

Sickness and Syncretism in the African Context¹

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Peter Cotterell has defined religion as 'any coherent philosophical system which attempts to answer the fundamental questions'.² The employment of an essentially doctrinal approach of this nature in the investigation of religions does not of itself deny the existence of the many other dimensions which they contain,³ but it does underline the fact that at the centre of any religious tradition are certain pivotal beliefs.⁴ It is these that significantly shape the other phenomena, ritual, institutional, ethical and so on, found within the religion, and which give to it its essential character.

In the study of African traditional religion such an approach is indispensable in order to identify the common themes and emphases which unite the enormously varied religious traditions of the sub-Saharan peoples. According to Barrett there are almost 750 different peoples in sub-Saharan Africa, and each has its own religion.⁵ Consequently some scholars refuse to speak of 'African religion in

1 I am grateful to Dr K.G. Molyneux for reading this study and commenting upon it.

2 Peter Cotterell, *Mission and Meaninglessness: The Good News in a World of Suffering and Disorder* (London: SPCK, 1990), 16.

3 N. Smart, *The World's Religions* (Cambridge: CUP, 1989), 10-21, for example, adopts a seven-dimensional approach in his analysis of the world's religions.

4 Harold A. Netland, *Dissonant Voices* (Leicester: Apollos, 1991), 40, refers to them as the 'defining beliefs of a given religious tradition'.

5 D.B. Barrett, *Schism and Renewal in Africa* (Nairobi: OUP, 1968), 45, quotes Murdock's, 1959, study, which argues that there are 853 peoples in Africa, of whom 742 live south of the Sahara.

generalised terms'⁶ and severely criticise those, such as Parrinder and Mbiti, who have undertaken pan-African studies of religion.⁷ Such caution is a necessary reminder both of the importance of the serious study of each individual tradition in its own terms, and of the danger of imposing a spurious unity on the diversity of African religions. Nevertheless, there is also the complementary danger of failing to perceive the underlying unity by an exclusive focus on phenomenological variety. Divergent sub-traditions exist within all the great religious traditions,⁸ and African traditional religion, while very diverse, is not necessarily any more so than Hinduism or even Islam.⁹ Many students of African traditional religion have been able to identify fundamental similarities of belief and worldview across the whole of sub-Saharan Africa notwithstanding the immense variety.¹⁰ Particularly striking is the extent to which their analyses of the central concerns of African traditional religion are found to be in basic agreement.¹¹ There are therefore grounds for affirming the existence of a distinctively African traditional religion.

1. Suffering in African Traditional Religion

A central element of this religion is the belief that the cosmos consists of a complex interplay of power, in which all elements and creatures participate, men, spirits and animals, acting and reacting

6 J. Ferguson and R. Finnegan, *Aspects of African Religion* (Milton Keynes: The Open University Press, 1977), 9: 'to speak of "African religion" in generalised terms... would be unpardonably misleading and superficial.' Cf. also D. Westerlund, *African Religions in African Scholarship: A Preliminary Study of the Religious and Political Background* (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wicksell International, 1985), 48-49.

7 Cf. e.g., B.C. Ray, *African Religions* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1976), 14.

8 Smart, *World's Religions*, 11-12.

9 Cf. D. Zahan, *The Religion, Spirituality and Thought of Traditional Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 4: '...Africans are no more divided than are Muslims or Christians.' A.F. Walls, 'A Bag of Needments for the Road: Geoffrey Parrinder and the Study of Religion in Britain', *Religion* 10 (1980), 147, compares the diversity of African traditional religion with that of Hinduism.

10 N.S. Booth, 'An Approach to African Religions', in N.S. Booth (ed.), *African Religions: A Symposium* (New York: Nok Publishers, 1977), 6ff.; B. Davidson, *The Africans* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), 38; J.S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1969), 1-2; E.G. Parrinder, *Religion in Africa* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), 17; B.C. Ray, 'African Religions: An Overview', in M. Eliade (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol. I (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 60; Zahan, *Religion*, 4-5.

11 H.W. Turner, 'Geoffrey Parrinder's Contributions to Studies of Religions in Africa', *Religion* 10 (1980), 159-60.

upon one another for good or ill. Ideally this interplay of forces produces a situation of equilibrium and harmony. For humanity such harmony expresses itself in life, health, and the fertility of animals, fields and wives, and this happy state is considered to be the normal condition of things.¹² Accordingly the African world is not 'fallen', as it is in Christian doctrine. It is true that African mythology contains stories of a primitive rupture between humanity and the creator which resulted in the withdrawal of God from direct contact with his creation,¹³ but neither in the myths nor in traditional thought does this seem to be conceived as having produced any obvious and continuing effect on life on earth. Nevertheless the equilibrium is fragile and life is consequently characterised by unpredictability: the arrival of misfortune in the form of illness, death, barrenness or drought is the sure sign that the equilibrium has been upset at some crucial point and needs to be restored.

It is here that the central preoccupation of African traditional religion is to be found. The issue with which it is most pressingly concerned is that of human suffering, its aetiology, prevention, and alleviation. What is true of the Gusii of Kenya is also true of most other African peoples: 'supernatural beliefs... serve mainly as explanations of "troubles" (*emechando*) such as death, disease and economic disaster. This means, in theory, that when things are going well a man need not concern himself with the supernatural.'¹⁴ African traditional religion is thus, as has been often said, essentially anthropocentric, utilitarian and this-worldly: its main concern is with the well-being of humanity on earth, and its rites are directed towards that end. 'Traditional religions and philosophy are concerned with man in past and present time... Man's acts of worship and turning to God are pragmatic and utilitarian rather than spiritual or mystical.'¹⁵ Hence, for example, when individuals

12 N.Q. King, *Religions of Africa* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), 57; W.A. Dyrness, *Learning about Theology from the Third World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 43-44.

13 Cf. e.g., Ray, *African Religions*, 33-37; E.M. Zuesse, 'African Religion: Mythic Themes', in M. Eliade (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol. I (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 70-71.

14 R.A. LeVine, 'Witchcraft and Society in a Gusii Community', in J. Middleton and E.H. Winter (eds.), *Witchcraft and Sorcery in East Africa* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), 224; cf. also J.H.M. Beattie, 'Spirit Mediumship in Bunyoro', in J.H.M. Beattie and J. Middleton (eds.), *Spirit Mediumship and Society in Africa* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), 162; and E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion* (New York: OUP, 1956), 315.

