
The Magical Worldview in the African Church: What Is Going On?

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A radical rethinking of the nature of magic brings surprising results in a re-analysis of some of the widely perceived weaknesses of the African church. The pervasive effects of magic result in witchcraft being widespread and confine people to following complex codes of conduct throughout their lives. Western institutions and initiatives all too often flounder. A danger highlighted is the almost inadvertent promotion of the prosperity gospel on the part of those who teach the total defeat or irrelevance of occult powers by Christian believers. There is a great need for deeper understanding of magic and the missiological implications that follow.

The Christian world rejoices over the phenomenal growth of the church in Africa. Yet at the same time, many voices lament its immaturity and lack of depth. We struggle to rectify the latter deficiency. Numerous programs for education and training of African church leaders are set up to that end. This paper suggests that one of the causes of the weakness of the African church is an error in the conception of one of the fundamental ways in which African culture is seen to relate to Christian doctrine—that is, that Christian belief provides immunity to witchcraft attack and the curses that result from the breaking of taboo. This arises from a misconception of the nature of magic.

What Is Magic?

While in Western nations these days secularism appears to be a powerful rampant force, much of the world continues to be directed by what I am calling the magical worldview. This presumes that physical and social reality originate from the good or bad will of people (dead or alive) and/or the gods. In turn, that success and prosperity or poverty and failure in life then depend on maintaining appropriate relations with the above.

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It seems that the English language is very poorly equipped to explain the nature of magic. In British English, Paul Daniels has confused magic with trickery.¹ Although there may be trickery involved, it is not all trickery. The word *medicine*, which no doubt used to describe magical substances, has been co-opted by the scientific biomedical fraternity. Although some traditional medicine may be scientific, much of it certainly is not. Words like *spell* are simply no longer in use. *Cursing* is considered to be merely the uttering of expletives. Ghosts are found primarily in children's stories, etc.

Yet contrary to popular opinion, I would like to suggest that magical worldviews do not simply disappear on exposure to Enlightenment thinking or to Christianity. Magic is not primitive, unsophisticated, and confined to the uneducated and the dull. It can be extremely sophisticated. And it works.

It is found in the West as well as elsewhere, although of a different nature and under different names. Examples of acceptable magical practices in the West include the following:

1. Making use of a counselor with whom to share difficulties. Very often, we can be helped without receiving any direction or physical benefits from the counselor. Just having him or her listen to us is already of assistance.
2. Placebo, as a recognized effect even in biomedical circles.
3. Positive thinking as an approach to life, whose advocates claim that thinking positively brings positive outcomes.
4. Some day-to-day use of language is designed to have a magical impact. A typical example of this occurs if someone comments that he or she is not feeling well that particular day. A friend may reply, "You will be all right," as if that in itself can bring healing, and, of course, in a way it does.

It could be argued that these are not examples of magic but of the power of suggestion. Then one would need to ask whether there is a legitimate category called "power of suggestion" that is distinct from "magic" in the magical worldview. I suggest that there is not.

A friend of mine (a Luo pastor called Thomas Ogoda) often tells me that a "word has power" (*wach en gi teko*). It would appear that he has observed how positive words can build up someone's confidence and ability, how negative words can be depressing, and how, in a sense, telling someone something makes it come true (see examples above). Then he has also observed that sometimes people can be more or less encouraged or move in different directions without first hearing any audible words. It is only a small extrapolation to presume that such mood swings or changes in direction are nevertheless due to words of affirmation or condemnation which were uttered or even only thought, whether or not the person affected is consciously aware of this having happened.

It is clear that magic in the magical worldview as we are defining it overlaps with practices that in the West would not be deemed as magical. We could therefore begin by drawing the tentative conclusion that we have magic type A, which includes acceptable practices that are given different names in the West, and magic type B, which includes practices that are not recognized in the West but are found in Africa. For example, the power of suggestion would fall into type A, whereas the ability to make someone's crops fail through being jealous of him or her (a typical witchcraft case) falls into type B.

To explore this issue further, we can go back to asking whether indeed a "word has power." I must acknowledge that if a family member came into my room and said with obvious serious intent, "I wish Jim Harries would get sick and die," then this would trouble me. But if the same person stood in an empty field and said the same thing, then it would not trouble me. Or would it? If I were to admit honestly that the latter would also trouble me, then I would be conceding the power of magic type B over my life. In fact, in my understanding of the nature of human beings, we are inclined to acknowledge type B. In other words, I do not like having enemies, even if they do not appear to be in a position to do me any physical harm. In other words, it makes me unhappy to know that some people do not like me. There is a deep inclination within me to consider such a person or people responsible for a misfortune should it befall me.

The above examples and explanation show that both types of magic still have roles to play in the West, even though much of the lives of Westerners and their understandings are rational. In traditional Africa, magic has much more of a hegemony over peoples' lives while rational understanding, such as scientific understanding, has a much smaller part to play.

