DECOLONIZING AFRICAN CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY

Evaristi Magoti Cornelli[1]

Abstract

Africa is mired in problems and has been so for a very long time. In their attempts to rescue the situation, our forefathers took upon themselves the task of decolonization. Although this process began in earnest in the early 1960s, it has since stalled. Today there are few Africans, either in the secular realm or in religious orders, who dare to speak about decolonization. It is as if the continent is in a coma, its attendants paralyzed. We all seem to have reached the conclusion that the current worldview, provided by the neo-conservatives in Washington and London, is an unassailable universal, a definitive and final creed. This paper is an attempt to break the deadlock of the world's current commitment to a monoculture. Focusing on the religious domain, in particular prayer, and using historical and critical methods, I argue that African Christians are alienated from their cultural beliefs, and as such their quest for meaning in life is eschewed. I maintain that the spirituality of individualism characterising Christianity is detrimental to Africa and as such it has to be replaced by the 'spirituality of community', which is grounded in African traditions and cultures. I conclude by suggesting that if African people want to find meaning in their life and existence here on earth, then they must do so by looking very carefully into their own cultures and traditions, and not disappear into alien cultures, or into some mono-cultural hybrid we witness today.

Key words: *spirituality, prayer, individualism, community, Eurocentric Christian hegemony*

Introduction:

This paper seeks to divest negative colonial elements subsisting in contemporary African Christian spirituality. It does so in two stages. In the first instance, prayer life in African Christian spirituality is described in some detail. This task sets the issues at stake in their proper context and introduces the importance of decolonization which serves to frame the further discussion about Africans' quest for meaning in life. The second stage addresses the question of decolonizing African Christian spirituality. This task is particularly important from a practical standpoint as well as being central to the theoretical argument advanced here. In addition to providing a critique of contemporary approaches to decolonization, the paper also identifies African assumptions, beliefs and practices that must eventually find their way into Christianity, if any meaningful decolonization is to take place at all. In that respect, fulfilling this second task provides a picture of what is meant by the indigenisation of prayer in African Christian spirituality. And if the discussion is prefaced with clarification of some concepts, it is mainly because, like Hermes, the

[1] Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, University of Dar es Salaam

demi-god of Greek mythology, we want to interpret words in the clearest terms possible, so that the main arguments of this paper can be clearly understood.

Conceptual clarifications

One of the central notions drawn upon very often throughout this essay is 'spirituality'. The term has a long history and has a variety of meanings that change according to the historical moment and context of its use, and so it needs to be clarified here. For the purpose of this paper it is sufficient to employ the currently common usage of the term. Derived from the Greek term 'πνευματικότητα' (pronounced *pneumatikoteta*), denoting that which is related to 'πνεῦμα'(*pneuma*), variously translated by Tzounis (2017: 2) as spirit, wind, air or breath, and from the Latin word '*spiritualitas*' (which signifies the same thing), the English word 'spirituality', is used today to refer to the human quest for meaning in life. This quest is sometimes reduced to the search for happiness, understood as well-being in terms of both material and quality of life pursued through self-transcendence towards the Triune God. Sandra Schneider (2005: 16) expresses well the current version of spirituality when she writes:

[Spirituality] is the actualization of the basic human capacity for transcendence . . . [it] is the experience of conscious involvement in the project of life integration through self-transcendence towards the horizon of ultimate value one perceives.

In this definition Schneider (2005) is careful not to mention God because of the belief that the inner quest for meaning in life is not exclusively religious. It involves even those who do not believe in God but believe in some kind of absolute set of values or ideals. Central to the idea of spirituality, then, is our capacities to lift up our hearts to the absolute reality, which in the Christian tradition is the Triune God, in search for the meaning of our existence. Thus in addition to being a reflection on those elements which animate the everyday life and faithful practices of African Christians, discussion about African Christian spirituality is also, in the final analysis, a reflection that focuses mainly on the inner quest of African Christians for meaning and purpose in life.