15 Mbiti, *African Religions*, 5; cf. B. Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa* (Kisumu, Kenya: Evangel Publishing House, 1975), 34; P. Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy* (Paris:

and groups pass through dangerous transitional states which might undermine harmony, the careful observance of 'rites of passage' is intended to preserve them, and society generally, from harm. However it is particularly when suffering occurs that religious activity comes to the fore, the object being to identify the reason for the breakdown of harmony and secure its restoration. For the Tallensi of northern Ghana, as for most other peoples, 'religious beliefs and rituals have a restorative function'.¹⁶

Where disruption occurs it is invariably understood in personal terms: 'in modern rural Africa nothing happens except through divine or human ill-will... Misfortunes occur because somewhere, someone has bewitched you; or somehow, sometime, you have failed to do, or done incorrectly, some prayer or sacrifice.'¹⁷ More succinctly, the Zulu respond to suffering by saying: 'There is always somebody.'¹⁸ Even death requires explanation: 'although death is acknowledged as having come into the world and remained there ever since, it is unnatural and preventable on the personal level because it is always caused by another agent.'¹⁹ The rupture may be caused by agents from the invisible world including, for some peoples, the Supreme Being himself. Among the Lugbara a condition known as *nyoka*, 'unending trouble or disaster which follows a man and his lineage', is sent, or at least approved, by God as punishment of a long series of 'sins'.²⁰ However, and although there is considerable debate on the question,²¹ the Supreme Being of most African peoples is somewhat withdrawn and, while perhaps the sustainer of the world, is rarely engaged in the course of its history. Therefore it is more usually a lesser spirit who will be identified as

Présence Africaine, 1959), 64; L.V. Thomas, 'Brève Esquisse sur la Pensée Cosmologique du Diola', in M. Fortes and G. Dieterlen (eds.), *African Systems of Thought* (London: OUP, 1965), 371.

16 M. Fortes, *Religion, Morality and the Person: Essays on Tallensi Religion* (Cambridge: CUP, 1987), 196.

17 J. Nottingham, 'Sorcery among the Akamba in Kenya', *Journal of African Administration* 11 (1959), 13.

18 A.-I. Berglund, *Zulu Thought-Patterns and Symbolism* (London: C. Hurst, 1976), 270.

19 Mbiti, *African Religions*, 156.

20 J. Middleton, *Lugbara Religion* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1960), 22.

21 Cf. E.B. Idowu, *Olodumare, God in Yoruba Belief* (London: Longmans, 1962); J.S. Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa* (London: SPCK, 1970); M.J. McVeigh, *God in Africa* (Cape Cod, Mass: Claude Stark, 1974); E.G. Parrinder, *African Traditional Religion* (London: Sheldon, 1974), 38ff.; T. Adeyemo, *Salvation in African Tradition* (Nairobi: Evangel Publishing House, 1979), 37, 46-47.

the source of affliction; Hastings refers to 'a dependence upon lesser spiritual causalities because there is no adequate recognition that the great power of the one God could really be concerned with this or that side of one's own small life'.²²

While some spirits are understood to attack capriciously, even malevolently, most peoples also believe that humans may provoke the aggression of deceased ancestors, whose responsibility it is to uphold morality, through offences which both upset 'the equilibrium of society or of personal relationships [and]... also extend into the cosmic realm'.²³ Thus ancestors of the Zambian Ndembu 'punish their living kin, so the Ndembu declare, for negligence in making offerings at their village shrines, for breaches of ritual interdictions, or "because kin are not living well together"'.²⁴ Accordingly, while ancestors are respected they are also feared, and careful attention is paid to meeting the obligations which they impose. Murder, adultery, incest, the breach of taboos, may all lead to the breakdown of harmony on both the horizontal and vertical planes, and an offence committed by a single individual can have consequences for the group as a whole, reflecting the strong consciousness of communal solidarity within traditional thought.

'Sin' in many African cultures is in fact defined not so much in terms of the nature of the act in itself but rather of its consequences.²⁵ An act that disrupts the harmony of the cosmos in a way harmful to the interests of man is *ipso facto* evil; if no harmful consequences are entailed it is not strictly accurate to speak in terms of 'offence' or 'sin'. Writing of the Sudanese Mandari, Buxton says, 'sin as a particular kind of action can more exactly be defined in the Mandari context by reference to its results'.²⁶ Similarly, 'Nuer do not reason that incestuous congress with a kinswoman is bad and therefore God

22 A. Hastings, *African Christianity* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1976), 74; cf. also F.P. Cotterell, 'An Indigenous Church in Southern Ethiopia', *The Bulletin of the Society for African Church History* 3, 1-2 (1969-70), 90.

23 Adeyemo, *Salvation*, 57.

24 V.W. Turner, *The Forest of Symbols* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), 360.

25 E.A.A. Adegbola, 'The Theological Basis of Ethics', in K. Dickson and P. Ellingworth (eds.), *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1969), 133; Adeyemo, *Salvation*, 52-54; J. Middleton, 'Oracles and Divination among the Lugbara', in M. Douglas and P. Kaberry (eds.), *Man in Africa* (London: Tavistock, 1969), 263; Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, 120-21; and McVeigh, *God in Africa*, 85-86, on the views of E.W. Smith.

26 J. Buxton, *Religion and Healing in Mandari* (London: OUP, 1973), 189.

punishes it but that God causes misfortune to follow it and therefore it is bad.'²⁷ The perspective is again essentially anthropocentric.

Witches and sorcerers are also understood to bring about suffering by the malevolent manipulation of psychic power. The notion that people can influence one another not only by empirical means but also mystically, particularly in order to inflict harm, is almost universal in Africa,²⁸ and a dominant explanation of all sorts of suffering. Anger alone may suffice to hurt, particularly in certain relationships ('anger is like a stranger, it does not stay in one home'²⁹), but it is witches and sorcerers who are believed systematically to bring catastrophe upon their neighbours and societies. The frequently employed distinction between the activities of the witch, who does not use any objective technique but possesses an innate power to harm, and the sorcerer, who employs *materia* and incantations, has been very much based on the case of the Sudanese Azande;³⁰ but similar, if not identical, distinctions are widespread throughout Africa. For very many peoples human malevolence of this type is seen as the usual source of all kinds of misfortune. Among the Azande, according to Evans-Pritchard, 'if blight seizes the ground-nut crop it is witchcraft; if the bush is vainly scoured for game it is witchcraft; if women laboriously bale water out of a pool and are rewarded by but a few fish it is witchcraft; if termites do not rise when their swarming is due and a cold useless night is spent waiting for their flight it is witchcraft; if a wife is sulky and unresponsive to her husband it is witchcraft; if a prince is cold and distant with his subject it is witchcraft; if, in fact, any failure or misfortune falls upon anybody at any time and in relation to any of the manifold activities of his life it may be due to witchcraft.'³¹ In the

27 Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion*, 194.