In many African societies, events are often understood as happening due to magic, including especially good and bad fortune. When somebody gets sick, it is due to sin, a curse, or bad magic (i.e., bewitchment) (Mbiti 1975:165). When that person recovers, it is because the curse has been undone or good magic has been brought to counteract the bad. Similarly, if someone becomes wealthy or has a good or a bad harvest, it is due to magic.

It is only natural (although this is often not considered) for African people to assume that Westerners are fundamentally the same as they are and also to consider that prosperity arises due to magic of one sort or another. Hence, many people are preoccupied with trying to decipher the magical secret to the prosperity they see coming from the lands where the white man lives.²

The question of whether or not magic "works" is in the African context a very heavily loaded one. A negative answer would seem to condemn the African people to being stupid. If it does not work, then why do so many people in Africa and elsewhere around the world pay so much attention to it? Yet if it does work, then some people in the Western missionary and secularizing force should have egg on their faces because they have been saying that it does not.³

The social reality of magic is of course beyond doubt. While perhaps not real in the scientific sense, it is as "real" as friendship, or as the love of parents for children, or as the team spirit of a group of boys playing football. As each of these has critical roles to play in life, so does magic.

Understood in this way, magical forces are a normal, powerful, and necessary part of social relationships and normal human existence. According to the magical worldview held in Africa, they are also primary, whereas physical forces are secondary.

For example, a likeable person (someone with a particular magical power) is often a person who prospers (a physical occurrence). The suspicion that a wife is committing adultery (magical insight) is what causes her husband to beat her (physical event).⁴ Having an attitude of love for a co-wife (magical property) will result in the couple's being able to cooperate in a task together (physical occurrence).

If positive thinking brings a positive outcome, then it would seem obvious also that negative thinking can be held responsible for a negative outcome. Hence, to take this one step further, if there is a negative outcome, then there must have been some negative thinking somewhere. As we are saying that the “magical property” precedes the physical outcome, somebody is hence held responsible for every negative outcome. This is where the magical worldview when not centered on the sovereign God gets to be extremely destructive. A culprit is sought for having caused every calamity; hence, suspicion, hatred, and jealousy between people are propagated. Someone who in this way is held responsible for every negative outcome has an extremely destructive effect on the whole society. The person who brings the negative outcome upon others or upon the whole society has become the enemy of society and the root cause of the evil that troubles it. This person is known as a witch.⁵

Magic and the Bible

It seems that magic is found in the African Bible. At least African people seem to find it there, according to our understanding of magic as described above. Theological educators may try to convince their African students that it is not there, but the enormous growth of Pentecostal churches in Africa, plus the presence of numerous spiritual indigenous churches of many varieties (Barrett 1968), show that the old orthodox teaching has been seen as having something lacking.

I have come across magical claims so often in churches in different parts of the Continent (and in African-led churches in Europe) that I would not know where to begin to give references. Just today, as I write this on 2 May 1999, I was worshipping in a Revival church, and the pastor was assuring us that a truly godly man will not suffer illness or death until he reaches old age. Here is the best in magic, tied in with prosperity theology. Parts of Africa suffer enormously high mortality among youth and people of all ages because resources are simply inadequate to go around. In those areas, such claims are simply misleading lies from a Western rational perspective. Yet here there are plenty of takers, and the Revival church, and with other so-called spiritual churches, are growing at incredible rates.

There is plenty of fuel for the prosperity theology fire in the Scriptures. Much of the Scriptures indeed do follow the same magical worldview that Western nations seem to have rejected. Proverbs furnishes us with many examples, e.g., Proverbs 12:21 and 22:9. Perhaps Deuteronomy 30:1-3 is one of the plainest explanations to the effect that prosperity does not come through careful planning and rationality, but by obeying the laws of (and this is where the Bible is strikingly unique) the one God:

When all these blessing and curses I have set before you come upon you and you take them to heart wherever the Lord your God disperses you among the nations, and when you and your children return to the Lord your God and obey him with all your heart and with all your soul according to everything I command you today, then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you and gather you again from the nations where he scattered you. (New International Version)

The uniqueness of the Bible is not in its denial of the power of magic. It is rather in its acknowledgment that ultimate power is in the hands of one God.

The Effects of Magic

The effects of living under the magical worldview are many, wide-ranging, and deeply penetrating into a society and its people. Below are effects that I have found in nine years of living among rural people in Zambia and later Kenya.

Many of them will appear to be negative. This is almost inevitable because the evaluation is from the Western viewpoint where the magical worldview has been devalued for generations. For a Christian, this devaluation is right only in so far as the magical worldview falls short of the way of life that is lived under a genuine acceptance of the all-encompassing power of the great mighty God and acknowledgment of the cleansing power of his son Jesus Christ. In other words, Christians brought up in the West need to be careful to ensure that they distinguish the critique of magic that arises from their inherently secular lifestyle from that arising from the Scriptures.

