

# Reconciling the Supernatural Worldviews of the Bible, African Traditional Religion, and African Christianity

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## Abstract

Christian interactions with the spirit world of African traditional religion (ATR) remain problematic because Christian missionaries have not adequately come to terms with the spiritual realm of ATR and the supernatural worldview of the Bible. In this article I propose a way beyond this impasse. I overview the cosmology and spirit world of ATR and African Christianity's variegated responses to these traditional beliefs. Having critiqued these responses, I survey the supernatural worldview of Scripture and its mythological narratives concerning the spiritual realm. I suggest that a responsible retrieval of these scriptural phenomena can help theologians reconcile the spirit world of ATR within a biblically-informed African theology, thereby yielding new pathways for the inculturation of Christianity in the African context.

**Keywords:** African theology; African traditional religion; biblical worldview; biblical cosmology; early Christianity; the spiritual realm; demonology

## 1. Introduction<sup>2</sup>

Christian theologians in Africa struggle to find ways of inculturating the Gospel in the African world of divinities, spirits, ancestors, and witchcraft. Theologians must come to terms with these realities of African traditional religion (ATR) if they are to make Christianity intelligible in the African context.<sup>3</sup> While this has been accomplished with varying degrees of success, African believers still struggle to reconcile the robust spirit world of ATR with the Christianity it has inherited from western missionaries. To address this struggle, I first survey the nature of cosmology and

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<sup>3</sup> When I refer to "Africa" in this article, I mean sub-Saharan Africa. When I refer to ATR, I am aware of the problems of generalization. The same is true for "African Christianity." My intention is to focus on the common threads that run through ATR and African Christianity. I follow Magesa (2013:4) who states, "if one underlines the similarities of inner meaning of the religious worldview and ethical values contained in the expressions... the terms African culture, religion, philosophy, and spirituality (in the singular) are perfectly legitimate and justifiable" (cf. Idowu 1973:103-106).

the spirit world of ATR. I then examine African Christianity's variegated responses to these traditional beliefs. Having critiqued these responses, I offer my suggestion: a responsible retrieval of the supernatural worldview of Scripture and its mythological narratives concerning the spiritual realm can help theologians reconcile the spirit world of ATR within a biblically-informed African theology, thereby yielding new pathways for the inculturation of Christianity in the African context.

## 2. Cosmology and the Spirit World of ATR

One cannot understand the spiritual beings of ATR without first grasping traditional African cosmology. Here I provide an overview of this cosmology, and then examine the broad characteristics of divinities, spirits, witches, and the living-dead. This survey sets the stage for my overview of how Christians have engaged and transformed the cosmology of ATR and its beliefs about the spiritual realm.

In his seminal work, *Bantu Philosophy*, Placide Tempels (1952:44-69) organizes African cosmology according to a hierarchy of "force-beings," which possess varying degrees of vital force (the dynamic African concept of "being"). According to Tempels, God transcends force and is the source of all vital power. God is the Supreme Being and far above human beings. Below God are the first human ancestors who founded the various clans. Below these are the dead of the tribes, in order of primogeniture. Below these are the living, in order of vital-power rank. Below these are lower forces, such as animals, vegetables, and minerals (Tempels 1952:61-64). Janheinz Jahn (1958:99-104), utilizing Alexis Kagame's four-fold schema (cf. Kagame 1956), relays a slightly different cosmology: (1) *umuntu* (forces with intelligence); (2) *ukintu* (forces without intelligence); (3) *ubantu* (forces of place and time); (4) and *ukuntu* (forces of modality). John Mbiti's (1969:16) cosmology situates spirits between God and humans: (1) God; (2) spirits; (3) humans (the living); (4) animals and plants; and (5) phenomena or objects without biological life. All beings are interrelated by means of vital power and hierarchically arranged according to vital rank. Both Mbiti and E. Bolaji Idowu (1973:165-188) subdivide spiritual beings into three hierarchical categories: divinities, spirits, and ancestors/the living-dead.<sup>4</sup> Generally speaking, spiritual beings "belong to the ontological mode of existence between God and man" (Mbiti 1969:75).

