

Western Theology in Africa

Christian Mission in the Light of the Undermining of Scientific Hegemony

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Abstract

Comprehension of the Old Testament in indigenous African Christianity can draw deeply on, confirm, and uphold tribal traditions designed to prevent death, calamity, and infertility. Deep spirituality demonstrated in such comprehension contrasts with “remnant spirituality” in the West. Western people’s awareness of their own religious underpinnings has lapsed. As a result, how well are Western Christians able to engage with holistic African communities? Holistic or integral mission can fall short through being a holistic means of introducing dualism. This article questions the legitimacy of science’s intrusion on the Christian faith, and draws practical implications for the Western mission enterprise, such as the fact that it generates dependency.

Keywords

Africa, Christianity, Mission, Science, Postmodern, Vulnerable Mission

A revised definition for science

It is important for this article to use a helpful definition for “science.” I want to consider how to define science in a way that makes sense to Africa as well as to Europe. This requirement brings a problem. A typical definition of science is that it is “systematic knowledge of the physical or material world gained through observation and experimentation.”¹ This definition presupposes that a “physical or material world” is a known and familiar category. Many African people are known to have a

¹ <http://www.dictionary.reference.com>.

monistic worldview. They do not draw a clear line between the material and the spiritual. This seems to disqualify the above definition. Berman tells us that “what gave rise to scientific values was not the carving out of a sphere of life – the secular, the temporal, the material – which could be investigated without risk to religious beliefs, but rather a new attitude to the sacred itself.”² If he is right, as I suspect that he is, then I propose a more helpful working definition for science to be a systematic knowledge gained through observation and experimentation *as practised by those who have a particular attitude to the sacred*.³

Introduction

How is a familiar Bible passage received in an African context? It is not easy, for many Westerners, laity and clergy alike, to know the answer to this question. Such would seem to require crawling into people’s heads. It requires interpretation through unfamiliar contexts and categories.⁴ In this article, I attempt to throw some light on how interpretation might happen in the light of African contexts and categories. Drawing on phenomenological method, after a long period of close identification with the Luo people in western Kenya, I suggest thoughts that may be in the minds of Luo people as they hear the Bible read. Looking closely at some of these thoughts can help us to understand how familiar passages may be expounded in very unfamiliar ways.

The above scenario is contrasted with widespread wisdom in Western theology. In the West, we will discover, spirituality can be perceived as a remnant – something that remains after science has whittled away at Christian beliefs. I will show how such whittling away of beliefs has resulted in religious practices being shorn of some of their original content, leaving a less than holistic faith. I will critically examine this shearing process in light of recent philosophical shifts, focusing particularly on the undermining of modernist/realist philosophy that occurred in the mid-20th century.⁵ Up to the mid-20th century, philosophers considered realism to

² Harold Joseph Berman, *Law and Revolution: The Formation of the Western Legal Tradition*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), 158.

³ Note that I have not redefined science, but only pointed to the direction of what might be a more helpful definition for some African people’s understanding of English. I have looked at such an innovative approach to science in more detail in a so-far unpublished article entitled “Faith in Christ: The Way Forward in African Development.”

⁴ Under the category of “contexts” I include the social, physical, spiritual, historical, and other contexts of human existence.

⁵ Paul G. Hiebert, *Missiological Implications of Epistemological Shifts: Affirming Truth in a Modern/Postmodern World* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1999), 30.

be grounded in absolute truth. More recently, they have had to acknowledge that belief that reality is a solid foundation to knowledge is a choice made by faith following subjective sifting of the evidence, much as are other belief-choices. That is to say, there is nothing “obvious” or “natural” about the West’s choices on what to consider to be “reality.” As a result, we have to acknowledge that science and belief in the foundational nature of objectivity are themselves less than securely grounded.

I want to ask how a gospel shorn of so much content that it is no longer holistic can contribute in a healthy way to the growth of a prospering indigenous African church? What is nowadays known as holistic mission⁶ represents one attempt at doing this. Among the weaknesses of this approach is the enormous unhealthy dependency on Western resources that it often creates. This article suggests that the “way forward” must include a re-examination of some perhaps inappropriate ways in which Western theology has responded to the encroaching of science into what was once “religious” territory.

The Bible in an African context

Sunday morning in an indigenous church in Western Kenya in March 2014. The Bible fell open (or was it intentionally opened?) at *Ywagruok* 1:1 (Lamentations 1:1).⁷ The following words were read (from the Luo language Bible):

*Mano kaka dala Sayun mane ji ng'enyie tinde odong' nono!
Chon ogendini ne kwane ka dala maduong,'
to koro osedong' mana ka chi liel.
Adier, chon ne en ruodh mier duto,
to tinde ochalo mana ng'ama tiyo tich misumba.*⁸

English translation from Dholuo is:

That is how the home(stead) of Zion that had many people these days remains empty!
Long ago peoples (tribes) used to count it like a big home(stead),
but now it has remained like the wife of a grave (widow).
Truly, long ago it was king of all homesteads,
but these days it is like someone doing work of a bachelor (slave).

⁶ Rene C. Padilla, “Holistic Mission,” in *Holistic Mission, Lausanne Occasional Paper No. 33*, ed. David Claydon, 11–23 (Pattaya, Thailand: Lausanne Committee for World Evangelisation, 2004), http://community.gospel.net/lcwe/assets/LOP33_IG4.pdf.