The idea of what it means to be an African Christian, as referred to so often in our discussion, must now be examined. According to Acts (11: 26) it was in Antioch where those who believed in the teachings of Barnabas and Saul about Jesus Christ, were first called 'Christians'. This suggests that Christians are not only those who believe in God, but also those who believe in Jesus and his teachings about God, man and the universe. This seems to be consonant with the claims of Panikker (1972: 284) that a "Christian is simply a conscious collaborator with Jesus Christ." This means that a Christian is a person who has decided to be a disciple of Jesus in words and deeds.

The idea of being an 'African' is a bit more complex. I have discussed this at length in earlier writings (Cornelli 2014, 2017) so that there is no purpose to repeating myself here. Suffice it to point out that the term 'African' will be used in this paper

to refer to Black people in Africa south of the Sahara and in the Diaspora. In relation to other Christians in the world, Black people are unique in that they are among the few racial identities in the world who – in addition to their own religion, African Religion (AR) – have been compelled by the forces of history to also embrace two other foreign religions, namely Christianity and Islam. Consequently, most Africans today live with a minimum of two religions: AR and Islam or AR and Christianity.

This paper is concerned with those who believe in both AR and Christianity. This means that when we speak about an African Christian, we are speaking from the outset about a person with a double heritage. These are individuals who integrate themselves within two civilizations: the Christian or European civilization on the one hand, and African civilization on the other. In practical terms, this means that there are moments when they behave and act as Africans and there are times when they behave and act like Europeans.

We must now turn to the idea of prayer that is so central to this paper. What kind of an activity is prayer? The term "prayer" is normally used to designate the act of talking to God or any superior being. Prayer is a form of worship; and according to Mbiti ([1969] 1994: 61) "it is the commonest act of worship" in Africa. Sometimes the term 'prayer' refers to a form of words (spoken or unspoken) used in praying and these can be requests or petitions to God. At its most basic level, however, prayer is often described as the most direct way to communicate with God. Communication with God can take different forms: formal and informal and private or public.

The act of praying is not limited to any specific cultural or social identity. As Mbiti (1969/1994: 61) has noted, in Africa praying is "reported among practically all African peoples." What then is prayer for Africans? In his study of African religion, Magesa (1997: 195) observed that for most Africans, prayer "is a means of restoring wholeness and balance in life."

In addition, prayer is also understood as a moment when an individual or community places themselves completely "in the hands of greater invisible and mystical powers . . ." (Magesa 1997: 196). When that happens, prayer becomes also a moment of absolute dependence of the living upon God and their ancestors. One of the main features of African prayer is petition, or requests for practical needs, such as healing, having children, and other kinds of health.

Lastly is the idea of decolonisation, which is linked in principle to the end of colonialism, variously expressed as Independence, or freedom, or self-rule. But to Nyerere (1971 [1968]: 1-2), in addition to freedom, decolonisation is also a process of re-education in view of regaining the attitude of mind that existed in traditional African societies. In other words, decolonisation signifies restoration of African culture. To be able to do that, however, Nyerere thought it was necessary to be self-reliant.

This self-reliance concerns all aspects of life. In this paper we are concerned with the religious aspect of African life. To appreciate what this extrication of colonial

influence involves, it is necessary to have a better understanding of the very nature of Christianity as a religion.

Christianity as a religion

Christianity as the label is used today refers to doctrinal beliefs and attitudes which are rooted in liberal ideology. This is a controversial claim to make because of the relation that is usually established by theologians between God and the Christian religion. Granted that connection is assumed, it could be objected that the claim just made is patently false, because God has no ideology. But this objection can easily be over-ruled because there is sufficient evidence to suggest that there is an ideological dimension of Christian theology that cannot be avoided. In the Gospel of John (1.1), for example, Jesus the founder of Christianity is depicted as the Word who was once with God. Following John's Gospel, the Vatican II document, "Dei Verbum" (No.4), states the following:

Then, after speaking in many and varied ways through the prophets, "now at last in these days God has spoken to us in His Son" (Heb. 1:1-2). For He sent His Son, the eternal Word, who enlightens all men, so that He might dwell among men and tell them of the innermost being of God (see John 1:1-18). Jesus Christ, therefore, the Word made flesh, was sent as "a man to men." (3) He "speaks the words of God" (John 3;34), and completes the work of salvation which His Father gave Him to do (see John 5:36, 17:4).

