

Mukhanyo Consultation 2017

Helping Theological Students to effectively engage the Witchcraft belief still rampant in the Christian Church in Africa.

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1. Introduction

Thank you very much for the invitation to 2017 Consultation. This is platform provided for engagement in how best we can build a theological education which can be an instrument in addressing the critical issues facing the church in Africa. For me this consultation is a call to theological education in Africa to stop looking faraway places for solutions, but to embrace that we, as Africans, are genuinely saved by the blood of Christ, and God can work with and by us. I am pushed to this conclusion as a result of reflection on the topic I am tasked to address. One of the question that has consistently lingered on my mind was: It is more than 500 years that European Christianity has arrived in Africa, why are we still affirming that witchcraft belief is still rampant in the Christian Church in Africa? Is it the gospel's failure to combat witchcraft? It is the response to this question to which our theological students are to be exposed to and be prepared on how they can wage this critical war.

When I was invited, I was presented with two topics from which I can choose one. I jumped into this choice not because I am an expert on the topic, but due to challenges I am facing each and every day as the minister of the Word due to witchcraft belief. Here are some of the challenges that I am facing each and every day of my ministry:

- I have a deep love for the family unity, but due to witchcraft belief, families are broken up, and enmity becomes the order of the day among family members.
- It is my belief that as an African Christian repentance to God should also be observed in my rejection of the witchcraft belief as unbiblical, but one fails to see the urgency of the Christian church addressing this matter to their members and to Christian families.
- I see a rapid growth of this belief since 1994 among Christian youth and young Christian families. This growth puts the future of the Christian Church in Africa and of the continent at risk of being no-influential on other parts of the world.
- There is growth of Christian groups that fail to deal with this challenge of witchcraft biblically, but instill fear of witchcraft in the minds of their members.

- Where people live in fear of witchcraft, we should not expect socio-economic and political development. We can surely attribute the socio-economic and political decay we are going through as a country to the belief of witchcraft, which has grown tremendously since 1994

Hence, there are three areas which I believe theological students should be exposed to in order to engage the witchcraft belief effectively for the wellbeing of the Christian Church in Africa, which are: 1. The underlying understanding of the witchcraft belief. 2. The failure of the Christian Church in Africa to engage the witchcraft beliefs effectively. 3. The biblical response to witchcraft belief.

2. The underlying understanding of the witchcraft belief.

The belief of witchcraft is imbedded in the worldview of the African people. No-one can claim to understand the phenomenon of witchcraft who is not interested in understanding and engaging the African worldview. All human beings have blood and tears, and that explains the phenomenon of suffering in their existence. No-one is immune of suffering. Therefore, in every culture there should be a way of dealing with suffering, and that way is imbedded on the religious beliefs of that community, which provide satisfactory explanation for the evil we are experiencing (Kunhiyop, 2008:375).

Witchcraft belief, in African worldview, provides an explanation of the ultimate cause of any evil, misfortune or death (Kunhiyop, 2008:377). When people experience barrenness, losses in life, failure in life, bad crop, etc, they suspect witches as the cause of the misfortune. It is not denied that people encounter accidents in life, but the ultimate cause is beyond what we are able to see with our eyes such as bad roads, negligence on the side of the driver. Witchcraft is the explained as an inherent capacity to exert supernatural influence over another person. It is this influence that causes harm, and it can be used to explain phenomenon such as breaches in social relations, anti-social behaviour that we experience from the suspect.

From this point of view witchcraft should never be viewed as irrational or animistic, but rather as a serious philosophical approach in dealing with the question of evil in life. It is a way of making sense in the midst of chaos. When people face suffering, death and sickness, there should be an explanation that will make people live beyond those experiences. Where a sensible explanation is not available, that renders life impossible to live. This explains a well-known

phenomenon in the so called main line churches in Africa in which members leave their church and join another church because it can deal with problems the former church has failed to deal with. This implies that one's faith in God is closely connected to how that God is perceived to deal with suffering that one encounters in life.

Another area in which students are to be introduced is on the reality of the witchcraft belief. Many Africans believe the reality of witchcraft because they have heard scores of stories about witchcraft. They have heard the confessions of those who claimed to have practiced witchcraft, and the testimonies of victims. These stories spread like wildfire in many communities, and become the basis of the witchcraft belief. I think, it should be emphasized to students that it will not serve the church well to deny the reality of this belief as it happened with the church in the past. The belief is real, and it has to be taken seriously. It has to be engaged and not to be dismissed. However stories and confessions about witchcraft do not affirm the certainty of the witchcraft belief, but they only reveal to us the belief in the existence of witchcraft, which we need to engage as Christians.

I do admit that there are many aspects of this belief which I did not touch here. The reason is that the intention of this paper is to show areas of concern to be introduced to students in helping them in their engagement with the witchcraft belief.

[3. The failure of the Christian Church in Africa to engage the witchcraft beliefs effectively.](#)

Here we have to go back to the first interaction of Christian faith and the African religion. Students are to be exposed to this interaction as it is of great help in understanding and explaining the current reality with regard to witchcraft belief which is still rampant though Christianity was with us for more than 500 years. Much of what we have in Christian faith can be traced back to Christian Europe, and that explains the reason for the existent struggle of the church with witchcraft belief.