⁷ Note that unless otherwise indicated, non-English words are in the Luo language of Western Kenya.

⁸ Bible, *Muma Malar mar Nyasaye: moting'o Muma Machon kod Muma Manyien* (Nairobi: Bible Society of Kenya, 1976).

The brightly adorned bishop stood in front of us. Aged no more than 30, but recently promoted from a priest to a bishop, he wore long robes and scarves of red, orange, and yellow, setting him apart from the congregation. The other five bishops sitting at the front of this church looking at the congregation were similarly dressed. The congregation itself, of about 15 men and 30 women and perhaps 35 or so children, sat facing the slightly raised platform at the front of the mud-walled, iron-roofed building. Almost all the women wore white headscarves. A few of the men wore coloured robes, and a good number of the women wore white robes. Women were seated on the left side of the congregation, facing the front, and the men on the right. We had just finished a period of a half-hour or so of loud drumming and dancing when the congregation sat down again to listen to the expositions by the bishops.

The bishop began commenting on the Bible passage from Lamentations. There must be “*gimomiyo dala dong’ gunda*,” he explained: that is, there must be “a reason for the homestead to have remained deserted.” He added that “*onge manyalo timore ma onge gimomiyo*” (nothing can happen without a reason [cause]). By this time we were already deep in Luo people’s worldview, and way outside of Western world views! *Dala* was the Luo term used to translate the Hebrew *ir*, which is almost invariably translated in the King James’ Version using the English term “city.” A *dala* is a homestead. A typical *dala* has between three and ten houses, and is built by a man and his sons. A *dala* is usually either fenced or surrounded by a hedge of some sort. In the past, hedges used to be a defence against marauding enemies or wild animals. These days, they have little such function. Along with people, cattle and other livestock also stay in the centre of the *dala*, sometimes in a specially designed house, at other times tied to pegs in the ground.

Whereas the Bible had talked of “*dala ... odong’ nono*” (homestead ... remained empty), the bishop began referring to a *gunda*. A *gunda* could in some ways be compared to the English concept of graveyard or cemetery. A *gunda* is a *dala* (homestead) that no longer has people living in it. People typically are no longer living in it either because they have died (in which case they are buried within the *dala*) or because they have moved on. The process of moving out of one’s parental homestead (*dala*) is very complex and involved.⁹ Before moving away, a man needs to have built first his house as a bachelor, then his house for his wife and young family within the father’s *dala*. At a certain point, after and while fulfilling numerous

⁹ Paul Mboya, *Luo Kitji gi Timbegi* (no publisher, 1997 [1938]) (originally published by Nairobi: East African Standard Ltd., 1984, printing by Kisumu: Anyange Press), 45–76.

ritual obligations, he can move on and start his own *dala*. From then on, having his own *dala* known by his own name is a major status-boost for the man concerned.

The *gunda* is the remains of the once-living homestead. It is characterized by being somewhat overgrown, surrounded by an overgrown hedge. In these days, when cement can be used to cover a grave, a few graves may be clearly visible. There is a good chance that there may be a few derelict houses left in it. These houses may have already collapsed or be in various states of disrepair. Old people remember those who used to live in those places, once bustling and thriving. Eventually the *gunda* reverts to farmland, bush, or forest, depending on where it is located.

The link between “*dala ... dong’ nono*” (homestead remaining empty) and *gunda* (vacated homestead) is a very easy one, if not almost automatic, to make in the Luo language. In our minds, those of us in the congregation pictured Zion as an oversized *gunda*. Homesteads (*dala*)¹⁰ were bigger in the past, when men had more wives and more children, when a *dala* was also a defensive fort, and when they all lived in the rural areas. As a result, it is not too difficult to think of a large *gunda*. While the progression from *dala* to *gunda* is in some ways automatic in the course of human life cycles, there is also a sense for the Luo people in which it should not be inevitable. This is because Luo men do not expect to die.¹¹ Death is always an intrusion into life, and never a “natural” event.¹² Hence a *gunda* is a sad place.

Seeing or hearing of a *gunda*, as in Lamentations the city of Zion, raises questions of why things had to be as they were. A *dala* should be lively and prospering and full of people. The Luo tradition itself proposes many answers to these questions of death and loss of human community that are deeply a part of what we could term the Luo worldview. Two books that expound on this in depth are *Richo ema kelo chira* (Breaking traditional taboos brings chronic illness that leads to death) by Mboya¹³ and *Chike Jaduong e Dalane* (Rules for a senior man in his homestead) by Raringo.¹⁴ I do not have space to expound on all those rules and traditions. I have

¹⁰ I use *dala* as the plural also for *dala* for the sake of simplification for English readers. The plural for *dala* in Dholuo is *mier*.

¹¹ Boniface Obondi, “Immortality in the African Context,” Maarifa lecture given at Kima International School of Theology, Kenya, 24 May 2000.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Paul Mboya, *Richo ema Kelo Chira* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House Ltd., 1978).