Complex Codes of Conduct Govern the Lives of People

Life governed by the magical worldview is extremely complex, as numerous rules and traditions are likely to be devised to maintain order and prosperity in society.

It is worth pointing out that rational legal and economic systems,⁶ such as are operated in the West, are unknown in magically led societies. Whereas rational law supposes that living human beings functioning as responsible decision-making individuals are the only significant participants in a community, this presumption is totally contrary to a society governed by the magical worldview. In the latter, as we have mentioned above, the good and the bad wills of gods and of other people whether dead or alive must be taken into account if some issue arises.

For this reason, rational aims and objectives cannot form the guiding principle for life as they do in Western nations. Many Western governments are heavily committed to understanding how their national economy functions so as to prime and to maintain it at a high degree of efficiency for maximum productivity guided by indices such as the GDP (Gross Domestic Product), etc. Even at the household level, people are calculating how with the most efficient use of time and other resources available to them they can best please their families.

From within the magical worldview, such a mere predisposition to physical efficiency is far from adequate. Many more things must be kept in mind. One of these is the critical importance of following the examples laid down by one's forefathers, whose spirits often remain responsible for maintaining one's peace and prosperity (Mbiti 1975:73). Another is the extreme necessity whenever possible to be friendly and accepting to everyone through fear that should you upset them their magic may prove to be of harm to you. Hence, the avoidance at all costs of face-to-face confrontation mentioned by Hill (1996:327).

The combination of the above two, especially the former, results in oral (or sometimes written) traditions being developed that need to be adhered to as meticulously as possible in order to prosper. Anyone who fails to follow these laws or does so only half-heartedly is like a rebel in society who must be forced to comply for the good of the whole group. Such matters are no joke! To deny or to ignore these traditions is dicing with death. Therefore, people are bound hand and foot through their lives by numerous stringent regulations. According to Sayer (reporting on Max Weber), there is a "[d]eep repugnance to undertaking any change because supernatural evils are feared" in societies governed by tradition and magic (1991:14).

It is not easy to give up in a stroke the very things one understands as having brought life and prosperity to one's people for generations. The magic by which people are bound in Africa is not an inconvenient side issue in the way of the gospel or even an issue of development. It is *the* issue! Some of the aspects that propagate these traditions and help them to survive include the following:

1. They give identity. What makes one a member of a particular tribe is that one follows the customs and traditions of that tribe. Giving up one's magically based traditions can result in losing one's identity.

2. They give order and purpose to life. Simply removing people's traditions can leave their lives chaotic, meaningless, and purposeless. Here one must be careful.

3. They give authority to the elders who authoritatively interpret the traditions. While some people may prefer to curtail the authority of old men over their society, few want anarchy.

4. They make fascinating conversation. There is never a lack of interest in life as long as the latest speculations on the identity of witches or on the way people's lives accord with traditional customs can be discussed and disputed.

5. The fear that failing to keep the traditions will bring problems (which is often shown to happen in practice⁷) means that people will continue to keep them.

It is these reasons and others in addition that account for the sheer persistence of customary beliefs.

Witchcraft Beliefs Flourish

Witchcraft beliefs and practices are almost inevitable companions to the magical worldview. In fact, the two terms, *magic* and *witchcraft*, are indistinguishable in many African languages. For example, in Swahili *witchdoctor*⁸ and *magician* are both translated by the same word, *mchawi* (Johnson 1939:271). (I would personally suggest that a more correct translation for both these words might be *mganga*, which is also used to translate the English word *doctor*). Within this worldview then, when misfortune or illness strikes, there is always the possibility that this has been caused by someone's evil intent or thoughts, that is by evil magic, i.e., by witchcraft.⁹

Let us take the example of a death occurring. This may be interpreted as being due to the person's failing to keep some particular law or tradition, i.e., to breaking a taboo. Yet, to assume this, is to degrade the character of the person who has already died. Family and friends, especially of someone who has been popular, will not want to spoil that person's name when he or she is dead.

Instead, they are likely to assume the dead person to be innocent of causing his or her own death, but then the death must still be explained. The explanation will be that someone else has killed him or her! A killer is sought out, usually with the help of a magician who specializes in such discernment. This killer may be understood to have functioned as a sorcerer who kills by prepared magic, or the killer may have been a witch who killed unwittingly or even unknowingly, for example by harboring evil thoughts, as discussed above.¹⁰

It should be realized that illness and death are never neutral, incidental, or primarily physical events (Mbiti 1975:165). They inevitably have a magical cause. Illness must then be dealt with by countering the attacking power, and death must be avenged. This is often done by arranging in turn (through magical means) the death of the one who is considered to have been the killer.