The point to be made here is that God communicates to human beings in ways that that they can comprehend. Notice that it is *ideas* which God communicates to human beings.

In addition to these official documents, there is sufficient seminal secondary literature such as Max Weber ([1920] 2002) and J. Gresham Machen ([1923] 2009), establishing links between Christianity and liberalism. This widely influential quotation from Max Weber (1920/2002: xi) indicates that the spirit of capitalism, and thereby liberal thought, has its very roots in the supernatural order as taught through the Christian Church, and that these beliefs were part and parcel to the development of industrialism, the bedrock of industrial capitalist society. He writes:

. . . One important source of the modern work ethic and orientation to material success . . . is located outside the realm of 'this worldly' utilitarian concerns and business astuteness.

In its classical form, liberalism, is "committed to the extreme form of individualism" (Heywood [1997] 2000: 43) characterised by selfishness, egoism, and self-seeking attitudes. Underpinning liberal thinking is the belief that "individuals are the proprietors of their own person and capacities, owing nothing to society or to other individuals" (Heywood 2000: 43). Like a 'monad' or an 'atom', an individual presumed to be ideally self-reliant and self-sufficient, as such he or she has the liberty or the freedom to do exactly what he or she wants without interference or constraints

from other people or society as a whole, provided in doing he or she does not break the law or interfere with the comparable freedom of other individuals.

In economic terms, classical liberalism is often marshalled to defend the mechanisms of the free market. The claim here is that an economy "works best when left alone by government. Laissez-faire capitalism is thus seen as guaranteeing prosperity, upholding individual liberty and . . . social justice" (Heywood 2000: 43). There is a double standard lurking here because the defenders of liberalism tend to disregard the values and freedoms of individuals in other cultures outside their own societies.

Crucial to the understanding of African Christian spirituality is the key functional status of religion in liberalism. For in the liberal tradition, according to Rice (2005: 114), religion is "deeply personal," which means that it is "essentially private." In practical terms, this means that "religious beliefs are merely matters of personal preference" (ibid.). An individual is free to decide what to believe and what not to believe. This leads people "to pick and choose the [beliefs] they like and mix them as ingredients of a tossed salad" (Rice 2005: 115). In this view, the individual is the final arbiter of what religious convictions to believe in. Rice observes that, as a norm, the society is of no significance to the individual, nor should it be (2005: 116-117). Rice captures well the liberal view of society when he writes:

> Society is nothing more than a collection of autonomous, independent selves, each of whom pursues his own ends . . . People may still form relationships, but they do so only to meet their individual needs. If they don't need the group in order to reach their private goals, they feel free to leave. The object of their commitment is the self, not the community.

This view of society makes it clear that in the liberal tradition, wherein Christianity is deeply rooted, the individual constitutes the fundamental unit of humanity and of rationality. As such, moral commitments – religious or otherwise – are not made to the community but to the individual self. Correlatively, it is not the community that commits itself to religious beliefs but the individual that so commits.

Christianity was introduced in Africa during the colonial period (circa 1886-1961). Backed by colonial administrations, European Christian missionaries set out quite explicitly to destroy African beliefs and replace them with Christian beliefs. One of the major shifts that took place during the colonial period concerned itself with religion. Africans were encouraged to convert to Christianity by publicly rejecting and renouncing their own religious beliefs and practices, as devilish, pagan, and outdated. This hegemony was quite personal and invasive on an individual level. For instance, in the process of converting Africans they forced converts to Christianity to adopt European names and to reject their given traditional African names. Other examples are many, but the point to be made is that the introduction of Christianity in Africa did mark a seismic shift in the African understanding of personal identity, religion, spirituality, and prayer, from which Africa has yet to recover.

The new religion, to which Africans converted, was completely different from the African traditional religions. While in traditional societies religion was perceived as a community good, an approach to life rooted in the community to which an individual belongs indelibly and quite essentially, Christianity was presented as an institution standing separate from the community. As Bouckaert (2003: 108) depicts it, Christianity was presented as "an organized form of life referring to a set of rituals, symbols, texts, doctrines, sacraments, holy places, structures of authority, laws and tradition." As time went by, African converts themselves began to recognise the very nature of religion as an institution or a corporation that is self-standing, and not an integral part of the community to which they belong.