¹⁴ Jacktone Keya Raringo, *Chike Jaduong e Dalane* (no publisher, no date). Among sources available in English, see Paul Mboya, *Mboya's Luo Kiti gi Timbegi*. A translation into English by Jane Achieng’ (Nairobi: Atai Joint Limited, 2001).

referred to some in other writing.¹⁵ They are extremely complex and almost endless. They concern sexual relations (particularly) but also procedures of house building, farming and cultivation, weddings, childbirth, funerals (these are very important), memorial services for the dead, livestock, husbandry, and so on. Wrong ways of doing the above are thought to result in illness, death, calamity, failure, madness, infertility, defeat (in battle), debilitation, and so on.

The main point of this part of this article is not only to expand on Lamentations 1:1 or to try to articulate the full complexity of Luo traditions and customs. It is to show how the reading of such a biblical passage can bring to mind questions and simulations¹⁶ that are vastly different from interpretational expectations that would arise from typical Western hermeneutical approaches. It shows how strongly the reading of Lamentations 1:1 seemed to confirm and strengthen the hold of the same indigenous beliefs over people's contemporary lives. Whereas an English reader of this passage in an English Bible may think about an ancient city in distant history, a Luo person hearing the same is likely to be caused to reflect on the state of abandoned homesteads in their village and (extended) family. There is little about this interpretation that is scientific or, I would argue, objective. The interpretation draws heavily on African people's own familiar contexts. I would argue that the above interpretation is in absolute terms hermeneutically as legitimate as any interpretations made by expert Western scholars. Instead of using a Western context as interpretational screen, it uses an African background. Any assessment that either the Luo or the Western interpretation is superior requires drawing on authority from outside of the text.

For anyone who thinks that any "error" in the above interpretation may have arisen from the fact that only one scripture has been read, Lamentations 1:1 was further interpreted in the ensuing sermon with reference to Matthew 8:23–24. This latter passage describes how Jesus and his disciples went into a boat, and then strong winds and waves battered them as they attempted to cross the lake. Underlying this calamity was wind (*Dholuo; yamo*). In Luo context, this kind of wind is responsible for misfortune and calamity. The bishop explained that Zion became a *gunda* (derelict homestead) due to the *yamo* (wind). The same wind is more likely to target *jodolo* (pastors/priests in the church) than normal members of the congregation, we were

¹⁵ For example, see Jim Harries, "Pragmatic Theory Applied to Christian Mission in Africa: with special reference to Luo responses to 'bad' in Gem, Kenya" (PhD Dissertation, University of Birmingham, 2007), 147–53.

¹⁶ "Simulations" is the term used by Bergen in Benjamin K. Bergen, *Louder than Words: The New Science of How the Mind Makes Meaning* (New York: Basic Books, 2012).

told. So the disciples had to say to Jesus “*reswa watho*” (save us; we are dying) (Matt. 8:25c). When someone experiences extreme misfortune, we were told, that could be explained by saying “*yamo odonjo ka ng’ane*” (wind has gone into the place [house or homestead or both] of so and so). The same wind can come between people who loved each other and cause them to hate each other, the bishop added. So we can say, in just a small part of the whole message I am here reflecting on, that winds of misfortune combine in a complex way with people’s breaking of taboos to bring calamities. The calamity described in Lamentations 1:1 reminds people of the difficulties faced in their own homes, and thus reinforces the need to be very diligent in following customary laws.

I want to make two further points before moving on. One is to concede that the above constitutes a subjective interpretation of what was going on in people’s minds as I sat in church with them on that Sunday. In terms of my research, it is an example of phenomenology – I interpret according to the understanding that I have acquired over many years of exposure to indigenous churches of the Luo people’s relationship with their traditional law. This subjective element of interpretation is pivotal. Without it, interpretation would be presumed to be little different from that in the West. Such false (so far as I am concerned) presupposition seems to be rooted in a Marxist view in which the material determines one’s consciousness.¹⁷ This is a view that is seriously hindering intercultural communication.¹⁸

My final point before moving on is to say that although the above insights were acquired through attending an African Indigenous Church (AIC), they are not confined to AICs. AICs are often more open regarding beliefs that emerge from their hearts, contexts, and histories. Mission churches can for various reasons conceal such, either intentionally through wanting to appear Western, or less intentionally through their borrowing of systems of foreign theology and their use of non-native languages. The same beliefs and understanding of causation found in the AIC above are also very widespread in other Christian churches in Western Kenya.

¹⁷ According to Karl Marx, “the mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general.” This is unlike non-Marxist views that it is the “consciousness of men that determines their being” (Brian Baggins, “Abstract from the Preface of *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*,” <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/preface-abs.htm>).

¹⁸ For more details on such and other factors hindering intercultural interpretation, see Jim Harries, *Communication in Mission and Development: Relating to the Church in Africa* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 2013).

What is happening above is that particular biblical texts are taken out of their context and applied to a very indigenous context.¹⁹ Part of the indigenous context that I want to mention in more detail at this stage is what we can call monism. In contrast to dualism, which is the underlying philosophy in the West, monism is the philosophy which does not distinguish material from spiritual causation. This philosophy underlies the African belief that misfortune, such as the calamity described in Lamentations 1:1, arises from the breaking of taboos. Behind the taboos, ancestors are considered responsible for bringing misfortune. I am not suggesting that we simply uncritically accept that misfortune arises from the breaking of taboos, except insofar as to do so will help us to understand where many African people are coming from.

Western vs. African spirituality

African monistic worldviews such as that articulated above do not separate the spiritual from the material. In this section I want to briefly consider the contrasting situation of modern or contemporary Western worldviews and how these can interact with the African situation.