Divinities are often associated with God and God's attributes and activities (Mbiti 1969:76). According to Adonijah O. Ogbonnaya (1994:23-30), divinities are related to one another by virtue of their divine nature, but they are distinct in personhood and function. As Idowu remarks (1973:169), divinities exist "only in

<sup>4</sup> It should be recognized that these taxonomies and categorizations are not homogenous across ATR. They are constructions that attempt to articulate an observable phenomena in many traditional African societies.

consequence of the being of Deity,” and are not ends in themselves. The divinities are often associated with nature (e.g., earth, rivers) or activities (e.g., farming, fishing), and are ministers of God and intermediaries between God and man (Idowu 1973:169). The Yoruba, for example, have nearly one thousand and seven hundred divinities (the largest pantheon in Africa). *Orunmila* is associated with God’s omniscience and wisdom, and has knowledge of all spoken language. *Esu* is God’s “inspector-general,” reporting the deeds of humans to God. Since he is clever, cunning, and pernicious, having the power to render punishment, people greatly fear him. The Yoruba say: “*Esu* the doer of both evil and good” (Gbádégesin 2007:33-53; cf. Mbiti 1970:121). Enoch Gbádégesin (2007:34) notes that *Esu* is not wholly bad, since God originally “sent Èsù . . . with a mission of creating and maintaining order in the cosmos.” People offer sacrifices to *Esu*, calling him “Father” (Idowu 1962:80-85). Keith Ferdinando (1999:51) mentions several divinities who appear to be predominately malevolent, such as *Uri Cbi* of the Igbo and *Macardit* of the Dinka. Yet he emphasizes that the divinities “are rarely understood as unambiguously bad,” noting that they are “characterized by an unpredictable ambivalence.”

Spirits are distinguished from divinities and ancestors/the living-dead. Idowu (1973:173) observes that divinities and ancestors are associated with families and communities, but “spirits are not as clearly defined.” Spirits are “shrouded in mystery,” their origin being unclear (Ezeanya 1969:44). Many believe spirits to be the “remains of human beings when they die,” although some believe they were created by God, or that they are spirits of animals (Mbiti 1969:79) or of humans who were not properly buried (Magesa 1997:175). They are invisible, ubiquitous, without personal ties to the living, and without genuine personality, being referred to as “its” and “things”. Spirits may dwell in forests, rivers, mountains, or on the outskirts of a village (Mbiti 1969:79-81). They lack bodily form and may seek to possess people, animals, and other objects (Kalu 2008:177). Spirits can be benevolent, malicious, or both. Humans often fear spirits since they are strangers. Malevolent spirits disturb cosmic harmony and peace within a community, detracting vital energy from victims (Magesa 1997:178-179). Ferdinando (1999:49) notes several “capriciously mischievous” spirits, such as the *zar*, *bori*, and *shetani*. However, these spirits can be placated and transformed into guardians and protectors. Idowu (1973:174-176) speaks of “ghost-spirits,” who are aimless wanderers; spirits “born-to-die,” who sadistically enter the wombs of women to kill their children; and spirits of witches, who are “out-and-out diabolic.”

As already observed, spirits interact with humans in many different ways. Some societies make a sharp distinction between spirit attack and spirit possession, but any spiritual being may inflict physical or psychological pain on a dishonorable person. Disease, depression, homicide, or birth of a deformed child could consti-

tute an attack. Superhuman strength, convulsion, bizarre motor activity, and flight into the woods could constitute possession (Ferdinando 1999:52-59). Ferdinando (1999:57-70) relays several possible responses to spirit attacks. One may *appease* a hostile spirit by offering a propitiatory sacrifice or establishing a shrine for it. A diviner may *exorcise* a spirit by invoking possession upon him- or herself, or by transferring the spirit into an object. Finally, one may *accommodate* a spirit, “domesticating” and welcoming it as one’s benefactor.

Witches are also active agents of malicious activity, although sometimes witchcraft entails manipulating evil spirits (Evans-Pritchard 1937:118-33). Some societies make a distinction between witchcraft and sorcery, the former being distinguished by the use of psychic powers, the latter by the use of medicines (Evans-Pritchard 1937:21). This dichotomy should not be overstressed (Ferdinando 1999:89-95). Witchcraft and sorcery are generally regarded as anti-social evils. They often disrupt social harmony within a community. Witchcraft may be hereditary and even subconscious. Almost any personal and societal misfortune may be attributed to witchcraft or sorcery (Evans-Pritchard 1937:23-39). Sorcery is “theoretically open to anyone with access to the requisite knowledge,” and is sometimes viewed as a greater threat than witchcraft, given that harmful substances are usually involved (Ferdinando 1999:104-107). Sorcery often utilizes “magic,” which is generally considered neutral but can also be used for evil purposes (Bosch 1987:47). Sometimes the magic or the evil spirit of one’s bewitchment can be returned upon the witch or sorcerer. The traditional doctor treats such bewitchment, who, through “visible symbolic rituals,” brings healing to both the physical ailment and the hostile relationship that often coincides between sorcerer and victim (Oosthuizen 1987:75).