The Christian religion was perceived as belonging to a private sphere. This has several implications: first, it means that a religious collective can be identified as a non-governmental organisation (NGO), founded by individuals and operating independently of the polity to which those founding and participating individuals belong. Secondly, the dichotomy between church and community implies that religion does not play a major role in the public spheres of politics and economics. As such the public sphere is conceived as the realm guided more by reason than by religious faith. The public sphere then became the secular arena, devoid of religion. It did not take long for people to come to a conclusion that the secular order is not sacred and as it can be treated without respect or fear of God.

The dichotomy enshrined in Christianity led to a belief that religion is a private good and as such it is a matter of personal choice. Underpinning that is the belief in the principle of freedom. The depiction of religion as a private matter went hand in hand with the principle of tolerance, which demands, "non-intervention in one another's [religious] beliefs" (Bouckaert 2003: 112), even if they are perceived to be irritating, irrational and outdated. It is curious that European missionaries did not tolerate African religion.

A cautionary note must be inserted here. The principle of individualism in Christianity is not a creation of missionaries. It is inserted in the Christian faith and practice. Rice (2005:115) expresses this by saying that western assumptions:

> Occupy a level of cognitive architecture so deep in [European consciousness] that is seems unnatural to question them". Then he adds "they are so deeply woven into the fabric of [European] thinking, that [Europeans] think *with* them, not *about* them.

African Christians have also internalized western beliefs to such an extent, that what Rice says here can be said about African Christians as well. They consider European assumptions as natural and no longer question them.

Individualising Christian spirituality

Just as during colonialism religion in Africa became a private matter, spirituality also became a private good in almost the same way. African converts to Christianity were

led to believe that the things that lead them closer to God are located inside the individual. They were also led to the belief that practices of controlling the desires of the flesh necessary for life in the spirit of God, are the responsibility of the individual and community has no role to play.

The location of spirituality as central to the inner life of the individual person goes hand in hand with the process of discovery. Thus for example, according to Rice (2005: 117) in order to find God, Christians are taught to do so through introspection, that is "by turning within [themselves]," within the soul or heart of the individual and not within the soul or heart of their community. Similarly, in order to find meaning in life, in order to discover the will of God, a person is encouraged to look in solitude within their own conscience, to listen in silence to their inner voice. Furthermore, it suggests that we can know ourselves better and know who we 'really' are not by turning to the other people in the communities to which we belong, but by turning away from the outside world and discover within the truth about ourselves through reason. It is this understanding of faith, according to Rice (2005:115), that "leads people to concentrate on inner experience and to pursue [spiritual] goals entirely on their own." Being an inner experience, faith and the truth of God can only be accessed by an individual privately, and never by interacting with other people. This is what Motak Dominika (2009: 133) draws our attention to this when he writes: "Expressing similar sentiments Motak Dominika (2009: 132), makes clear that:"

> The inner experience can be experienced primarily, if not exclusively, in the individual (2009: 133). The individual believer does not need intermediaries . . . [he] has the primary responsibility for his own spiritual destiny . . . he has the right and the duty to come to his own relationships with God in his own way and in his own effort (2009: 132).

The message of this passage could not be clearer. It places spiritual matters simply within the domain of the individual. On this showing, it is clear that the role of other people in spiritual matters is limited. At the very most, other people can only provide advice and when necessary encouragement; but in the final analysis, the arbiter of an inner experience is the individual and not the community. One does not need to stretch one's imagination too far to understand why most Africans are struggling with Christian spirituality.

In addition to discovery through introspection, Christian spirituality is a private affair insofar as, in principle, it does not have any official role to play in the public sphere (Bouckaert 2003: 107). Although, according to Bouckaert there is a sense in which spirituality is in fact relevant to the public sphere, nevertheless for most Christians, spiritual issues, choices and preferences are entirely private, and under the principle of freedom all the different religions require political distance and social tolerance. Lastly, it should be noted that Christian spirituality is essentially reductionist, in the sense that the Christian view divides reality in dualistic terms. St. Paul, in particular, stressed the *pneuma* (spirit) as the element that God relates to, whereby a very

important relationship must be maintained between man and God. Instead of paving the way to a relationship with God involving the whole person – body and soul, Paul argued for a relationship with God which excluded the body (*soma, sarx*) and thus reduced the relation with God to one aspect of the human being, the *pneuma* or spirit only. In putting such emphasis on the *pneuma* and dismissing the *sarx* (*soma,* the physical aspect of human agency) as the chief source of evil, Paul paved the way to reductionism.