Spirit and spirituality are known terms in the Western native-English speaking worlds. The origin of the term “spirit” itself reveals some of its contact with the above-described African scenario – the term apparently comes from the Latin *spiritus*, for wind.²⁰ There are people who seek to maintain a spirituality in the Western world. I want to look particularly at how Christian spirituality comes to be defined, focusing on Protestant and particularly evangelical Christianity. I link this briefly with the above-described incident in western Kenya.

Western spirituality is helpfully recognized as being a *remnant* of what once was – a remnant from a time when Westerners were monistic. It is widely assumed that at one time the spirituality of Western people was more like that of contemporary African people.²¹ Subsequently, their spirituality has gradually been eaten away by science.

¹⁹ This practice is of course not unique to Africa. In the West people also interpret scriptures according to their contexts, but in the West the contexts are different. The Western context being familiar to Westerners is to them the “norm” in interpretation, whereas interpretation according to African context can seem “abnormal,” strange, and syncretistic.

²⁰ “a breathing (respiration, and of the wind), breath; breath of a god,” <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=spirit>.

²¹ Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and Modern Africa* (Oxford: Regnum, 1992), xii.

Foundational to the beliefs of scientists is that there is an extra-human, inanimate reality that human beings engage with but are separate to or distinct from. Hence science is built on notions of objectivity. A classic example of the victory of science over what we could term “spirituality” was the Copernican revolution. Despite its being evident from a human perspective that the sun and moon revolve around the earth, scientists began to insist that in reality it is the earth that (with the moon) revolves around the sun. This discovery resulted in a tension between what is evidently true to people living on the earth (the sun revolves around the earth) and what is apparently actual reality (earth revolves around the sun). Such tensions continue, as scientists attempt to shape worldviews on the basis of discovered notions of what constitutes “reality.”²²

For centuries now,²³ scientists and modernists have been whittling away at animistic or primal as well as Christian (and other) worldviews. I use the term “primal” to refer to the kinds of worldviews that seem to arise by default in the absence of “world religions” (or science). Particularly known in the Christian West, however, are ways in which science has been seen as undermining Christian belief. It has caused many to question the reality of the miracles in the biblical record. Bultmann is renowned for his suggestion that belief in miracles no longer makes sense in a world in which a light can be turned on with a switch.²⁴ Constant attack on Christian belief on the part of science, later supplemented by the social sciences, has caused some people to lapse in their Christian faith. Of those who have so lapsed, some are seeking life fulfilment in primal worldviews. Other people in the modern West have (supposedly) rejected all religious belief, claiming only to believe in that which is scientifically verifiable. For all the flaws in this approach, such people have acquired a strong following (see, for example, the widespread influence of Richard Dawkins²⁵).

Science’s claims, on the basis of which it considered itself justified in attempting to undermine “religions,” were rooted in the belief that science had its own superior foundation for “ultimate truth.” This belief was undermined when it was realized that considering science to be “absolute truth” is somewhat of an arbitrary assertion, with no definite basis that is superior to other competing truth-claims.²⁶ Some

²² Hiebert articulates some of these tensions and associated debates around the replacing of realism with critical realism (Hiebert, *Missiological Implications of Epistemological Shifts*).

²³ Ibid., 7.

²⁴ Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1958), 37.

²⁵ <http://www.richarddawkins.net>.

²⁶ T. S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 77–92.

of the origins of science itself are highly unscientific, revealing its dependency on human subjectivities (as against objectivity). Berman suggests science has arisen from a “new attitude to the sacred,” that is, particular religious understanding.²⁷ This implies that passing on the means of science requires attention to just how science can find a functional place in relation to non-Western people’s pre-existing worldviews. Kuhn tells us that scientific paradigms switch when the building up of pressure from new evidence eventually overcomes a previous idea. Decision-making by scientists is often far from scientific; scientists themselves are people who are subject to the same kinds of pressures and subjectivities as other people.

Part of the problem of science that African countries seem to be facing is the difficulty of translating it into African languages in a way that it works. It appears that African languages and ways of life might not have the categories needed for science to take root. Although an American Peace Corps volunteer found that Swahili could be used to teach science,²⁸ that was clearly on my own assessment of the situation, through the use of Swahili terms substituting for English, resulting in the Swahili used being assumed to have “English” meanings. It appears that African languages do not have names for scientific categories, since these categories are not recognized in the cultures in which these languages are at home.²⁹ This is an important reason for the preference for African languages in education, especially technical education: use of African languages in education would stretch the languages, and thus in healthy ways challenge the indigenous cultures. Use of African languages would help to ensure that education finds a place within the African worldview. It would also clarify what is contemporarily often a largely invisible gap between African and Western cultures.

Someone may ask what the origins of science have to do with the way science operates now. One response would be to suggest that perhaps the way science arose then is likely to be the way that it will arise again. Simplifying a little, if in the past the impact of Christianity on primal religions brought about science, then we have a case for taking Christianity to people with primal religions today as a prerequisite of enabling them to acquire science. Challenges to primal religions came from

²⁷ Berman, *Law and Revolution*, 158. See also Hiebert *Missiological Implications of Epistemological Shifts*, 1–2.