28 Witchcraft beliefs do not exist among some peoples, such as the Tallensi, cf. Fortes, *Religion*, 196; and the BaMbuti pygmies 'practise no sorcery or witchcraft' although 'they know it is rife amongst their neighbours and they have seen enough of it in action to be uneasy about it': C. Turnbull, *The Forest People* (London: Triad Paladin Grafton Books, 1984), 205.

29 Akan proverb, quoted by J.V. Taylor, *The Primal Vision* (London: SCM, 1963), 40.

30 E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande*, abridged by E. Gillies (Oxford: Clarendon, 1976), 1: 'Azande believe that some people are witches and can injure them in virtue of an inherent quality. A witch performs no rite, utters no spell, and possesses no medicines. An act of witchcraft is a psychic act. They believe also that sorcerers may do them ill by performing magic rites with bad medicines. Azande distinguish clearly between witches and sorcerers.'

31 Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft*, 18.

traditional thought of the Nigerian Tiv and South African Lovedu *all* deaths are caused by witchcraft and sorcery,³² and 'the vast majority of deaths among the Luba are said to be the result of witches, or by curses cast by those who might not be active sorcerers but who still possess maleficent powers'.³³ It would indeed be difficult to overstate the importance of witchcraft beliefs in the worldview of the great majority of African peoples.

In all cases of misfortune attempts are made to identify the cause and restore the *status quo*, which will invariably involve having recourse to one or more of a number of 'specialists'. Most important is the diviner 'who holds the code which allows the decipherment of the various messages intended for man, the society in which he lives, and all else related to his destiny'.³⁴ Diviners employ a number of techniques. Among the Ugandan Banyoro these include mechanical devices, augury and the use of spirit familiars,³⁵ and in West Africa the complex process of Ifa divination, which is carried out by the manipulation of sixteen palm nuts and the application of appropriate verses, enjoys enormous prestige.³⁶ However, as investigators have observed, the diviner operates not only by the use of his psychic tools but also by astute questioning of the enquirer and a sound knowledge of human nature and of his own community. Where suffering has occurred it is his task to locate the cause of his client's misfortune, the point at which equilibrium has been disturbed to his detriment; 'the divinatory consultation is the central phase or episode in the total process of coping with misfortune, and it looks both backward to causation and forward to remedial measures.'³⁷ Having given his diagnosis it is then necessary to prescribe the action required to re-establish equilibrium and thus restore the well-being of the afflicted party. This stage may necessitate the co-operation of a 'herbalist' or 'doctor'.³⁸ Depending on the diagnosis of cause, the prescription may involve the offering of a sacrifice to

32 E.G. Parrinder, *Witchcraft: European and African* (London: Faber & Faber, 1963), 136; E.J. and J.D. Krige, *The Realm of a Rain Queen: A Study of the Patterns of Lovedu Society* (London: OUP, 1943), 269.

33 C. Vecsey, 'Facing Death, Masking Death, in Luba Myth and Art', *Journal of Religion in Africa* 14 (1983), 28.

34 Zahan, *Religion*, 81.

35 J.H.M. Beattie, 'Divination in Bunyoro, Uganda', *Sociologus* 14 (1964), 44-62.

36 W. Bascom, *Ifa Divination* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969).

37 Turner, *Forest of Symbols*, 361.

38 The term 'doctor' is used of African specialists who provide remedies for misfortunes, including sickness, and also preventive measures against them. They have sometimes been inappropriately called 'witchdoctors'.

appease an offended spirit, perhaps an ancestor, whose attack has precipitated the initial problem; or warding off the attack of a witch or sorcerer, frequently by identifying the guilty party and obliging them to withdraw their aggression or to repair its consequences. In addition to the use of ritual and mystical techniques of this nature herbal treatment may also be employed, some of which may have real empirical validity.

Divination is thus among the central rites of African traditional religion, and diviners are among the principal specialists. Although their techniques vary considerably, they are found in almost all traditional African societies, offering essentially the same service. They provide a response to the central religious concern, the breakdown of harmony, to which the advent of human suffering bears witness, diagnosing the source of the problem and prescribing remedial action.

It is important to note that belief in the fundamentally personal causation of misfortune, often of a spiritual or psychic nature, need not imply ignorance of the empirical factors involved (although it may inhibit the development of medical remedies of an empirical nature³⁹). Empirical, naturalistic explanations of an event may be invoked alongside mystical, personal ones, for the two function at different levels of interpretation. While naturalistic explanation serves to explain *how* a situation has arisen, the traditional African approach seeks to understand *why*; it is offering explanation of a more profound nature.⁴⁰ Hence increasing awareness of western empirical theories of disease, and the introduction of western medical services, do not of themselves necessarily eliminate traditional theories of witchcraft or spirit attack, for they are not offering an alternative explanation but one of a different type.⁴¹ This is illustrated by the confession of a West African witch: 'She held herself responsible for the deaths of many people in the village. There was a guinea-worm epidemic there a year before and she claimed that it was she who had brought the germs into the

39 A.S. Moreau, *The World of the Spirits: A Biblical Study in the African Context* (Nairobi: Evangel Publishing House, 1990), 117.

40 Cf. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft*, 22-24.

41 Cf. King, *Religions of Africa*, 57; M.G. Whisson, 'Some Aspects of Functional Disorders Among the Kenya Luo', in A. Kiev (ed.), *Magic, Faith and Healing* (New York: The Free Press, 1964), 289-90; E.H. Winter, 'The Enemy Within: Amba Witchcraft and Sociological Theory', in J. Middleton and E.H. Winter (eds.), *Witchcraft and Sorcery in East Africa* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), 289; McVeigh, *God in Africa*, 164.

village.⁴² Similarly, in the words of another African informant, 'it may be quite true that typhus is carried by lice, but who sent the infected louse? Why did it bite one man and not another?'⁴³

2. Syncretism in the African Church

It is not to be expected that African Christians, or indeed those of other cultures, would completely divest themselves of their traditional worldview by converting to Christianity: in fact it is neither possible nor desirable that they should, for to do so would be to cease to be African. The Christian faith is inevitably assimilated in terms of the existing structures of thought of its adherents, whatever their culture. Nevertheless, there are points at which the worldview of any people will be found to be incompatible with central elements of the gospel; if conversion to Christianity is to be more than purely nominal, it will necessarily entail the substantial modification of the traditional worldview at such points. Where this does not occur it is the Christian faith which is modified and thus relativised by the worldview, and the consequence is syncretism.