The living-dead comprise spirits of humans who have died but are still actively remembered as members of the community. Ancestors are among the living-dead, although not all living-dead are ancestors, since ancestorhood requires an exemplary life-lived (Mbiti 1969:83, 85). Ancestors have greater vital force and may mediate this power to the living (Setiloane 1986:19). “Life from day to day—and we might legitimately say from moment to moment—has no meaning at all apart from ancestral presence and power” (Ezeanya 1969:43). While ancestors are generally benevolent beings, “they are a constant threat, punishing breaches of tradition and taboo as well as any failure to render them appropriate honor” (Ferdinando 1999:48). Some spirits in ATR evade this classification schema, such as guardian spirits or the spiritual double (*chi*) of the Igbo, who resides within a human being for his or her lifetime (Ezeanya 1969:43).

In sum, the spirit world of ATR is complex, multivalent, and dynamic. Spirit-beings are rarely perceived as “either good or bad,” although some are more malevolent than benevolent. They are commonly the cause of evil, although witches and sorcer-

ers are especially regarded as such. If we define demons as “spiritual beings, numinous powers both benevolent and malevolent in nature,” then we could say that ATR possesses some form of demonology (Long 1987:282). However, since the term “demon” has come to acquire a predominantly negative connotation in western settings, it is best not to refer to the traditional spirits of ATR as “demons,” since not all spirit-beings in ATR are understood as evil entities. We must be careful not to import western suppositions concerning “the demonic” onto traditional African beliefs about the spirit world. Reasons for this will become evident in the following section.

### 3. Demonology in Contemporary African Christianity

Here I survey how Christianity has critiqued and transformed traditional African beliefs about the spirit world. This is not the place for a thorough coverage of this topic. My aim is only to highlight several key patterns of Christianity’s variegated response to the supernatural worldview of ATR.

According to Abraham Akrong (2001:18), “the dualistic strategy that the missionaries... used to distinguish Christianity from traditional religion promoted the tendency towards dualism in African Christianity.” Through the fusion of African and Pietist imaginations, the ancestors, divinities, and spirits became diabolic powers. Gerhardus Oosthuizen (1987:74) similarly remarks that “the reaction of the church against the emphasis on the evil forces, especially the devil in the seventeenth and eighteenth century and the declaration that belief in witchcraft is heresy, did much to influence the missionaries against such forces.” According to Birgit Meyer (1999:108-111), the introduction of a morally dualistic cosmology into African Christianity is an observable phenomenon throughout the continent. The acceptance of Jesus as Lord meant the acceptance of Satan as God’s chief rival, whose trappings are the practices and beliefs of ATR. Therefore, certain African ministers, such as T. B. Joshua, have painted the native doctors of ATR as emissaries of Satan, reversing their traditional social function as healers and restorers of order (Ezigbo 2010:226-228).

The dualism that the early missionaries introduced into African cosmology had an ironic effect. Meyer (1996:210-217) demonstrates that, in spite of the efforts of early Pietist missionaries who diabolized ATR among the Ewe, African Christians kindled a “reified heathendom,” and the spirit-beings of ATR became *more real* to African converts than before. This subverted the intention of the missionaries to eradicate the native religion. Rather than stamping out African traditional cosmology, the diabolizing of ATR enshrined and glorified Satan as the most powerful divinity. Victor Ezigbo (2010:226) remarks that, in Nigeria, Satan is perceived “as a deceiver precisely because, in their thinking, he solves problems for people and hopes to compel them to believe that he has the power to solve problems more quickly than Jesus.”