²⁸ Halima Muhammed Mwinsheikhe, “Using Kiswahili as a Medium of Instruction in Science Teaching in Tanzanian Secondary Schools,” in *Language of Instruction in Tanzania and South Africa* (LOITASA), ed. Birgit Brock-Utne, Zubeida Desai, and Martha Qorro, 129–48 (Dar-es-Salaam: E and D Limited, 2003), 145.

²⁹ For more on the relationship between language and culture, see Jim Harries, *From Theory to Practice in Vulnerable Mission: An Academic Appraisal* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 2012).

Christianity. That is to say, it would appear that the intervention of a “world religion” is a necessary pre-requisite for a people to become scientific.³⁰

A main point in this article is to look at how science and its various tributaries and co-disciplines have affected the spirituality (or, if you like, religions) of Western people. I think there is no doubt that it has affected them. Christian apologetics, for example, has a lot to do with the defence of Christian truth against scientific incursion. Clearly related to science is of course the *modern*.³¹ Because what is modern is widely known to be counter-religious, it is not surprising that “religions” such as Christianity that are in the modern world should seek to shore themselves up against attack from “modern” (i.e., scientifically based) thinking. Western Christian apologetics can sound like a charter of defence against modern-scientific incursion. Hence, looking at apologetics.org, we find prominent reference to scientists, to the cosmos, wildlife and the animal kingdom, evidence, and other scientific themes. We can mention the discipline of systematic theology. The latter takes the Christian scriptures and by systematic (i.e., pseudo-scientific) reasoning attempts to show how they point to clear doctrines without any apparent ongoing need for fresh divine revelation.³² This almost amounts to a claim, as a means for acquiring credibility in the modern world, that Christianity is itself scientific.

Such and other means have been widely used to remove or “downplay” any content of “traditional” Christianity that seems to be counter-scientific or counter to reason. Classic examples of this include the denial, based on an adherence to “rationality,” by many Protestants of transubstantiation, the Roman Catholic belief that bread and wine taken in holy communion becomes the actual flesh and blood of Christ. At least, certain theologians will claim that the opposition to the doctrine of transubstantiation is based on faith in reason.³³ Emotionalism has gone the same way as transubstantiation and can be considered to be not-of-God, so not very appropriate in churches.

The very graphic description of the implicit interpretation that I made at the start of this article shows how content can implicitly be added to biblical passages.

³⁰ In referring to Mohr, I am pointing to the Christian origins of secularism, assuming that science arose from the same secular history. Richard Mohr, “The Christian Origins of Secularism and the Rule of Law,” in *Law and Religion in Public Life: The Contemporary Debate*, ed. Nadirsyah Hoden and Richard Mohr (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), 34–51, at 38. I take Christianity as being “the” world religion (Jim Harries, “The Fallacy of World Religions: A View from Africa,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* [2017], <https://emqonline.com/node/3607>).

³¹ Hiebert, *Missiological Implications of Epistemological Shifts*, 1–2.

³² *Ibid.*, 19–20.

³³ John Young, “Transubstantiation and Reason,” Real Presence Eucharistic Education and Adoration Association website, n.d., <http://www.therealpresence.org/eucharst/realpres/transubstantiation.htm>.

Supposedly objectively based hermeneutics can fail to realize how much of the content of a word arises from the context of its use. This context in Africa includes considerable “spiritual” activity.

As a result, we can be left with a (in some ways) rather bland “correct” Christianity shorn to its bare bones by relentless scientific clipping. At its core many have realized that, for all its efforts, Christianity cannot help but be in some ways extra-scientific, on which basis (as mentioned above) they have rejected it. The Western church hobbles a little. It still has vast amounts to offer to those who choose to take it seriously in terms of moral teaching and purpose in life. It has lost a little of the old tinsel, bang, flash, comfort, euphoria, colour, and enthusiasm – which of course Pentecostalism is bringing back to it through the back (postmodern) door that is also of interest to us.³⁴

My main aim here, however, is to point out ways in which the gospel shorn of some of its mystery, wonder, exuberance, and colour (described above) can be a less adequate vehicle for evangelism in the extra-modern rest-of-the-world, Africa being a case in point.

Intercultural articulation of a gospel shorn by science

Some in the West may find “their gospel” to have been shorn of the floss of what are considered untruths because they contradict science. If science was indeed securely grounded on an epistemological bedrock of objectivity, then we might have to agree with this. In recent decades, philosophers have lost the grounds for making such claims on behalf of science. Science may be useful, but it may still be a fiction.³⁵ Science has no legitimate absolute claim to being either ultimate truth or even a means toward ultimate truth. As Hiebert puts it, “scientific laws are expressions of the processes of human cognition.”³⁶ If science can no longer be considered to have a foundational claim to legitimacy, then on what absolute basis is the West justified in cutting off chunks of Christian faith and allowing them to swim away like unwanted flotsam because they contradict science? Surely the resulting faith is a kind of syncretistic product of a particular cultural appropriation of gospel truth? This is not to say that it

³⁴ Allan Anderson, *An Introduction to Pentecostalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

³⁵ Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1994), 26.

³⁶ Hiebert, *Missiological Implications of Epistemological Shifts*, 73.

is *wrong*, but it is to say that it is culturally biased or loaded. The gospel emanating from the West may be “pure,” but it may also be culturally compromised.