The term 'syncretism' is an elusive one, and is used in more than one sense in current discussion.⁴⁴ It is employed here of the substitution or modification of central elements of Christianity by beliefs or practices introduced from elsewhere. The consequence of such a process is fatally to compromise its integrity. Such a definition implicitly affirms the existence of a *normative* Christian faith derived from authoritative Christian Scriptures,⁴⁵ in the light of which every particular purported expression of Christianity is to be evaluated. Given a definition in these terms, the Bible's own injunctions against syncretism, involving the intrusion of antagonistic and incompatible religious practices into the worship of the God it reveals, are particularly relevant.⁴⁶

It is the continuing dominance of traditional conceptions of sickness and healing that have particularly given rise to syncretism

42 A. Omoyajowo, 'What is Witchcraft', in E.A.A. Adegbola (ed.), *Traditional Religion in West Africa* (Nairobi: Uzima Press, 1983), 323.

43 Quoted by M. Gluckman, *Custom and Conflict in Africa* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1955), 85.

44 Cf. e.g., R.J. Schreiter, 'Defining Syncretism: An Interim Report', *IBMR* 17.2 (1993), 50-53; or I.A. Levinskaya, 'Syncretism: The Term and the Phenomenon', *TynB* 44.1 (1993), 117-28.

45 Such a belief is implicit throughout the New Testament as, for example, in Jude 3: 'I found it necessary to appeal to you to contend for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.'

46 Cf. e.g., Exod. 23:23-24, 32-33; Lev. 18:24-30; 1 Cor. 10:20-22, etc.

in many African churches, precisely because of their central importance in traditional thought. Despite the apparently large-scale disappearance of much of the ritual of traditional religion as a result of the remarkable growth of the Christian church throughout sub-Saharan Africa, the philosophy of sickness and healing that lies close to its heart continues to exercise a pervasive and profound influence. The diviner's ongoing role in modern African cities is evidence of this,⁴⁷ as is also the still widespread attribution of misfortune to the activities of witches.⁴⁸ The continuing acceptance of such ideas by Christians manifests itself in two ways.

First, there are those who profess conversion but continue to resort to traditional remedies in the face of suffering, despite the condemnation of such approaches by their churches. One African theologian has recently written that 'the usual resort of the African Christian in crisis situations is a reversion to traditional African religious practices'.⁴⁹ In many cases this takes the form of the continuing use of 'medicine', fetishes of various sorts, as a prophylaxis against attacks by spirits or sorcerers. When suffering does occur, the victims may consult the diviner in order to identify its source and take such remedial measures as he may prescribe. In some cases recourse is had to a diviner only after conventional western medical treatment, possibly administered in a church dispensary or hospital, has been tried and has failed; in other cases both western and traditional approaches are used simultaneously, the western treatment being understood to deal with the symptoms of the illness while traditional remedies tackle its cause.

Second, many African churches assimilate the Christian message to traditional concerns, such that Christ becomes pre-eminently a saviour from the traditional evils of illness, barrenness, and death. This seems to be the approach, for example, of the Church of the Lord in Nigeria, in which the human predicament is understood essentially in physical terms and attributed to evil supernatural beings, witches and sorcerers. 'It is clear that man's plight is attributed less to the defects of his own nature than to objective evil forces, both human and superhuman, which lie behind all the calamities with which life is beset, and are much more to be feared than evils that arise from within a man himself... The description of

47 Cf. A. Shorter, *East African Societies* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), 52-54.

48 Cf. J.M. Hopkins, 'Theological Students and Witchcraft Beliefs', *Journal of Religion in Africa* 11 (1980), 56-66.

49 O. Imasogie, *Guidelines for Christian Theology in Africa* (Achimota, Ghana: Africa Christian Press, 1993), 11.

the opponents, and the nature of those which appear most frequently, are in full accord with the major concerns in African religions.⁵⁰ Where reference is made to sin it is understood in an African rather than a biblical sense, as 'an aberration or misfortune that disturbs the harmony of the social and cosmic order... which may be set right by the proper human action, to repair, restore, or revitalize'.⁵¹ Accordingly salvation is conceived in practical and therapeutic terms as a deliverance from the powers of evil, and especially from sickness, rather than from sin,⁵² and Christ's death is similarly related to traditional rather than biblical priorities. 'Christ therefore delivers from objective evils and revitalizes man in his weakness, but does not atone for human sin.'⁵³ In consequence the central importance of the primitive Christian creed which Paul transmitted to the Corinthians 'as of first importance' (1 Cor. 15:3-4), and which interprets the work of Christ precisely in its relation to human sins ('Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures...'), is obscured in favour of a message, shaped in largely traditional terms, of deliverance from the physical aggression of occult powers.

Peel's account of the Nigerian Aladura churches suggests an approach very similar to that of the Church of the Lord.⁵⁴ The Aladura employ anti-witchcraft methods very similar to those of traditional witch-finding cults, having in large measure accepted traditional beliefs about occult aggression and grafted them into a Christian doctrinal structure in which witches and sorcerers are agents of Satan. During revivals in the 1930s many people renounced evil practices including witchcraft and publicly destroyed their medicines. It was believed that witches had to confess if they drank specially sanctified 'holy water', and many previously under suspicion drank in order to clear themselves.⁵⁵ Among the Zulu Zionist churches of South Africa the healing message is very much the pivot of all church activity. Traditional emphasis on the role of witches and sorcerers in the aetiology of disease is retained, and Zionist prophets function effectively as Christian witch-finders who

50 H.W. Turner, *African Independent Church* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967), Vol. II, 305-306, on the hymnology of the church of the Lord. Turner claims (71) that prayer in the church reflects the same priorities.

51 Turner, *African Independent Church*, 360.

52 Turner, *African Independent Church*, xvii.

53 Turner, *African Independent Church*, 349.

54 J.D.Y. Peel, *Aladura: A Religious Movement among the Yoruba* (London: OUP, 1968), 114-56.

55 Peel, *Aladura*, 96.

also purvey a Christian protective magic.⁵⁶ Similarly in the Shona Apostolic Churches of Zimbabwe, 'prophets' identify witches much like traditional diviners, allegedly under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit; a Harare Apostolic Church even employed ordeals in which people had to pass through a fire and, if their clothes caught light, they were deemed to have 'sinned'.⁵⁷

Baëta and Mbiti claim that tendencies such as these are widespread.⁵⁸ Baëta focuses on Ghana and argues that it is specifically the 'separatist churches' (that is, those which have broken away from the traditional missionary churches) which interpret salvation in traditional African terms. 'The Christianity offered by the separatist churches may be described as a power for overcoming the ills of the secular aspect of life.'⁵⁹ As in the Church of the Lord, "'sin" is really relevant only in so far as it is a potent cause of bodily, mental, and social disorders'.⁶⁰ However, according to Mbiti such an understanding of Christianity does not exist in the independent churches alone; in 'missionary or historical churches, it is highly doubtful that African Christians understand its [i.e. sin's] centrality in the New Testament teaching about atonement and redemption... Converts appreciate more deliverance from the physical evils than anything else that would be in the nature of spiritual or moral depravity'.⁶¹ Consequently Jesus is perceived as a Saviour not so much because of the cross but 'because he is linked up with God who, by virtue of his almightiness, can and does rescue or save the needy'.⁶²