More recently, Arthur Holder (2005: 2) has demonstrated that in Europe and America attempts are made to avoid dualism in Christian spirituality, by emphasising that spirituality "involves the whole of life including politics, economics, art and sexuality." These nascent efforts, however laudable they may be, are still in their infancy, and seem to go against more than two thousand years of Christian dualistic and reductionist thinking and tradition.

Prayer life in African Christian spirituality

The privatization of religion and spirituality led inevitably to the privatization of prayer. The privatization of prayer in Christian spirituality is not an invention of European missionaries to Africa but comes from the teaching of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels. It appears that when the writers of the Gospels made a contrast between the private and public prayers, they noticed that Jesus' preference was on private and not public prayers. For instance, in Mathew (6:1-18), when Jesus addresses the question of outward piety, such as almsgiving, prayer and fasting, he condemns the public display of piety on the ground that it seeks to impress people and not God. With respect to prayers, His utterances become even more specific and scathing when in Mathew (6: 5-6), he tells his disciples that they should not pray like hypocrites, but rather they should "go into their rooms and shut the door and pray to [their] Father who is in secrete. And [their] Father who sees in secrete will reward [them]". With this, Jesus is suggesting that prayer is a private matter that has to take place in a quite place. In other words, for Jesus prayer is secrete activity and a private issue between the individual and his or her God. He goes even further in Mathew (6:7), to clarify the idea of prayer by suggesting that the encounter between God and the individual person in prayer, is not so much about many words as it is about communion (see also Luke, 6:12).

This means that to be heard by God and to be in communion with Him, it is not necessary to say many words. Based on Jesus' teaching on prayer, there developed a tradition in Christianity which put more emphasis on private prayer than on public or community prayer. Most spiritual writers in the west, like St. Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1516) encouraged Christians to pray privately so that God can hear them. Slowly meditation became the ideal way of prayer, and the best way to communicate with God. St. Ignatius of Loyola, for one, developed a technique in meditation, which can help an individual not only to discern the will and love of God in his/her life but also to show how God manifests Himself in the life of the individual (Thornton and Varenne 2000). Building on the tradition of individualism, privacy and secrecy,

African coverts began to pray in solitude. Moments of prayer acquired more significance than any other moments in the life of the individual. Prayer moments became far more important than moments of manual work or labour. In addition, moments of prayer became moments demanding absolute privacy and silence for the individual. Prayer times became moments of withdrawal from other people in order to be alone with God. For some Christians, prayer life led them in a position of despising the world (*contempus mundi*) and thus withdrawing from it (*fuga mundi*), so that they could pray better.

Simultaneously with the emphasis placed on private prayers, there occurred a diminishing role of prayer in the public sphere. For instance, religion, spirituality and prayer were presented as unhelpful in politics or economics. Here in Tanzania, no one expressed this more clearly than Nyerere (1971 [1968]: 13), when he declared that the "organization of life on earth depends on the dictates of reason and experience and not what God says or wants." Lastly, the privatization of prayer not only led to the irrelevance of prayer in areas that mattered the most to society, but it also led to intolerance. Tolerance connotes accepting some thing or condition that an individual or community does not like. In the end, religion, spirituality and prayer came to be considered as controversial activities that could be both loathed and loved simultaneously. Clearly in these circumstances something is not right; and it is the task of African Christians to help Christianity become relevant in Africa.

Decolonising prayer in African Christianity

Approaches to decolonising Christianity and making it a bit more relevant in the continent are many; but here we consider only the main ones, namely: inculturation, liberation theology and the break-away approach. Let us begin with the break-away strategy.