Ironically, a gospel that has been shorn of some of its holistic content, as has happened in the West, may be missing some of the key components that would enable it (or him – as the gospel is really about Jesus) to engage with non-Western world views such as those in Africa. That is to say: the Western evangelical church’s insistence that contradictions between the gospel and scientific truth be removed may have resulted in a handicapping of the Christian message. I write as an insider to the West. I am not so much pointing a finger as being forced to search my heart. I am being forced to ask myself: Am I believing in a kind of abridged, sanitized, Westernized, and cleansed view of my Lord? I was myself brought up very much believing in science. I have myself considered it important that the gospel and the Bible in general be articulated in ways that make scientific sense. How indeed can the bread “become” the body of Christ if not through some sort of counter-scientific and therefore illegitimate magic, I asked (and ask) myself?

Can the peculiar nature of a gospel that is shorn of much of its original content through compromise with the demands of science be observed in Africa? I believe the answer to this question is yes. That is to say, the Western gospel shared in Africa can be seen to be “lacking something.” I propose that the “lack” concerned includes a lot of the very flotsam I have already mentioned above. This should be a cause for concern. Let us also remember, though, that this is not a singular and catastrophic cause for concern. This is not a uniquely serious predicament for the church to find itself in. Rather, the ongoing task of the church, as inspired by God’s Spirit and often typified by the role of a Spirit-filled preacher, is to continue to reinterpret the message from one unchanging God to a world that is very much in flux. This is simply a “normal” role for the expression of the prophetic gift in the church.

The concern I am pointing to has been noticed by others, although other Western scholars tend to be in some ways more closely affiliated to the West than I am.³⁷ Particularly since Lausanne 1974, by which point John Stott had changed his mind³⁸ and had decided that “social . . . responsibility” was a part of the Great Commission,³⁹ evangelical scholars have tended to look at the above concern with the help of notions of holistic or integral gospel. The holism here referred to is a

³⁷ My home is in a “poor” village in Western Kenya, where I look after local orphan children using their languages.

³⁸ Padilla, “Holistic Mission,” 12.

³⁹ John Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 1975), 23.

recognition (much as ours here) that the gospel should not and need not be confined only to what has recently in the West come to be known as the “spiritual” sphere of life. The flaw I would point to in the corrective implicit to the holistic gospel is that what is known as holistic gospel is actually dualistic. That is to say, the people seeking to apply the corrective (Westerners) are dualistic and do what they do by drawing on their dualism in an attempt to produce an apparent holism. I have suggested elsewhere that such creation of dependence of holism on the products of dualism is too artificial a solution to a problem that needs a more profound approach. Holistic gospel represents a dependence on dualism as a means of producing holism insofar as the non-spiritual products and thinking that are to supplement monism in places like Africa arise from the very dualistic West; that is, “holistic” or “integral” gospel tends strongly to be gospel *plus* aid from the West.

The problem of the holistic gospel can in a sense be said to be the problem of dependency that has been plaguing church and mission in the non-Western world since, it seems, the beginning of the modern era. Where the gospel has been taken hand in hand with products of science – such as medical care, improved agricultural methods, and advanced education – an unhealthy ongoing dependency on material inputs from the dualistic West has been created. African people have often not been helped by such means to themselves be materially productive. Such dependence on inputs from the West brings almost endless distortions in relationship arising from the desperate need on the side of African people to keep funds flowing, even when/if such requires them to engage in lies and half-truths. Its dependence on the backing of a powerful Western dualistic economic machine renders the holistic gospel far from adequate if our aim is indeed to encourage the growth of a true and strong indigenous church in Africa, and elsewhere in the majority world.

It is important to recognize that, as far as the West is concerned, the “invention” of the holistic gospel has been a part of its defence against the encroachment of post-modernism. Bringing material benefits alongside the gospel message saves the trouble and the step of humility of having to re-examine the words of Christ with respect to diverse cultural contexts, particularly those contexts which have their basis in monism. The material benefits act as the incentive for the people being reached to uncritically accept what they are being told. Bringing a dualistic relation between gospel and the benefits of science (in effect, this is how holistic gospel is widely implemented)⁴⁰ has

⁴⁰ Jim Harries, “‘Material Provision’ or Preaching the Gospel: Reconsidering Holistic (Integral) Mission,” in *Vulnerable Mission: Insights into Christian Mission to Africa from a Position of Vulnerability*, ed. Jim Harries (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2011), 81–98, at 86–87.

permitted an ongoing defence of the legitimacy of the gospel that has been shorn by science, mentioned above. It is less comfortable to the West to have to question those bastions of its own belief that would enable it to reach a more culturally sensitive level of engagement with non-Western people, such as those in Africa. If those “bastions” are themselves grounded in what must now be acknowledged to be the sinking sands of faith in science, then they should be put up to question! I acknowledge that this is uncomfortable. It is one thing to be asked to dress up one’s beloved gospel in dualistic (i.e., supposedly holistic) clothes that essentially affirm science. It is another thing for the missionary to the lost and the poor to appear to be as lost and poor as are those being reached. I am reminded of events in Deuteronomy 9: the Israelites’ sin almost caused God to destroy the very people who were themselves to have displaced the “evil” inhabitants of Canaan (Deut. 9:4–6 and 13–14).