In this area, we find one of the most horrific side effects of the magical worldview. People who believe in witchcraft, in blaming another person for any misfortune that one meets, propagate jealousy, suspicion, distrust, and hatred within a community. So Shorter (1985) tells us that where witchcraft is rampant, “[e]vil is always on the verge of victory and must be constantly held at bay. . . . It is a topsy turvy nightmare world.” But what I hope will also be apparent is that witchcraft cannot be dealt with in isolation. It is one of the outcomes of having a society run on the principle of magic, in which the power of Almighty God is not recognized.

Another important point that needs to be made is that bewitchment and the breaking of law or tradition are terms that are used as almost synonymous in meaning with illness, misfortune, and death.¹¹ Too many Western missionaries have been mistaken for generations in perceiving witchcraft and its allies as being in some mysterious upper spiritual realm. In that realm, it is assumed that the greater spiritual power of God has already totally defeated them. Yet if the above is true, that the terms *witchcraft* and *illness* are almost synonymous as the latter is always thought to be caused by the former, then to say that a Christian is not affected by evil magic is in effect to say that a Christian is always happy, wealthy, and does not become sick or suffer misfortune!¹² Through an inadequate understanding of the linguistic semantics of the magical societies they have been working in, missionaries have been inadvertently propagating the prosperity gospel. They have taught in effect that Christians do not have troubles and do not get sick. This teaching is unbiblical and in the end unhelpful.

We need to admit that Christians can still suffer from witchcraft and curses for our teaching to make sense to people. Our focus must be somewhere else! In effect, for Christianity to give immunity to magic reduces the Christian faith itself to being no more than a brand of magic. I do not believe that this is the case as I believe that in salvation through Jesus Christ there is something different and new. Jesus is not only the latest and most powerful diviner!

Where should the focus of our teaching instead be? This is a big question. One answer is the Christian teaching that God has a purpose even in suffering (e.g., see Hebrews 12:1-13). This even goes so far in the Scriptures that in some, albeit in a limited way, our suffering completes the work of Christ (1 Peter 4:13-14). To suffer is a privilege. It is not something to be avoided or to run away from at all costs, whether through magical means or other.

Western Institutions Flounder

Western institutions have been set up all over Africa and elsewhere in the non-Western world. Many of them are founded and function with the aim of bringing good with the aid of science and reason. These include hospitals, numerous varieties of schools and colleges, businesses, leisure societies, aid and development projects, even political parties, etc.

Yet how do these fare in magically based societies? The foundations and underlying principles of these organizations are generally foreign and unfamiliar. Local people therefore inevitably try to understand them by comparison with familiar institutions. They then adapt them to more closely resemble something that makes sense to them. Typically, these are the extended family, age- and male-ordered village hierarchies, and the pre-existing network of magical practitioners.

The above assumes that there has been a degree of ownership. Other institutions are just so foreign that they remain no more than the purveyors of mysterious rituals. After all, local people in most cases do not understand them, did not design them, and did not ask for them.¹³ If they do want them, it is generally because they are evidently generators of funds.

This was illustrated clearly to me in recent years by a cloth dying project that was introduced to my area.¹⁴ Being a project run by a white person, and with money to back it up, it could not be refused as there would certainly be advantageous side benefits for the community. The local person hosting the project conceded openly that he did not understand what the project was supposed to achieve or how it was supposed to work. Three years later, the initiator's hopes that this project will continue in his absence look less and less likely as he has had to realize that those who were encouraging him by telling him that he would succeed were in effect reasoning magically. That is, they took words as having power and projects as succeeding if only everyone believed that they would succeed, and anyone expressing doubt was at risk of being accused of causing the resulting failure. As a third party talking with people about the project, I learned very early on that only a few of them had any genuine hope for success.

Hospitals have their particular difficulties. They deal with the symbols and objectives of good health and life, which are very familiar to African people. Many modern medical practices have a remarkable resemblance to traditional medical rituals.¹⁵ Yet in other ways they remain extremely foreign.

Their major weakness from the perspective of the magical worldview is their failure to deal with the root cause of a problem, the root cause being magical. Instead, the focus in Western hospitals is on dealing with symptoms.

The enclosed and regulated style of hospital management is also difficult for people to cope with. People from different tribes and backgrounds are simply mixed. Non-family members are expected to carry out intricate patient care, such as dressing, washing, and changing bedpans for the sick.¹⁶ This gives ample opportunity for the administration of bad magic or for the nurses to be affected in turn by whatever the magic is troubling the patients. Numerous taboos may be broken, even unwittingly, such as exposure of nakedness or sleeping on a bed previously slept in by one's mother-in-law.¹⁷

Western institutions are usually founded on an understanding of cause and effect in the physical realm in which human activities and finance are perceived as essentially physical. This is contrary to the magical understanding. The physical realm functions by planning; the magical realm by protecting and securing relationships, sacrifices, incantations, spells, medicines, and the following of traditions.