Syncretism thus takes either a private or a community form. Where the church denounces traditional approaches to suffering and restoration its members may nevertheless resort to them when in trouble, despite the disapproval of the church leaders and the possible application of disciplinary procedures. Alternatively many churches may themselves 'baptise' the traditional understanding of

56 B. Sundkler, *Bantu Prophets in South Africa* (London: OUP, 1961), 255ff.

57 J.R. Crawford, *Witchcraft and Sorcery in Rhodesia* (London: OUP, 1967), 233-34.

58 C.G. Baëta, 'Conflict in Mission: Historical and Separatist Churches', in G.H. Anderson (ed.), *The Theology of the Christian Mission* (New York: Abingdon, 1961), 290ff.; J.S. Mbiti, 'ὁ σωτήρ ἡμῶν as an African Experience', in B. Lindars and S.S. Smalley (eds.), *Christ and the Spirit in the New Testament* (Cambridge: CUP, 1973), 397-414.

59 Baëta, 'Conflict', 293.

60 Baëta, 'Conflict', 293.

61 Mbiti, 'ὁ σωτήρ ἡμῶν', 408.

62 Mbiti, 'ὁ σωτήρ ἡμῶν', 402.

suffering into their teaching and practice, adopting rituals which approximate to the traditional remedies, and thus make it unnecessary for their members to seek solutions to their misfortunes from traditional specialists. Christ is then perceived as the supreme doctor, the focus of whose work is to protect and deliver from the hostile forces which cause illness. The popularity of this latter approach is shown to some degree by the multiplication and numerical strength of the 'independent' churches, many of which employ it in one form or another.

3. A Contextual Approach

In large measure the origin of such syncretism lies in a failure effectively to contextualise the gospel, both at the theological and the practical level, in order to address African concerns both adequately and biblically.⁶³ For many of the more orthodox churches the theological response to syncretism of this sort consists primarily of a repudiation of the practices of traditional religion, based on biblical denunciations of similar activities. For example many of the procedures condemned in Deuteronomy 18:9-14 are essentially divinatory,⁶⁴ and the original Israelite recipients of the text are exhorted to pay heed to the prophetic word of the Lord (18:15-22) rather than to diviners. The prohibition is therefore easily and fittingly applied by the church to traditional African divination, which is similarly to be abandoned in favour of attention to the preaching of the Bible. Similarly, traditional veneration and propitiation of ancestors are rejected, in part because they are perceived as a form of worship and thus a breach of the persistent biblical denunciation of all worship other than that which is offered to God alone,⁶⁵ and in part because they are identified as a violation of the frequent biblical proscriptions of necromancy.⁶⁶

63 The notion of contextualisation is discussed fully in D. Hesselgrave and E. Rommen, *Contextualization* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989). The apostolic or orthodox didactic approach they advocate (149, 155) is that on which the present discussion is based since it alone maintains the integrity of the historic Christian faith by its insistence upon the final authority of Scripture, and thereby avoids its relativisation by cultural considerations.

64 Cf. S.R. Driver, *Deuteronomy*, ICC (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1895), 223ff.; P.C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 260-61.

65 As in the first commandment, for example, 'You shall have no other gods before me' (Exod. 20:3).

66 Lev. 20:27; Deut. 18:11; Isa. 8:19-20; 19:3; 65:2-4.

The denunciatory approach is valid and necessary but in need of qualification in two directions. First, care is needed to apply the biblical injunctions and prohibitions appropriately. The Bible condemns the practice of sorcery, for example, on a number of occasions,⁶⁷ and its denunciations and warnings may properly be addressed to contemporary African practitioners of sorcery and witchcraft, whose malevolent purpose is basically the same as that envisaged by the sorcerers denounced in the Bible. An absolute rejection of traditional African *beliefs* in sorcery and witchcraft cannot however claim biblical warrant but seems rather to reflect a western rationalistic worldview.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, such has often been the approach of western missionaries and writers, some of whom identify witchcraft *accusation* as the real source of suffering in human relationships. It is undoubtedly true that accusation can cause immense and unjust suffering to the accused, but this need not mean that 'the belief in witchcraft is a tragic error'.⁶⁹ The denunciations of such practices in the Bible would seem to imply that their efficacy is assumed by its writers, although not necessarily to the extent presupposed in African thought, nor with all the exotic trappings ascribed to the African witch or sorcerer. Denial of the *possibility* of mystic aggression apparently entails responding to traditional fears by seeking to replace the traditional worldview with a western one, rather than by the pursuit of a distinctively biblical approach to the problem.

Second, the denunciation of traditional practices such as divination is inadequate if the 'felt needs' to which they were responses are not satisfactorily met. To condemn the use of diviners and traditional protective medicine without offering an alternative structure within which to cope with both the reality of present suffering and the fear of future suffering, is simply to leave the individual feeling exposed and helpless in the face of hostile forces. It is for this reason that members of orthodox churches frequently have recourse to diviners and traditional doctors despite the disapprobation of their churches, or alternatively leave their churches to join those which claim to offer defence against witches

67 Deut. 18:10; Ezek. 13:17-23; Gal. 5:20; Rev. 18:23; 21:8; 22:15.

68 A number of prominent African scholars have affirmed the reality of mystical aggression: cf. J.O. Awolalu, *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites* (London: Longman, 1979), 91; Eriwwo, referred to by Hastings, *African Christianity*, 73; E.B. Idowu, 'The Challenge of Witchcraft', *Orita* 4 (1970), 9; Mbiti, *African Religions*, 198.