We can consider this issue with respect to miracle. We can ask: Has science disproved miracles? As soon as we ask the question, complications begin to crowd onto the scene. What is miracle? The way it looks to be defined in contemporary English, a language that has itself been deeply influenced if not determined by the scientific worldview, is an event that contradicts the laws of science.⁴¹ How can miracles that we read about in the New Testament be such, we might well ask ourselves, when science as we know it today was not even around in New Testament times?⁴² As alluded to above, the gospel has in the West been appropriated into (or with respect to) the modern paradigm. A little linguistic study reveals that the terms often translated into English as “miracle” are the Greek word *dunamis* (eight times in the New Testament) and *semeion* (22 times in the New Testament).⁴³ These terms would more literally be translated as “act of power” and “a sign,” respectively.⁴⁴ Indeed, *dunamis* is, in the New Testament, translated 77 times as “power” (rather than as miracle) and *semeion* 51 times as “sign.” We can say, therefore, that the knotty question of whether science disproves miracles in the New Testament is an invented one arising from particular (misguided?) anachronistic mistranslations designed to position the scriptures in a modern world which has now been

⁴¹ According to the *Oxford Dictionary*, miracle is “an extraordinary and welcome event that is not explicable by natural or scientific laws and is therefore attributed to a divine agency.”

⁴² The knowledge of ancient Greece was certainly not scientific in the way science is known in the West today. For example, even Hippocratic doctors “ignored the principle of infectiousness because they saw belief in it as mere superstition,” (See Robert Parker, *Miasma: Pollution and Purification in Early Greek Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 220.

⁴³ Data taken from the King James Version.

⁴⁴ Robert Young, *Young’s Analytical Concordance to the Bible* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1982), 663.

undermined! Talking of God having power and doing signs rather than doing miracles avoids the jam that scientific modernists who see a sharp contrast between the natural and supernatural have tended to get themselves into with the scriptures.

Once the counter-scientific (supernatural, apparently) notion of miracle and related doctrines are removed from the scene, the gospel begins to become more compatible with the non-Western world. The key question becomes: Does God have power, and does God show us things (signs), not does God do miracles, things that are contrary to science? Few would deny, I think, that to those who believe in God, God has power. God can guide people in many non-miraculous (in the Western sense of being contrary to science) ways, not least through reading the scriptures, words of encouragement from others, dreams, even “feelings.”

Another bastion of the modern worldview that we could look at briefly is people’s understanding of *emotion*. As a result of science’s finding no basis in “reality” for such (“just a feeling”), emotion has been disconnected from the material world. Following suit, Western Christians have denied its importance. “Just emotion” seems to mean other-than true faith in God. African churches have at times been accused of being excessively rooted in emotion rather than in God. Emotions have ended up in a no-man’s-land, being somehow worldly and carnal. Recently, in the last 31 years, emotions have reappeared *en masse* in contemporary electronic communication in the form of emoticons that are used in endless email and other electronic media communications.⁴⁵ This suggests that they may be essential to communication after all! Perhaps “emotions” are real, and perhaps God speaks to us through them, or even in them.

Practical implications for the foreign mission enterprise

The African world is incredibly meaningful. The dramas of life and death and of prosperity and loss are clothed in elaborate theories of causation and purpose or meaning, and elaborate social dynamics. The African world is full of powers and spirits (“winds”) blowing continuously hither and thither, taking people’s lives in their course. Along comes Western theology, increasingly shaped in response to an apparently ever-growing extent in unproved and poorly founded theories of causation known as science and objectivity. These theories have been allowed to shear off vast chunks of theology and beliefs which are left to float away like flotsam,

⁴⁵ Keith Houston, “Smile! A History of Emoticons,” *Wall Street Journal*, 27 September 2014, <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702304213904579093661814158946>.

considered irrelevant, discarded as superfluous. The gospel shorn of its pre-modern content can fit into the African worldview like a box of dry bones on a dance floor. The essentials are there, and are correct, but flesh, warmth, and movement can be missing: holistic gospel or holistic mission, sometimes proposed as a solution to this debacle, unfortunately in turn creates unhealthy dependency on the Western dualism that it supposedly bypasses.

A number of dangers need to be recognized. One is the danger that the West can substitute itself into the place of African deities. We were able above to note examples of presumed dependency in Africa of material prosperity on “spiritual”⁴⁶ factors. Western mission efforts that proclaim a spiritual message about God on one hand, and that seek very effectively to raise people’s material living through outside resources on the other, are in great danger of identifying the West with God.⁴⁷ This kind of practice whereby a human community (the West) is identified with God is a serious type of idolatry.

Closely related to the above is the need to recognize the role of the dead in the African worldview. We hinted at this in the first part of this article. It is a large issue, already much studied in the literature.⁴⁸ For the dead to be recognized may not be the same as for their role to be confirmed, facilitated, or perpetuated. Our recognizing the role of the dead in African life and theology can be considered helpful in an equivalent way to Africans perceiving the role of science in Western people’s lives and theologies. Neither is to say that either science or the role of the dead are thus ratified. Rather, in both cases, recognition of what is going on can assist in facilitating mutual understanding and communication, and thus joint action.