Attempts by individuals or sectors of the population at following planning and rational procedures are frequently frustrated by the pressures of the extended family. Pressure from relatives can be difficult for anyone to overcome. For example, when someone is wanting funds from a relative who has access to money which is earmarked for another use, the difficulty of standing up to such pressures is enormously magnified when the failure to cooperate brings destructive magical retaliation.

Tribalism Is Underpinned

Tribalism is considered a major problem in Africa, and along with racism, in much of the world. One cornerstone of a people's distinctiveness that underpins this

great partiality to others, is their particular set of traditions which are often supported by magical beliefs. Certain rituals are considered to have great magical significance. For example, male circumcision is not primarily valued due to any improvement in hygiene or sexual pleasure. Circumcision brings a blessing and bars a curse. It also acts as a mark of group identity. In other words, it is an essentially magical ritual (Mbiti 1975:93-97). Reading the Scriptures reveals that circumcision is not a new issue, yet it seems to remain as much a divider of people in Africa as it did in the ancient Middle East.

As long as the distinctions that people seek to maintain between their group and another group are magical, it is extremely difficult to find an acceptable unifying ritual. This is because of the nature of the foundation that underlies magical taboos and traditions, which are not required to be logical.¹⁸ This foundation may in some instances be extremely non-rational. Its origin may be almost arbitrary, which means that there is a very good chance that it will be different for one people than for another, which can in turn make cooperation among people very difficult to achieve.

For example, the law of the Luo people states that sons must build their houses in order of seniority. That is, older sons must build before younger sons can build. This is justified by saying that this is a way of showing respect. The law is underpinned by magical powers, which will bring misfortune or a curse should it not be upheld (Mboya 1938). This customary law continues to be much debated and variously upheld among the Luo of western Kenya today. Yet its reasoning is sufficiently shallow, or as I have said above, non-rational, for people from many other tribes in Kenya simply mock those who feel obliged to uphold it. Hence, the magical underpinning of a customary law continues to aggravate inter-tribal tensions.

Language Has Different Bearings

We are accustomed to the need to expect different degrees of relationship between language and the world it describes. For example, we know that journalists sensationalize, and politicians use words in careful ways that seem to make problems disappear.

We have mentioned that the modern positive-thinking school in the West is making use of a form of magic. They hold that by thinking of things greater than they are, the reality of the world tends to follow where their thoughts have led (Peale 1948). There may be truth in this. Yet it also helps to know when dealing with such people that they are following this line so as not to be misled by what is happening.

Language is very much of this nature in the magical worldview. What is said may not be a description of the reality as it is recognized by someone from a realist's vantage point. Things are rather described in the way that they ought to be in the hope that on having been described in that way, that which ought will come about.

We can also examine here the question, "Will it work?" In the rational worldview, this is a matter of weighing pros and cons, checking out a budget, or examining forecasts that are based on an extrapolation of previous experience. The answer may come out as "yes" or "no" or "it depends." In the magical worldview, if the thing being asked about is desirable, then there is a strong bias to answer "yes," regardless of the lessons of previous experience.

The widespread assumption of those in the magical worldview that the West is operating on the same basis as they are has already been mentioned. The magic that

the West employs is evidently more powerful than theirs. They may therefore have more faith in Westerners than they do in their own people!

Jesus Is the Greatest of Diviners

In any society, the unknown can only be understood by relating it to the known. This applies to people's understanding of Jesus. For someone in the magical worldview, the person whom Jesus most resembles is often the magician or diviner (sometimes known as a witchdoctor). Jesus is understood as being the great magician ancestor! (See also Schoffeleers 1982.)

To some extent, the understanding of Jesus as the greatest diviner is very useful, but somewhere along the line, it must also fall short. That is because no magician that this world has known has succeeded completely. Illness does take hold despite the magician's efforts. The normal thing then for many African people is to move from one diviner to another until their resources run out or death or the severity of the disease finally defeats somebody. This then is the way Jesus can come to be treated by those who consider him to be the greatest diviner. He is still only a diviner.

A diviner is evaluated by the extent to which he can help people with their, usually immediate, problems. Yet Jesus did not come only to solve our problems. In fact, he admitted that he was also bringing us some (Matthew 10:34). He taught us rather to live through our difficulties and that they could even bring reward (Hebrews 12:11). While it may be right to classify Jesus as a great diviner, he was also much more than that!

Implications for Mission Strategy

Once we have a grasp of some of the widespread effects of what we are calling a magical worldview on the whole of a people and culture, then this needs to influence the way we carry out mission. Below are just a few suggestions of practical implications.