Break-away strategy

Within mainstream Christian churches, there are African Christians who believed that the best approach to decolonise African Christianity was to break away from European established churches and start African churches. These religious leaders separated from mainstreams denominations and went on to establish what is variously known as African Initiated Churches (AIC), Ethiopian, messianic or spirit type. According to Magesa (2010: 122), these churches are known for "articulating the best of the fundamentals of Africans' belief systems and integrating them with and within their perception of Christianity." They are found everywhere in Africa but the most important ones include the Lekganyane Church of South Africa, the Mranke church of Zimbabwe, the Kimbangu church of the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Aladura church of Nigeria. The break-away approach has had many positive impacts; but it has not changed the teaching and promulgation of Christianity significantly. Its merit is in showing what an African understanding of the Church can look like; and this perspective illuminates the issues involved in decolonisation. As a method of emancipation from imperial hegemony, however, the break-away approach did not bring about the desired changes within Christianity.

The approach of liberation theology

For other Africans within the mainstream churches in Africa, the solution for decolonization was not to break away from the mainstream Christian churches but to reform them from within, using biblical insights. In the estimation of liberation theologians such as Gustav Guttierez (1971) and Leonardo Boff (1986) and Magesa (1976), liberation theology was a new way of doing theory, and of understanding God. Instead of spiritualizing conditions of poverty so common in Africa and Latin America as a condition of blessedness and therefore desirable and necessary for salvation (Mathew 5:3), liberation theology argued for freedom from poverty and eradication of all the material conditions enslaving people in the world. Based on biblical texts such as Luke.4: 18, liberation theology wanted Christianity to stop spiritualizing the mortification of the flesh and sanctifying the condition of suffering; instead it urged the creation of programmes and structures that would free the poor from the indignity of want and the oppression of poverty. Popular though this approach was, it did not bring about the liberation of Africans, not least because in the estimation of official Christianity, liberation theology was an aberration and a deviation from the Gospel. Within Catholicism, liberation theology was treated as a form of communism that Pope Pius XI (1937: 6) characterised as a "satanic scourge" (quoted in Mbogoni 2004: 142). Since such official condemnation, this approach has stalled. In Africa few people dare to speak about it anymore.

Inculturation approach

Winning favour worldwide within Christian circles was the inculturation approach, which has been recognised since the 1960s. Inspired by the Christ event of the incarnation, the event by which the Son of God took flesh and became one of us – like human beings except without sin – the inculturation approach argued for efforts to preserve the Christian gospel yet make it more relevant to African cultures. In a more practical vein, it argued for divesting African Christianity of all undue influences originating from European cultures. Explaining the practical implications of the process of inculturation, Magesa (2004: 5) writes:

In practical terms, the process involves the interaction of mutual critique and affirmation. It entails acceptance or rejection of thought forms, symbolic and linguistic expressions and attitudes between the faith cultures in question.

Expressing similar sentiments, Martey (1993: 55, cf. Diego 2000) remarks that inculturation is a process geared towards "replacing Western cultural incidents with African cultural elements (Martey 1993: 55). The key terms in this approach are 'indigenization' and 'Africanization' of Christianity. Yet this orientation is now losing esteem. Initially inculturation managed to effect some positive changes but these were more cosmetic than substantive. For instance, the inculturation movement managed to restore the use of indigenous languages in prayer and acts of worship. It also managed to have African names respected to some extent, and facilitated the inclusion of certain African cultural expressions into acts of worship and prayer.

The way forward

Clearly, African Christianity now has become fully indigenized in terms of personnel. The number of Euro-American missionaries is dwindling on the continent and the leadership is now in the hands of Africans. Nevertheless – and this is my concern – the changes that have taken place so far are artificial and cosmetic. The inculturation approach has been dealing with symptoms and not with the real underlying cause of what is troubling in the African Christian Church. It has assumed that names, dances, and languages exist in a vacuum, in isolation from the ideology which produces them. It should not surprise anyone to note that the process of liberating African Christianity from Anglo-Eurocentrism has stalled.

In order to decolonize prayer in African Christianity, the process of inculturation in Africa must now go a step further and begin to address the dominant ideology in Christianity and its correspondingly hegemonic attitudes. These are the pillars on which colonizing elements are based. To decolonize Christianity, it will be necessary to replace the ideology of individualism with the ideology of communalism. Another way of expressing this is to say that decolonizing the prayer life of African Christians will require Africans to re-educate themselves and regain their former attitudes towards their own cultural and essentially social identity in prayer and spirituality.