African Bible translations often rendered the name, “Satan,” as the name of a local African divinity. For example, “Satan” is translated as *Legba* in the Ewe Bible; *Rwuba* in the Rundi Bible; and *Esu* in the Yoruba Bible. Bosch (1987:40) notes that none of these African divinities are true equivalents to the Satan of Christianity. Eventually, many converts revert back to their traditional religion when the God of Christianity fails to “deliver the goods” (Meyer 1996:217-219). Gbádégésin (2007:50) remarks that charismatic movements began re-evangelizing these “backslidden” converts during the Nigerian revival of the early twentieth century, preaching that the ways of the old religion were in fact evil ploys of *Esu*, that is, Satan. According to Gbádégésin, in Anglican, Baptist, Methodist, and other mainline denominations, “*Esu* . . . lost his former ambivalent roles of doing both good and evil in the minds and lives of the majority of the people in Yoruba land.”

In addition to the diabolization of the divinities, spirits, ancestors, native doctors, and the religious practices of ATR, witchcraft has fallen under the same rubric of the demonic. Jane Parish (1999:433) describes a conflict between Akan women of indigenous churches and younger women of ascendant Pentecostal churches. “Each church, in a war of attrition, accuses the others of using the Bible . . . to involve young women in satanic occult forces associated with overt consumerism, vanity, self indulgence and a desire for personal success at any cost.” Young women are accused of witchcraft and driven to the shrines of *aduruyeyfo* priests to have Satan expelled from them. Johannes Merz (2008:207) relates that Bebelibe Christians also link the Devil with witchcraft, understanding him to be a spirit that takes possession of witches and seizes the life-force of their victims. “It is the spirit of *disenpode* [the devil] that enters *bebopé* [witches] and tells them to catch people,” said one Bebelibe woman to Merz.

There are some Bebelibe Christians, however, who have apparently developed a positive theology of witchcraft. Merz (2008:213) relays a fascinating account of a Bebelibe witch who converted to Christianity and now considers himself to be “a witch in the Holy Spirit.” This convert reckons his witchcraft to be a God-given gift that enables him to discern and exorcise evil spirits. Certain Bebelibe Christians conceive of Jesus as the witch *par excellence*, according to Merz. This is undoubtedly a minority viewpoint. Witchcraft is generally stigmatized or identified as diabolic in most African churches (Merz 2008:212-213).

Whereas mission churches have generally tried to extinguish traditional religious belief and practice, African Indigenous Churches (AICs) have taken a more integrative approach. Among the Zulu Zionists, ministers and prophets often take the role of traditional diviners and herbalists (Oosthuizen 1987:81). These “prayer healers” may have visions or dreams that predict the cause of a church member’s curse, and they may utilize herbs, holy water, and other sacramental symbols or

sacrifices to exorcise a spirit and bring healing to a victim. Some ministers will seek the aid of the ancestors while diagnosing a person's bewitchment and do not discourage church members from seeking additional help from traditional doctors. Yet this is not the case in all AICs. Allan Anderson (2003:185) explores how some AICs understand the Holy Spirit to fulfill the role of indigenous spiritual practice. In regards to the role of the ancestors, he states: "In the practices of the Spirit churches, whether the functions of the ancestors have been taken over by the Spirit cannot be proved conclusive." However, the Zionists "are considered to be experts in granting people protection from, and fortification against, the power of evil" (Oosthuizen 1987:76-83). Satan is still associated with witchcraft and sorcery in these churches, but there is more room for incorporating traditional African practice and belief into a Christian worldview. In some cases, demon possession is equated with ancestral-possession and therefore has a positive valuation (Anderson 2007:61).

Turning to emerging African neo-Pentecostal churches, here the focus is constant and active warfare against Satan. According to Meyer (1998:322), Pentecostals deem it "important to keep on fighting Satan, who is believed to be operating in the guise of traditional spirits." This is not a one-time break from the past, but a long-term process of spiritual battle. In Ghanaian Pentecostal churches, Christians are urged to denounce all blood covenants and ties to divinities and spirits, suffering ancestral curses and satanic attacks if they fail to do so. Freedom is gained through deliverance rituals, during which a Spirit-filled minister casts out the victim's demon. Convulsions, vomiting, and prostration commonly accompany the deliverance rite, as the Devil's power is nullified (Meyer 1998:337-339). Opoku Onyinah (2012:181-187, 217-218) describes this phenomena in Ghanaian neo-Pentecostal churches as "witchdemonology," the blending of traditional witchcraft belief with Christian demonology. Onyinah highlights that these churches are more "demon conscious" than the African Spiritual churches, noting that any Christian may be attacked by a demon so as to become either a witch him- or herself, demon possessed, or inflicted by an ancestral curse. The line between becoming a witch and being demon-possessed is blurred and ambiguous (Onyinah 2012:175).