Magic and Religion

The dichotomy between magic and religion has often been discussed. Much of James Frazer's thinking has fallen into disrepute. However, Frazer's evolutionary-based definition is still widely accepted among many anthropologists, that is, that religion is petitioning and worshiping a great sovereign being, whereas magic is the attempted forceful manipulation of occult powers that are assumed to exist by "less advanced" people. Hence, magic is relegated to the realm of the backward and the ignorant. (See Grunlan & Mayers 1988:228.)

Definitions are often unhelpful when they impose a false limitation on the breadth of meaning which words otherwise carry. This is certainly a case in point. The relegation of magic to the realm of backward people has blinded academia to its deep roots and its persistent hold on society.

The Enlightenment tendency to create a dualism between the physical and the spiritual has led to a further demise in the understanding of magic. Not only is it now considered dated, but it is also considered to be found in that "other" realm often considered unreal and imaginary by secularists (Hiebert 1985:158).

We must take a renewed look at magic if we are going to make progress in understanding those peoples around the world who visibly labor under it. We are not going to make progress with such a dualistic model. I suggest that magic must be seen as a

normal part of human existence. It is deeply rooted in the human psyche. The mystery should be removed from it. This will begin to happen when we recognize that there are Western equivalents to some of the magical practices and practitioners found in the non-Western world (see above).

Hill (1996:337) gives us a good start in suggesting that we begin to see magic as neutral powers, something like the psychic. Such can be used for good or evil. It is not their presence that is the problem, but their abuse. I suggest that it is not their abolition that we are aiming for as Christian missionaries, but their orientation to God in the place of spirits of the dead. It would appear that when working with people who are functioning within a magical worldview, the Christian missionary may have much to learn from diviners before he or she begins to suggest changes to their practices. Hence, also Kirwen tells us, "The more a Christian Priest takes on the role of the diviner . . . the more effective and meaningful he becomes in the lives of the Africans" (1987:106).

A Revised Understanding

It seems that even today all too many Western observers look down upon the African way of life as lazy, inefficient, etc. It is not so common to try to investigate why this may be. The reason I suggest is the deep and widespread belief in the efficacy of magic. Examined from a secular or physical point of view, some of people's behavior may appear illogical. But when all the magical beliefs are taken into account, this is no longer the case.

Magical beliefs are powerful and penetrating. They underpin whole ways of life and do not simply disappear in the face of modernity and material prosperity. Rather, an understanding of the latter is intricately incorporated into the pre-existing worldview.

No Immunity to Witchcraft

I suggest that missionaries and those church leaders and commentators in Africa who publicly follow their example are wrong to depict salvation in Jesus Christ as giving immunity either to witchcraft attack or to tribal curses that arise from people's failure to follow their tribal traditions.

This conclusion was originally drawn by dualistic thinkers. They imagined that magical forces were unreal, only in the mind or otherwise in a spiritual realm that we as Christians consider to be already totally defeated by the power of Jesus Christ. For the latter, we need to remember the "already and not yet" thinking on the kingdom of God. For the former, our missionary forefathers considered that if these forces could only be ignored, they would go away. The difficulty lies in ignoring them when they have had such a consuming hold on people's lives. There is nothing "only" about magical beliefs being in the mind. The mind after all is the very seat of human consciousness and the core of our being.

Perhaps the most damaging effect of the immunity-to-witchcraft-and-curses view in Africa has been the mushrooming of prosperity teachings. This is because those who have brought such teachings have not realized to what an extent in people's understanding disease and suffering are synonymous with bewitchment and curse. To say that Christians are immune to the latter is in effect to say that they are immune to problems. It is also to say by simple implication that those who suffer or have problems have backslidden or have lost their faith. Here there is no assurance of salvation,

no resting in the arms of Jesus, no acceptance of the purifying and upbuilding role of trials. Instead, there is an incessant fear of making a false move lest the protection of the greatest diviner, Jesus, should be removed.

We need rather to teach that while the kingdom of God has already come, it is at the same time not yet here. Witchcraft can indeed take a hold on us. Then, it is not ours to avenge. Breaking of a taboo can hurt us, yet traditions need to take second place. We do not force Gentiles to be circumcised, but neither do we deny the Jews their ancient rite. We trust in Jesus through all, we claim him as a great diviner, but also much more! A recent incident helped me to understand Jesus' role as diviner.

Luo tradition dictates that should a man take a second wife, he should continue to give the first wife senior status. A neighbor of ours married a second wife, but then contrary to Luo law built a larger house for her than he had built for the first wife. The man subsequently became ill. He went to the diviner, who told him that in order to get well he must rectify his error and knock down the newer largest house. He did this. He still did not get well, so he called some Christians from a spiritual church to pray for him. They did pray for him and told him that he must be saved in the name of Jesus Christ. I later asked the same Christians about this, and they told me what had happened. On inquiring whether the diviner had given good advice, they said that, yes, of course he had. The Christians agreed that he was right to have knocked the second house down, but now he needed to be saved in the name of Jesus in order to be healed.