Wherever Christian faith was embraced all over the world, it had to deal with the primal religion of the area as we have a good example of that experience in Acts 17 when Paul was in Athens (we will deal with this matter later). With Christian

Europe primal religions of the world were designated as animism. They were viewed as backward and degraded as the people who practiced them (Bediako, 2000:12). They could not be compared to Christianity. What is the root cause of this understanding which we do not have in the New Testament? Gus Casely-Hayford (2017:40) helps us to respond to this question, saying: *Much of our understanding of Africa's past – and, indeed, its present –was confected during the Enlightenment. During the 18th and 19th centuries, philosophers and intellectuals skewed and tainted our perception of Africa and its cultures. The words of men such as Hegel and Kant intellectually underwrote colonialism, and the theories of men such as Hume were used to justify racism. Hume famously observed of people of Africa descent that not a single one was ever found who presented greatness in art or science....* It is therefore my conclusion that this context has robbed Christian Europe tools to engage and interpret the new cultural and religious phenomena. Eurocentrism, consequently, has become the characteristics of Christian theologians who believed that European superiority in culture and civilization was a result of divine favour, and that has resulted to the negative view of Africa known as Afro-pessimism, which argues that Africa is intrinsically chaotic and unredeemable (Bediako, 2000:13). This understanding has caused the trouble we are experiencing today with the witchcraft belief, because it was viewed as barbaric and uncivilized. African theologians are to help their students in this regard if we are to help our churches to engage our communities. Unfortunately I do not see us doing the task as we are still consumers and not producers.

4. [The biblical response to witchcraft belief.](#)

In the light of the previous argument, it is important to note that the expansion of Christianity has always been among people with primal religions. The mission to the gentiles initiated by Apostle Paul was to peoples from the primal religious world of Greece and Rome (Bediako, 2000:14). Paul did not assume a combative posture nor make a frontal assault on the erroneous positions held by his audience; yet, with admirable delicacy, he challenged and corrected the major positions of both Stoics and Epicureans (Lotter, et al, 2005:714).

The Epistle of Hebrews is also a good example of how the primal religion of the Old Testament is being fulfilled in Jesus Christ. There is a continuity between the Old Testament and the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. This should help us in

engaging the African primal religion in our appropriation of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

European tribes who embraced Christianity had also primal religions which serve as the basis of their appropriation of the gospel. Today we have European cultural vintages which we observe as Christian practices.

4.1. The teaching of the Bible with regard to witchcraft belief.

The biblical teaching is clear in reprimanding God's children to be involved in witchcraft practices. Leviticus 19:31 says: *Do not turn to mediums or necromancers; do not seek them out, and so make yourselves unclean by them: I am the Lord your God.* Deut.18:14 reminds God's children who were to enter into the promised land to live differently from the nations they are dispossessing their land who listened to fortune-tellers and to diviners. They should not be involved in such activities.

The testimony of Scriptures is that the child of God has complete authority over demonic power; the devil flees from the child of God (James 4:7). Jesus has stripped evil forces of their power by the cross (Col.2:15)

4.2. How can African Christians engage the witchcraft belief?

We should encourage our students to become students of the bible, it is by listening to what the bible teaches us that we can appropriately deal with the witchcraft belief. We should respond to the challenge of evil and suffering by listening to the Word of God. The comfort that we have in the midst of all suffering is what God teaches us in the bible. The greatest challenge facing African Christianity is the knowledge of the biblical truth which enable Christians to deal with contextual issues. Here are some biblical truth that need to be emphasised in our teaching

4.2.1. The characters of God

The greatness of God

It is clear from the biblical teaching that Satan and his spirits can only work where they are allowed to do so by God. Satan cannot cross the boundaries set by God. This is very clear from Job 1, 2; Romans 8:31, 35, 37-39. This teaching is well summarised in Heidelberg Catechism Sundays 9-10 in which we learn about the provision of God. When we know God in this way, we are assured of our security in the chaotic world.

God's goodness and love

God is always good to his creation and people. He has steadfast love towards his people. We can read the following texts: Lamentations 3:21-25; Romans 8:38-39; Jeremiah 29:11

God is always with his people.

This truth should be derived from the message of the cross, resurrection and Christ's ascension to heaven. He promised that he will always be with his church. Those who accepted him, he assured them of his presence. Mark 16 tells us the early church has experienced his presence. We can read 1 John 4:4; Mat.28:20

4.2.2. Knowledge of the root cause of sin

The root cause of all evil is man's Fall. The fall has brought death, sufferings, and all forms of violence. This is clearly articulated in Genesis 4-6.

Moral choices that we make in life can also bring sufferings in people's lives.

Evil spirits or demons can also bring sufferings in the life of human being as we read in the NT. However they are also controlled by God (Genesis 50:20; Acts 2:22-23).

5. Conclusion

As Theological Seminaries we should look at our curriculum and make sure that they prepare our students to be relevant in their ministries in dealing with pressing issues in our communities like witchcraft belief. It is the true preaching of the gospel that engage contextual issues, and point to the kingship of Christ that will help the African church to engage effectively the witchcraft belief. However students should be introduced to the African worldview to understand

the underlying grasp of the witchcraft belief. It is also important for the students to understand the reasons for the failure of the European Christianity to combat witchcraft belief when it landed in Africa which are basically the negligence on its part to engage African worldview due to its superiority complex. Students should be encouraged to be students of the Bible if they are to respond effectively to the witchcraft beliefs. There is no other instrument that can be used to respond to witchcraft belief apart from the true preaching of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

6. Bibliography

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