Now, calling for a renaissance of African spirituality is not to urge going forward by returning to the practices of bygone days; nor is it to urge a desperate attempt to regain the past, a pursuit which is destined to fail. Rather, it is an exercise which according to Magesa (2013: 19) "should help the continent to avoid being misrepresented and repeatedly falling victim to previous cruelties." He maintains that "Africa's repatriation of her history, the recovery and renewal of memory, is necessary. . ." for defining Africa's unique identity. He notes that it is possible for some to ridicule these efforts because of the weaknesses found in some African traditions. But he appeals to Africans not to be complicit in this ridicule; because for them it is suicidal. He believes that "apart from the cultural ugliness that must be corrected, there is much beauty and meaning to be proud of." In the following section we examine those beautiful elements in African culture to which Magesa alludes.

African assumptions and attitudes

One of the basic assumptions that must be accepted to make Christianity relevant in Africa is the belief that religion is a community matter. Although for quite some time, western traditional philosophy and scholarship, like that of Hegel ([1837] 2001: 110-112) did not recognise Africans as havingand religion. The truth of the matter is that Africans had religion long before foreign missionaries ever arrived here (Tempels [1945] 1969, Shorter 1973: 49, Mbiti 1969, 1975, Magesa 1997, 2013), in the continent to establish Christian religion. It has been variously described as African Religion (Magesa 2004) or African Religions (Mbiti [1975] 1991). Unlike Christianity and Islam, AR was not created by an individual but by community. It arose slowly out of African people's collective existential situations and experience of life in communities. As Mbiti ([1975] 2011: 16) explains, African religion "evolved slowly through many centuries, as people responded to the situations of

their life and reflected upon their experiences." This means that AR emerged as African people's shared responses to the challenges of life that Africans experienced in the course of their existence.

The root of African Religions is found in the tradition of communalism. Wade Boykin, et al. (1997: 411) have described communalism as:

> [an] awareness of the fundamental dependence of people . . . [It is a system in which] there is overriding importance attached to social bonds and social relationships. One acts in accordance with the notion that duty to one's social group is more important than individual rights and privileges. Hence, one's identity is tied to group membership rather than individual status and possessions. Sharing is promoted because it affirms the importance of social interconnectedness. Self-centeredness and individual greed are frowned upon.

Central to the tradition of communalism was respect for social bonds and relationships, the supremacy of the commune and the value of sharing over the individual and appropriation. It is these elements which enabled African traditional societies to survive the onslaught of colonialism.

It is worth noting that AR is the religion that, according to Mbiti (1991: 14), shaped and influenced the African experience of life and of the world. It was the prism through which Africans understood the world and experience life. Mbiti (1991: 11-12) tells us that AR, like any other religion, also has beliefs, practices, ceremonies, festivals, and religious objects, places of worship, values and morals, leaders, ways of praying, and above all spirituality. One of the unique characteristics of AR is that it is whole encompassing. That is what Mbiti (1969: 2) means when he says that African Religions "permeate all the departments of life." And because African religious experience and practice is all encompassing, he observes that in ARs there is "no formal distinction between the sacred and the secular, between the religious and the non-religious, between the spiritual and the material areas of life" (Mbiti 1969: 2). In other words, there is no dimension of life that is not spiritual.

In African societies, religion was religion of a community; and faith was faith of the community. Expressing the same idea Mbiti (1969: 2) correctly notes that 'traditional religions are not primarily for the individual but for his community of which he is part." Another way of expressing this is to say that "African religion functions more on a communal than on individual basis" (Mbiti 2011: 15). And to function chiefly at the community level signifies that it is community that sustains the beliefs of AR, as well as its ceremonies and rituals.

The second fundamental claim that Christianity must take seriously concerns itself with the belief that spirituality is one and complete. Traditionally, in African societies, spirituality was not primarily for the individual but for the community. One's relationship with God was not enhanced outside one's community; and there was no meaningful understanding of the purpose or significance of one's existence

that came solely from one's inner feelings or intuitions. That is what Magesa (2013: 34) means when he says that insofar as an individual "knows the meaning and the demands of community, he [or she] understands the foundation of his [or her] existence and the implication of that for spirituality." In other words, in Africa, it is the community spirit and community understanding of life that counted the most and not the spirit of an individual or his/her approach to life. More specifically, meaning of life was found in the community and not outside it. Attempts by an individual to deal with existential conditions were sought within and through the community, not from outside nor in isolation from the community.