The Basis of Teaching

Too often our theological education is comparable to that of giving someone in a cheese store instructions on how to cook beef. Unless there is a way of getting him or her some beef, little benefit is obtained. He or she needs to know how to prepare cheese if unhealthy dependence on meat is to be avoided.

What does all this mean in practice? Below are three very practical points that need to be taken seriously in further research and practice.

1. The current Protestant emphasis on critical Bible study for all believers must be recognized as relatively recent. The Reformation did not occur until the sixteenth century after all. This means that God was prepared to allow his church to exist for 1,500 years without the modern biblical studies insights that it brought.

We need to be careful that the baby does not disappear with the bath water. However, we also need to think carefully about our attempt at transferring a product of sixteenth-century European thinking into an African society that in many respects more closely resembles biblical culture as it was at the time of Exodus. A rational systematic approach to the Bible may seem to have little point to those whose lives are neither rational nor systematic, but continue to be governed by magical interpretation in their approach to life in general.

It is necessary to investigate what is an appropriate approach to biblical interpretation from within the magical worldview, such as I did with the thesis I wrote in 1995 while engaged in postgraduate study (Harries 1995).

2. Closely connected to the above is people's deep desire for release from spiritual oppression, and not primarily for understanding in an apparently abstract way. The latter appears to be a particularly Western trait. Liberation theologians would

seem to agree here, hence, their major focus on praxis (Gutiérrez 1983).

While going along with the liberation theological analysis of recent Western theology to some extent, I differ with them in the proposed alternative direction. The former appear to have falsely reified the magical powers that Paul describes: "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Ephesians 6:12). Liberation theologians on the other hand are over inclined to interpret these powers from a Marxist perspective instead as being political and economic forces. Is this effectively throwing people "off the scent" of their real oppressors who are witches, sorcerers, the gods, and/or the dead?

The section of the church that has taken the latter the most seriously in recent times has been the Pentecostals. There is considerable evidence that this approach even originated and certainly continues to be especially strong among African and non-Western people.¹⁹ Pentecostalism indeed does speak to the hearts of non-Western people in a way which classic Reformation theology does not, hence, the enormous growth of Pentecostalism in many parts of the world.

The great danger that I perceive here is the confusion that is occurring as a result of the leadership of many Pentecostal movements being in the West. The connection is stark between Pentecostalism arising from the West, whose material prosperity has arisen following the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution, and a grossly misleading prosperity theology. While Pentecostalism has much to teach us, its effective spread and its remaining true to biblical teaching requires its divorce from many of the misleading symbols of specifically Western prosperity that often accompany it.²⁰ Failing this, it is all too easily perceived as the brand of Christianity that legitimizes magic to an extent which far surpasses biblical precedent.

3. Following on from the above is the desperate need for a theology of suffering that makes sense in the non-Western context. This theology must arise in the context of a clear recognition of the power of the magical forces of evil, but also, to borrow a term from the liberation theologians, out of praxis.

The vast gap in material prosperity in many parts of the world between Westerners and the majority of the non-Western population makes it extremely hard for a presentation of a teaching on suffering by the former to be heard by the latter. Such teaching can all too easily be seen as a mockery or aiming to try and pacify those who could otherwise see themselves as being the oppressed in a Marxist sense.

For such a theology to take root, a contribution from academia is required. More importantly, what is required is the giving of lives in sacrificial service in ways that are understood by symbols comprehensible to the non-West. And such sacrificial lives must continue to be ones of joy. Maybe there is no other way out than that of the cross and of sacrifice. Sometimes this may mean that a Westerner will consciously refuse comfort and protection that is offered to be sufficiently vulnerable to share in the suffering with which local people can identify.

Conclusion

To relegate magic to backward people and bygone years is to misunderstand its nature and to underestimate its power. In Western nations, what was once known as magic now goes under different headings, yet when carefully examined its roots are evident. Reading from an African cultural perspective reveals a lot of magic in the Bible.

The much more central role of magic in African societies has widespread and profound effects on Africans' ways of life. Complex codes of customary laws govern the whole of life. Witchcraft beliefs flourish, Western institutions flounder, and even tribalism is underpinned by magic. Jesus' life as depicted in the New Testament is easily seen as being that of a great diviner. Very often this widespread prevalence of magic is hidden from view to the West by the use of English, which is poorly equipped to explain it.

The distinction between magic and religion set out by Frazer in the nineteenth century is proving to have a blinding effect on current scholarship. A greater appreciation of the role of magic would improve understanding by missionaries and others for the reasons that many African traditions seem so non-rational and resistant to change. It can also go a long way in explaining why we now find such a rampant prosperity theology in Africa.