69 Parrinder, *Witchcraft*, 16; cf. A. Shorter, *Jesus and the Witchdoctor* (Maryknoll: Orbis/London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1985), 95-96.

and deliverance from the effects of their attacks. What is required is to replace the traditional structure of understanding with one that is authentically biblical (while not being western), but which nonetheless responds effectively to traditional concerns. Such a transformation of worldview is vital if professing Christians are to live out their faith: it is the model of reality to which people adhere which shapes their decisions and behaviour.⁷⁰

Certain central themes of biblical theology are particularly important to the development of such a biblical structure of understanding. Firstly, the consistent and continuous biblical emphasis on the sovereign rule of God within his creation substantially qualifies traditional African emphasis on the role of lesser spiritual agencies in human affairs. It is because of its stress on divine sovereignty that biblical demonology is so restrained in comparison with that of many of the surrounding peoples: there is little space left for independent demonic activity in a universe conceived to be under the rule of an almighty God. It is frequently made clear that the operations even of supernatural beings hostile to God proceed only by his permission and within limitations he defines.⁷¹ While this does not deny their freedom and consequent responsibility, it tends to reduce them to the level of secondary causes within God's overriding purposes. Of particular significance is the fact that this is not affirmed simply as doctrinal truth, but is also the basis of response to actual suffering. In the Bible belief in divine sovereignty does not entail passive acceptance on the part of sufferers but the vigorous pursuit of God who has permitted and who controls the suffering. Thus Job complains to God, as do Habakkuk, the psalmists who experienced suffering, and the apostle Paul (in 2 Cor. 12:7-9). It is this existential recognition of God's sovereignty which is absent from African traditional religion, whose Supreme Beings are not generally understood to exercise such a sovereignty: 'many supreme gods are like African sacred kings: they reign but they do not rule... [they] remain in the background of religious life.'⁷² Thus in the living experience of the adherents of African religion, it is the world of lesser spirits, and that of witches and sorcerers, which is of dominant spiritual and existential concern. While the biblical writers understand the invisible world as a monarchy in which God rules over spirits and men, both good and

70 Cf. P.G. Hiebert, *Cultural Anthropology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1976), 14-16.

71 In Job 1-2 for example; or throughout the book of Revelation.

72 Ray, 'African Religions', 64; see also n. 21 above and the quotation from Hastings (at n. 22).

evil, African traditional religion gives rather the impression of an anarchy of spirits and of occult forces, over which God may in principle be supreme, but in which he rarely if ever intervenes. This in turn explains the fear and uncertainty often experienced in traditional Africa; the individual is conscious of being at the mercy of a variety of unpredictable spiritual forces, whose activities are in practice largely unrestrained. Accordingly the doctrine of the sovereignty of God, especially in relation to all demonic and occult agencies, should be one of the major emphases of a contextualised proclamation of the gospel in Africa.

Secondly, the experience of suffering must be set in the context of the Christian doctrine of the 'fall': it is 'the effluent of the fall, the result of a fallen world'.⁷³ The absence of a developed notion of a fall in traditional thought coupled with the belief that all suffering is caused rather than simply fortuitous, has tended to mean that every isolated case of suffering must be associated with some specific cause. The diviner is accordingly consulted to identify the cause and prescribe a response. The biblical concept of the fall, however, implies that suffering and death exist as an inevitable part of the world as it is, and that the identification of *special* causes of particular cases of suffering is not necessary in order to understand them.⁷⁴ 'The key is to see the problems of life... as manifestations of the larger problem of sin and death in the world. The failure to make this connection represents the great weakness of African traditional faiths.'⁷⁵ Nor is this to deny the possible instrumentality of secondary agents, whether demonic or human, in the aetiology of suffering in certain instances. As has been suggested already, the role of sorcerers in some suffering seems to be presupposed by certain passages of the Bible, and that of Satan and demons is even more evident.⁷⁶ Nevertheless, maleficent occult attacks of both demonic and human origin are treated with considerable reserve in the Bible, both because the accent is on the fundamental importance of human sin and fallness as the source of suffering, and also because of the biblical emphasis on the sovereignty of God (as noted above), which relegates spirits, sorcerers and all other agents to a secondary role.

Thirdly, traditional African notions of evil should be heavily qualified in the light of biblical priorities. In African thought the

⁷³ D.A. Carson, *How Long, O Lord: Reflections on Suffering and Evil* (Leicester: IVP, 1990), 48.

⁷⁴ Cf. e.g., Gen. 3:16-19; Rom. 5:12-21; 8:19-23.

⁷⁵ Dyrness, *Learning about Theology*, 55.

⁷⁶ E.g. in Job 1-2; Luke 13:10-17; Acts 10:38; 2 Cor. 12:7.

primary evil is physical affliction, of which sin may be a cause; in biblical terms the primary evil is sin, of which physical suffering is a symptom and a sign.⁷⁷ Thus the biblical approach is theocentric: evil is pre-eminently that which offends a holy God, provoking his judgment, and human suffering issues from that. In contrast, the African perception is fundamentally anthropocentric: evil is that which hurts human beings, although it may be caused by offences committed against God or other spiritual beings, including ancestors. The contrast is equally valid when applied to notions of evil supernatural powers in African religion and the Bible. In African terms the evil inflicted by spirits is essentially physical; in the New Testament it is primarily spiritual and moral, although the physical aspect is not absent.⁷⁸ When the traditional African emphasis is imposed upon the Christian message the result, as noted, is that Christ is understood primarily as a saviour from physical ills rather than as one who reconciles men and women to God by dealing with their sins. This is not of course to deny that the work of Christ has implications for the physical creation, including the bodily ills of mankind, but in the biblical conception this is logically secondary to the primary purpose of Christ's work, the remission of sins.⁷⁹ Likewise the primary, although not the only, role ascribed to the Holy Spirit by the New Testament writers is the regeneration, sanctification and preservation of believers.⁸⁰

Nevertheless, fourthly, the work of Christ is to be understood also as a victory over all the forces of evil, as numerous passages of the New Testament affirm.⁸¹ The proclamation of *Christus Victor* over all

77 Shorter, *Jesus and The Witchdoctor*, 36-37.

78 The Old Testament contains very few unambiguous references to demons. In Job 1-2, 1 Chronicles 21:1 and Zechariah 3:1-2 (the) Satan is himself principally active as an agent of moral and spiritual attack, although in Job that attack takes the form of terrible physical persecution.

79 Paul's reference in 1 Corinthians 15:3 to the primitive Christian creed, already noted above, is significant, and indeed representative of the testimony of the New Testament as a whole. Guthrie, concluding his discussion of the 'mission of Christ', refers to the 'many different aspects of the meaning of the death of Christ' but goes on to speak of 'the one basic truth that Christ died for sins': Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Leicester: IVP, 1981), 507.

80 It would be instructive in this connection to consider how the doctrine of the Holy Spirit is understood in the theology of some African churches, but this would be beyond the scope of the present discussion.