African spirituality is wholly encompassing. Unlike western spirituality that considers some acts as spiritual and therefore sacred, while others are non-spiritual or secular, and therefore profane, in traditional Africa, as Magesa (2013: 24) observes: "all reality is situated in the sacred realm, which is the spiritual sphere". He adds that in this worldview, "all reality is spiritual because it is linked together by spiritual power and is connected to mystery" (Magesa 2013: 25). Thus, the distinction between the spiritual and non-spiritual or between the sacred and the profane is not relevant. Where Africa is concerned, Magesa (2004:198), correctly suggests that the notion of spirituality should be expanded to include "everything that a person is and does: body, mind will and emotions". Clearly if prayer life in Africa is to be efficacious, then Christian spirituality much cease being a spirituality of individualism and become a spirituality of community that is whole and not compartmentalized.

The third fundamental claim that Christianity will have to take seriously concerns itself with the belief that prayer is a community matter. In traditional society, prayer belong s to community and because of that it cannot be imposed on members of another community. Each community had its own prayers for each event and each community was praying to God through their own ancestors. The practice of imposing prayers from one community to another, and making some prayers universal and mandatory, is completely alien to African spirituality.

Arguing for African spirituality, which is the spirituality of community, should not be construed to mean that in African spirituality, individuals do not pray or that they have no needs or personal conditions for which they can seek interventions of the supernatural powers. That would be far from the truth. Individuals have their own prayers and just as they carry AR wherever they go (Mbiti 1969: 2), they too carry prayers everywhere they go and, in every activity, they do. Africans pray all the time in the sense that there is no moment that passes in "each day of an adult life without a verbal or mental recollection of the power of God and/or the ancestors" (Magesa 1997: 195).

Activities and conditions for which individuals pray are endless. But, and here is the difference, prayers are always communitarian. They involve three types of community, which Magesa (2013: 35) identifies as "community of place or geographical location, community of collective memory or shared history and the

psychological community personal interaction." This means that in the spirituality of Africans, prayers – be they proffered by the individual or otherwise – in order to be efficacious, must involve community, which according to Magesa (2013: 34) is "both a society as well as a unity of the visible and invisible worlds." The visible world is the world of those members of the community who are physically alive, and the invisible world is the world of the "ancestors, divinities and souls of the children yet to be born to the individual kin-groups" (Magesa 2013: 34). Prayers that are addressed directly to God, through Jesus Christ, without involving the community of the living, the dead, and the not-yet-born, are incomplete from the African point of view, and may not be considered efficacious because they are not part of the tradition of *anamnesis*, which is the tradition of remembering ancestors. Shorter (1973: 111-112) makes this point when he writes:

[Africans have] very strong consciousness of the necessity of continuity and tradition . . . [p]rayer and worship are effective because they are part of this tradition, and it is therefore important to worship in the way the ancestors worshipped, to be one with them in prayer.

Thus, for prayer to be effective it must be complete, involving all members of the community throughout the generations as well as all alive in the present. The fact that many people today do not worship the way ancestors worshiped may explain why many African Christians go to witchdoctors even after they have prayed in their respective churches. The process of decolonizing African spirituality, and prayer in particular, will require that we learn to pray and worship with our ancestors, that is with the community as a whole.

Conclusion

My aim in this paper has been to divest African Christian spirituality of European assumptions, beliefs, attitudes and ways of thinking that still determine prayer life of African Christians yet are fundamentally at odds with Christianity from an African point of view. We have shown that spirituality of individualism has to be replaced by the spirituality of community. As has been shown, this is especially pertinent, though not limited to, the role of community – as well as the sophisticated and complex, multi-generational constituency of a community itself – in the very meaning and efficacy of prayer and all forms of communion with God. In their search for meaning in life, African Christians would do well to look into their own tradition and culture and not into alien cultures.

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