What follows from the above is a need for a recognition of the “legitimacy” of what has often been known as African syncretistic practices, in a fallen world in which everyone’s kingdom theology is also “not yet”⁴⁹: that is, as a transient-legitimacy. In other words, the mixing of traditional African beliefs with Western theological tenets may not be “correct,” but may neither be incorrect to the point

⁴⁶ Spiritual, that is, in the broad sense, and not necessarily the more narrow sense of Western Christianity that has been shorn by science. For example, see *Richo ema kelo Chira* by Mboya, referred to above.

⁴⁷ See also Harries, *From Theory to Practice in Vulnerable Missions*, 16.

⁴⁸ For example, see Opoku Onyiah, “Akan Witchcraft and the Concept of Exorcism in the Church of Pentecost” (PhD Dissertation, University of Birmingham, 2002).

⁴⁹ John Piper, “Is the Kingdom Present or Future?” Desiring God website, 4 February 1990, <http://www.desiringgod.org/sermons/is-the-kingdom-present-or-future>.

of being heretical. In the same way, the West's adjusting its Christian faith to the claims of science is not heretical. What is sometimes known as syncretism may at times be more helpfully recognized as "theology (or orthodoxy) in process."

Many problems of misunderstanding interculturally, whether in theology or other fields, I suggest these days arise from linguistic naivety: that is, more specifically, intercultural use of one language, typically English. I have dealt with this issue in a great deal of detail elsewhere. In brief, a problem arises when folks from different cultural backgrounds who use one language in communication take insufficient cognizance of the ways in which their background influences their use of language. Hence, for example, in the contemporary world, African people are expected to be able to express themselves clearly in engagement with Western scholarship using the English they have learned in Africa. One outcome of this is that a very high proportion of African scholarship is done cooperatively with Westerners.⁵⁰ As a result, true African contexts and thinking continue to be hidden. This is a vital area of concern requiring urgent attention if African sensibilities are ever to be taken sufficiently seriously.

Correction in the above areas may (and must) lead us to a position where African scholarship can begin to be rooted in a genuinely African and not pretentiously European foundation. African people telling Westerners that their scientific insights are misleading them tend to hit deaf ears. The same applies to Westerners telling Africans that they are misguided in the credit they give to the interventions of their ancestors in their affairs. *Etic* (outside) approaches do not cut the mustard! To be effective, critiques should be *emic*, that is, from the inside, on the basis of understanding, on the side of those who have a grasp of pre-existing perceived realities. It has become very common to invite African people to use Western languages and to try to understand Western worldviews. Such is frequently heavily subsidized by global and other secular and religious bodies. The reverse – for Western people to use African languages to make serious efforts to try to understand African worldviews – is almost unheard of. (Fewer and fewer Westerners working in Africa or with African people seem these days to do so through the medium of African languages.) Such is sad.

I have, in the above text, frequently alluded to holistic or integral mission. Although no doubt well-intended, some contemporary implementations of holistic mission

⁵⁰ Sharon Dell, "Reliance on International Collaboration May Hurt African Research, Says Report," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 12 February 2014, <http://chronicle.com/article/Reliance-on-International/144731>.

and development are having us travel down a dead-end one-way street. They are rooted in some very serious foundational, albeit to date little recognized, errors in intercultural communication, which I have attempted to articulate in more detail elsewhere.⁵¹ Missiologists need to get back to the drawing board on this one. Those at the drawing board need to include scholars who have had the kind of genuine exposure to non-Western cultures that can in many ways only come about through the practice of vulnerable mission that I expound on a little more below.

For more on vulnerable mission, see *From Theory to Practice*.⁵² Vulnerable mission⁵³ is mission carried out using indigenous languages and resources. That is, we advocate that some Western missionaries should refuse to carry out their ministries on the back of the wide spread of European mother tongues or outside resources. Thus they can be rendered sufficiently vulnerable to the contours of local world views as to be enabled to learn, as they participate in local ways of life, genuine ways of engaging with indigenous theologies and indigenously rooted development. They can thus avoid the often-overwhelming impact of their knowledge of European languages and massive outside resources that obfuscate clear comprehension by Westerners of what goes on in Africa.

Conclusion

This article opens with a case study of some scripture readings and interpretations engaged in a spiritually orientated indigenous African church. Interpreted through an African people's worldview and way of life and death, the scriptures speak volumes to them that a Western theologian may be totally unaware of. Widespread hegemony of scientific thinking in the West has impacted on Western comprehension of the gospel in such a way as to result in dimmed vision of the above. The article identifies parallels between science in the West and the role of "ancestors" in Africa. Ways in which these two systems fail to dovetail are discussed. Finally, this article suggests that engagement with such requires in-situ theology, engaged in local African languages and with an awareness of contexts that is rare among Western theologians, or in the expressions of African theologians that seek to emulate the latter.

⁵¹ Jim Harries, *Secularism and Africa: In the Light of the Intercultural Christ* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, in press.)

⁵² Harries, *From Theory to Practice in Vulnerable Mission*.

⁵³ AVM, Alliance for Vulnerable Mission: see <http://www.vulnerablemission.org>

The way forward in the light of the above, I suggest, is a reconsideration of some theological fundamentals engaged in African languages and contexts in which Westerners cease to push their agendas to the top of the pile using outside resources. Thus, instead of dictating the theological agenda, the role of the outside missionary is to engage with the pre-existing theological status quo, to which they bring new theological insights. This way of working, using locally available languages and resources, has come to be known as “vulnerable mission.”