This essay throws light on a number of critical missiological issues. First, prosperity theology is reinterpreted as an almost inevitable misunderstanding arising from different aspects of Western and African thinking meeting in the way that they have. Second, and a closely related conclusion, is that the magical worldview has not been and is not as easily defeated by Western rationality as was once thought. What often appears to the Western observer as a widespread or even wholesale adoption of Western thought forms, on closer viewing transpires to be a Western veneer on a confused but otherwise vibrant magical system.

The above conclusions do not mark the defeat of the gospel so much as what has been an almost inscrutable victory. The very existence and power of the magical worldview is also one reason why the gospel of Jesus Christ has taken such a strong hold in Africa. Unlike secular Western prescriptions for progress, problem solving, and development, the gospel strikes a beam of light and hope to the heart of African culture and values. "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone" (Luke 20:17b).

Notes

1 Paul Daniels is well known in the United Kingdom for his televised magic shows. He is very happy to admit himself that the "magic" he uses is no more than clever trickery.

2. This preoccupation can take many forms. It can be a primary motivation to the acquisition of further education. It can result in imitating the behavior of whites without first understanding the motives that underlie their actions. Turner points out that it can result in suspicion that the African people have not been given the whole Bible! (1979:271-288)

3 As an example to illustrate this, there is a poster that has been widely circulated in Kenya, which reads, "AIDS is not witchcraft. AIDS is real"

4 Western readers may suppose that a husband will not act on the basis of the suspicion of his wife's behavior, but will want some evidence. This may not be the case for those living in a magical worldview. Hence, even in the Old Testament there is a procedure instituted to ensure that women are not mistreated on the basis of unfounded suspicion (Numbers 5:11-31). This example is comparable to one that happened at a leading African church in my area recently. A group of young men were very active in this church, working as elders and deacons. Then one day they told me that the pastor had forced them all to resign temporarily from their duties. I later discovered from the pastor that he had dismissed them because he had received a word from a church in Malawi (which does not even share a border with Kenya) to the effect that his elders were visiting women in the church with ulterior motives. Having heard this divine word, there was no need for seeking "evidence."

5 We have here focused on the nature of witchcraft in magically based societies. Yet it is rare to find a society oriented entirely to witchcraft. The latter tends to rise to particular prominence in times of instability. We have not yet mentioned the role of spirits of the dead or of gods that also have a part to play in ascertaining someone's prosperity. Their role does fall within the same magical framework.

6 The discussion regarding the meaning and the significance of rationality continues. It revolves especially around the interpretation of the writings of Max Weber. For comments on the relationship between traditional authority (such as that found in many non-Western and certainly African societies) and the economic order, see Weber (1947).

7 This is seen to be proven in practice because it is on these lines that events are interpreted. Hence, there is plenty of evidence in people's eyes for the advisability of following tradition.

8 I have avoided the term *witchdoctor* in favor of *diviner* in most cases in this article because of the stigma attached to it in some circles. The term used by the Luo people is *ajuoga*, where *juok* is witchcraft. The Bantu people (in the Swahili and Kaonde languages) use *mganga/muganga*.

9 This understanding is certainly not confined to Africa. It has been found in many parts of the world, including in early Greek religion, where according to Parker (1983: 251), "It seems almost inevitable that human malice must often have been diagnosed or at least suspected as the cause of a particular misfortune" (See also Mbiti 1975: 165-166).

10 There is a recognized distinction in anthropological circles between witches who have innate destructive magical powers and sorcerers who concoct magic. (For example, see Mbiti 1975: 165-166.)

11 For example, in the language of the Luo, the word *chura* refers both to the breaking of traditional laws and to the wasting illness that results.

12 I am considering the term *sickness* in its broad sense, as explained by De Rosny (1985) as including unemployment and general misfortune.

13 That is not to say that no verbal desire for something was expressed. But there was no deep heartfelt urge that would motivate people to put themselves out to achieve it.

14 I am not revealing the true nature of this project, as it remains a sensitive issue locally.

15 Examples include the diviner purporting to remove an evil substance from the body, and an appendix removal in a modern hospital, similarly, the swallowing of various substances which are oriented to alleviate particular bodily disorders.

16 In many African hospitals, nurses are not expected to do these duties for the reasons here being explained.

17 This is thought by some tribal traditions, e.g., that of the Luo people in Kenya, to result in death (Odhiambo 1997).

18 A contrast can be drawn with some legitimacy with the relations among Western nations. In the latter, the interflow of resources, personnel, finance, etc., is possible due to the high degree of rationality found in the reasoning of many institutions even across national and cultural boundaries. For example, a bank in France functions on the same principles as a bank in Japan.

19 Hence, for example, William J. Seymour, who was active in the birth of Pentecostalism at the great Azusa Street revival in the United States, was an African-American (Nichol 1966: 32).

20 Examples are the use of an American accent, black shoes and suit, public address system, wealth in terms of access to cash rather than locally grown food and cattle, etc.

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