81 John 12:31; Eph. 1:20-21; Col. 2:13-15; Heb. 2:14-15; 1 Pet. 3:19-22; Rev. 12:1-12. It is impossible within the scope of the present essay to discuss the significance of the passages mentioned. However, for 1 Peter 3:19-22 see discussion by W.J. Dalton, *Christ's Proclamation to the Spirits: A Study of 1 Peter 3:18-4:6* (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1989); on Revelation 12:1-12,

the 'principalities and powers' is vital to the contextualisation of the gospel in Africa, responding as it does to profound fears of the supernatural world. Of parallel importance are references to the victorious Spirit, as in Acts 13:6-12 where Paul, 'full of the Holy Spirit', overcomes the opposition of Elymas, a 'child of the devil'. Nevertheless it should not be supposed that such a message is *the* gospel for Africans. Jacobs has argued that each society sees Christ through spectacles of its own need. Therefore as western society is ridden by guilt it sees him as a sacrifice for sin but, since the dominant African concern is fear of being overcome by evil forces, an African gospel would proclaim him primarily as deliverer from such evil forces.⁸² Such an approach tends again to undermine the crucial New Testament emphasis already noted, namely that 'Christ died *for our sins*'. It is of vital importance in the contextualisation of the gospel that, while *felt* needs are recognised and responded to, *ultimate* needs, which may not be felt at all, retain their priority in the teaching of the church; if not it will be a largely culturally determined and relativised gospel that emerges.⁸³

In this connection it is significant that in the New Testament in general, and for Paul in particular, the supernatural powers of evil seem to be parasitic upon sin:⁸⁴ it is precisely by addressing the problem of sin that Christ's atoning work also, in consequence, brings about the defeat of Satan and the powers. Perhaps the clearest statement in the New Testament of the defeat of the principalities and powers is found in Colossians 2:15, and it is particularly significant there that the disarming and exposure to which they are subjected *follows* the nailing to the cross of 'the bond which was against us', probably a reference to a certificate of the sinner's indebtedness before God;⁸⁵ indeed it may well be precisely this 'bond' of which they are disarmed.⁸⁶ Thus the message of salvation

see G.B. Caird, 'On Deciphering the Book of Revelation: I. Heaven and Earth', *ExpT* 74 (1962-63), 13; J.M. Court, *Myth and History in the Book of Revelation* (London: SPCK, 1979), 113; P. Prigent, *Apocalypse 12: Histoire de l'exégèse* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1959), 146.

82 D. Jacobs, commenting on 'Is there more than one way to do theology?' by C.R. Taber, *Gospel in Context* 1.1 (1978), 24.

83 Cf. Hesselgrave and Rommen, *Contextualization*, 199ff. on the thinking of Matheny.

84 Limitations of space prohibit a full defence of this position. However, outside the Pauline epistles passages such as Hebrews 2:14-15, 1 Peter 3:18-22, 1 John 3:8 and Revelation 12:7-11 may be understood in this sense.

85 E. Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), 108; P.T. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, WBC (Dallas: Word Books, 1987), 124.

86 O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 127.

from sin logically precedes that of deliverance from evil powers, and texts such as Galatians 1:4 and Colossians 1:13-14 accordingly suggest that forgiveness from sins is prior, logically though not temporally, to deliverance from supernatural powers of darkness. The substitution of a message of deliverance from such powers for that of redemption from sins would have significant implications. It would mean that those to whom such a message was brought were being identified as victims rather than sinners, their condition being caused by forces over which they had no control rather than by their 'own deliberate fault'. In moral terms the dimension of human responsibility for sins, and consequent guilt, would be undermined, and redemption would be concerned not primarily with the human moral condition, but rather with a great cosmic adversary which had somehow enslaved humanity.

Fifthly, the eschatological tension found throughout the New Testament constitutes a necessary qualification of the frequently over-realised eschatology of some African churches, which looks for a present deliverance from all physical ills. The belief that the work of Christ includes physical deliverance is not as such unbiblical, but the idea that such deliverance should always and inevitably be the immediate possession of the Christian is.⁸⁷ The unrealised aspect of New Testament eschatology means that believers are still exposed to bodily afflictions. In particular they must wait for the 'redemption of the body' (Rom. 8:23; cf. also 1 Cor. 15:42-44; Phil. 3:21) and consequent liberation from all the physical and material ills associated with the present age (cf. Rom. 8:19-23), meanwhile experiencing the help and intercession of the Spirit of God (Rom. 8:26-27) but not necessarily his immediate intervention to end whatever afflictions they may be undergoing. Moreover, they are still exposed to the animosity of evil supernatural powers which, although defeated, remain active and still entrenched in the world. While the primary purpose of their attacks on believers is spiritual, the possibility of physical attack is not excluded. Clearly by inspiring persecution Satan is able to injure, even kill, believers through human agents; since that is so, and in the absence of any indication in the New Testament to the contrary, it seems likely that evil spirits would also have been considered able to injure believers *without* the intervention of human mediators. Paul suggests in 2 Corinthians 12:7 that he was himself the object of diabolical aggression, probably of a

87 Cf. J. Wilkinson, 'Physical Healing and the Atonement', *EvQ* 63 (1991), 149-67.

physical nature,⁸⁸ but the use of the divine passive, 'there was given me', along with the salutary purpose of the affliction, indicates that he understood it to have taken place by the permission of God and for the accomplishment of his purposes. The reference to Christ's exaltation and reign over the principalities and powers in Ephesians 1:20-21 implies that it is he who sovereignly permits and limits what Satan, powers and demons do to his people. This in no way entails a response of passive acquiescence on the part of Christians in the face of suffering: Paul says that he asked the Lord three times that his 'thorn in the flesh' should leave him (2 Cor. 12:8). Equally, however, it does not necessarily mean that Christ will always veto the physical aggression of evil spirits, any more than he vetoes their inspiration of persecution. What it does mean is that believers are delivered from the futile arbitrariness of demonic malevolence. A persistent New Testament theme is that the Christian's sufferings take on positive value, and one of the fruits of his justification is that he may rejoice in them (Rom. 5:3-5). Consequently, in the African context the gospel does not imply immediate deliverance from all physical ills, but it does involve a radically transformed perception of their meaning (Rom. 8:28). Moreover, from this perspective the identity of the source of affliction becomes *comparatively* unimportant.

Contextualisation must take place, however, not only at the level of theology but also that of practice, and particularly in view of the fact that African churches and western mission agencies operating in Africa are frequently heavily involved in medical work. The framework within which such work is carried out is vitally important. The simple fact that medical care is offered in a Christian institution does not necessarily imply that it is provided within an overtly Christian framework which will offer an alternative, as opposed to a supplement, to traditional approaches. Accordingly, what is required is the provision of medical care which is at the same time authentically biblical, culturally appropriate, and scientifically sound.

The care of the physically ill offered in most European and North American institutions focuses very much on the immediate clinical reasons for the malady. Such an approach is valid and has been enormously successful in tackling disease and relieving suffering. In the African context, however, a purely physical approach may well be inadequate in the eyes of the sufferers who are concerned not only about *what* is wrong with them but also about *why* they are sick.

88 The nature of Paul's affliction is much disputed. Cf. the discussion in J. Wilkinson, *Health and Healing: Studies in the New Testament Principles and Practice* (Edinburgh: Handsel, 1980), ch. 11.

