unknown God' of all Creation. The issues of *identity, heritage* and *culture* provide us with another connection point between true Christian worship and African culture. In Christ we become a new creation, we receive a new name, we receive a new family and a new heritage. We start afresh, even in our form and way of worshipping God. Finally, the concept of mediation leads us to point decidedly to Jesus as the Only Mediator between God and man, the Only Way to God the Father, and to emphasize that there is no other name given to men by means of which they may be saved, but the name of Jesus (Acts 4:12).

8. End Notes

1. Institutes, 1.1.1,2.
2. WSC Question 1
3. Health Theory – stresses the importance of taking all of somebody's physical, mental, and social conditions into account in the treatment of illness.

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