If the dispensary or hospital which is treating them fails to respond to this profoundly *felt* need, they may well resort to traditional remedies and solutions in addition to the treatment offered by the hospital.⁸⁹

This is not to argue for the employment of some form of Christianised divination which will detect particular causes of sickness. It is however to affirm that the concern to identify meaning in illness is not as such unsound. In John 9:2 the disciples look for reasons for the suffering of a man born blind: 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' In his response Jesus does not deny the validity of their pursuit of meaning behind the malady, but he enlarges the field of possibilities; it is not in this case a question of anybody's sin but rather 'that the works of God might be made manifest in him'. Western medical practice, based to a large degree on naturalistic presuppositions and with a consequent emphasis on biological and chemical aetiologies of disease, excludes this whole question from its purview. It tends therefore implicitly to assume that sickness is the result of fortuitous coincidence such that the search for reasons, the question 'why', is inappropriate.⁹⁰ By contrast, the biblical approach is not naturalistic: 'The natural cause, what the textbooks call the aetiology of a disease, is seldom mentioned. The Scriptures invite us to look deeper than to natural causes.'⁹¹ The traditional African pursuit of the meaning behind the purely empirical causes of suffering is consequently closer to a biblical perspective than is the western reductionistic approach. In both biblical and African terms the philosophy apparently underlying western medical care is profoundly unsatisfactory in that it leaves the sufferer in an ultimately meaningless universe, where sufferings are unexplained and inexplicable.

Christian medical institutions in Africa should therefore offer medical care in a pastoral context designed to help their patients to understand their suffering and to respond to it in culturally appropriate but authentically Christian ways. Consequently, the aim must be to establish an integrated and holistic approach in which the needs of both body and soul are met. Such an approach would be contextually appropriate, paralleling that offered by traditional

89 Cf. the example referred to in Taylor, *Primal Vision*, 185-86.

90 R. Mikulencek, 'Science and Magic Collide in African Medicine', *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 23 (1987), 358. Cf. A. Dopamu, 'Health and Healing within the Traditional African Religious Context', *Orita* 17 (1985), 70.

91 A.R. Short, *The Bible and Modern Medicine* (London: Paternoster, 1953), 135.

diviner and doctor, and avoiding the dichotomistic western separation of soul and body.

It would be beyond the scope of the present study to elaborate in any detail the operation of an approach of this nature. A crucial element would be the development of structures of pastoral counselling in which the patients' need for an interpretative framework within which to understand their experience of suffering was adequately but biblically met. Such a provision is vital if Christian health facilities are to deal with all that illness implies for African people. In large measure the responsibility for this aspect of care might be given to those with the biblical and pastoral training and gifts necessary. Nevertheless it is important that the medical specialists themselves, doctors and nurses, share in the concern for the spiritual well-being of their charges, and in some demonstrable way participate also in this aspect of the medical work. Otherwise it risks becoming an appendix to what is perceived to be the *real* work of the hospital or dispensary, and the dichotomistic approach characteristic of the west is maintained.

The purpose of counselling would initially be to bring about a restructuring of the patients' worldview in the light of biblical priorities and concerns in order that they should interpret suffering in terms of those priorities. Such a fundamental change in their conception of reality would have a crucial impact on decisions and behaviour, contributing in particular to the abandonment of traditional responses to sickness in favour of more biblical approaches.⁹² Further to this, however, the care of patients should seek to help them cope individually with their own particular sufferings in a biblical and positive way, being sensitive to the specific situation and needs of each one. It would not be expected that particular causes of suffering would normally be identified, but for many patients such questions would arise inevitably from their worldview and some issues might fruitfully be considered. While the notion that suffering is invariably the consequence of particular sins committed by the sufferer is emphatically rejected in, for example, the book of Job as well as the teaching of Christ (Luke 13:1-5; John 9:1-3), there are nevertheless suggestions in the Bible that *some* suffering may be related to particular sin, as in the case of the paralytic healed at Capernaum (Mark 2:1-12), or the man healed at the pool of Bethesda (John 5:1-15). Furthermore, in the epistle of James the healing ministry of the church is set in the context of the confession of sins (5:14-16). Accordingly, an integrated response to

92 Cf. again Hiebert, *Cultural Anthropology*, 14-16.

sickness would be concerned for the moral condition of the sufferers and their relationship with God, and would seek through appropriate pastoral assistance and counsel to help them find forgiveness and restoration where appropriate. In addition to the relationship between sin and suffering the Bible also offers other perspectives from which sickness might be viewed: as a warning, particularly perhaps to the unconverted (Luke 13:1-5); or as the discipline which God applies to his children (Heb. 12:3-11); or as an instrument of spiritual growth (Rom. 5:3-5; Jas. 1:2-4; 1 Pet. 1:6-7).⁹³

Perhaps the most important element of such an approach would be prayer with and for the patient, which should be a constant and ubiquitous aspect of all areas of health care, visibly uniting the physical and spiritual dimensions. In this way the doctrinal framework moves from being simply an intellectual affirmation of faith and becomes the basis of the response to sickness and suffering. It is a reminder of the fundamental biblical premise that God is the one within whose sovereignty illness takes place and from whom all healing ultimately comes.⁹⁴ The Bible offers numerous examples of people, such as Job, Paul, and Christ himself, who responded to suffering from the perspective of faith in the sovereign God, and many of the Psalms similarly provide examples of the living expression of such truth in situations of affliction.

4. Conclusion

The problem of syncretism within the church is not a new one, nor is it one confined to the newer churches. Wherever it occurs, however, it undermines the health of the church and compromises its testimony. It has been argued here that in Africa syncretism is particularly likely to manifest itself in the context of sickness and suffering. The reason lies in the fact that explanations of, and responses to, suffering are at the heart of African traditional religion. Although much of the ritual expression of traditional religion has vanished under the impact of Christianity, the worldview of which it was an expression continues to be powerfully influential even among those who have converted to the Christian faith. Accordingly, when confronted with sickness they are apt to respond in traditional ways, especially when the church seems unable to offer any defence against, or response to, the supposed causes of their suffering.

⁹³ Cf. Carson, *How Long O Lord?* part 2, on this area.

⁹⁴ D.J. Wiseman, 'Medicine in the Old Testament World', in B. Palmer (ed.), *Medicine and the Bible* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1986), 18.

The failure of the church is a failure of effective contextualisation both doctrinally and pastorally; what is necessary is to engage with the traditional worldview at both levels from a biblical perspective. On the one hand this implies developing an alternative, biblical interpretative framework within which sickness may be understood, and certain key elements of such a response have been outlined. On the other hand it implies the development of contextually appropriate models of care in the many Christian hospitals and dispensaries that exist, in order to respond to felt needs in an authentically Christian way. Nor should it be supposed that the benefit of such models would be confined to the African continent alone.