Ogbu Kalu (2008:179) argues that neo-Pentecostal churches take the African map of the cosmos seriously, blending it with the biblical one. Some churches have developed complex taxonomies of spirits, utilizing the names of demons and deities in Scripture. For instance, "principalities" may include Apollyon and Belial; "powers" may include Ashteroth (agricultural deities), Baal (earth deities), and Beelzebub (god of witchcraft); and "rulers of darkness" may include Moleck (patron of pornography) and Leviathan (spirit of immoral covenants) (Kalu 2008:182-183). Some Pentecostal churches place a strong emphasis on territorial spirits. These may be ancestors, spirits, or certain global powers, such as big-business banks,

who have spiritual control over particular geographic domains (cf. Nwankpa 1994). Prayer-walks attempt to tear down these demonic strongholds (cf. Onyinah 2012:177-180).

Paul Gifford's analysis (2014) of demonology in the Nigerian Pentecostal church of Daniel Olukoya reveals a similar, but less "biblically mapped," multiplication of demonic spirits and diabolization of African traditional practices. According to Olukoya, there are twenty-four types of malevolent "Night Raiders" who inhibit people from reaching their divine destinies, such as "forest demons, ancestral strongmen, counterfeit angels, dream manipulators," and marine spirits (Gifford 2014:73). "There are twenty places of intensified 'demonic traffic' ... ten different 'local' satanic strategies" and "forty different weapons that satanic spirits wield against us" (Gifford 2014:70-71). Olukoya emphasizes the nefarious role of indigenous spirits, witchcraft, and demonic spirit-spouses, whereas Pentecostal preacher, David Oyedepo, speaks primarily of Satan as God's enemy (Gifford 2015:44).

To summarize, there is great diversity and complexity in the demonologies of African Christianity. We surveyed only some of the ways Christians in Africa have engaged and transformed the cosmology of ATR and its beliefs about the spiritual realm. Generally speaking, missionary churches dismissed ATR altogether, diabolizing it and functionally denying the existence of African spiritual beings. Many mainline denominations continue this pattern today (Gifford 2015:121-124). Most African churches have accepted the cosmic dualism introduced by the missionaries, categorizing traditional spirits as satanic. AICs and older Spiritual churches have tried to integrate elements of ATR into Christian religion with varying degrees of success. Neo-Pentecostal churches have developed intricate demonologies that categorizes most aspects of ATR as satanic and linked to witchcraft. At the risk of over-simplifying the matter, the historical development of African demonology has taken the shape of thesis (missionary churches), antithesis (AICs and Spiritual churches), and synthesis (neo-Pentecostalism).

#### **4. Critique of African-Christian Theologies of the Spirit World**

How is one to evaluate these multivalent Christian responses to the African spirit world? Although a detailed assessment exceeds the limits of the present study, I here offer several critiques.

First, it is problematic that African Christianity has by and large diabolized all spirits and divinities of ATR. The rationalist mentality of the post-Enlightenment missionaries contributed to the complete eschewing of the spirit world and the general ignorance and even denial of the supernatural worldview contained in Scripture. Those who maintained belief in some kind of spiritual realm extended Occam's razor to categorize all traditional spirits as diabolic, leading to a kind of minimalist

cosmic dualism. As noted earlier, the blanket categorization of ATR as “demonic” enshrined and glorified Satan as the most powerful divinity.

Second, the cosmic dualism of many missionaries was not contextualized in a robust Christian theology of the spiritual realm that provided space for other spiritual beings besides God and the Devil. This failure actually led to an *increase* in witchcraft and “satanic activity,” since Africans retained their traditional cosmologies in which divinities, spirits, ancestors, witches, and doctors all played crucial roles in everyday life. For missionaries who retained belief in the Devil, to integrate the spiritual realm of ATR into the Christian faith could only result in worshiping idols and sacrificing to demons. For those of an entirely rationalistic mindset, the very idea of demons and other spiritual beings was entirely dismissed.

Third, the diabolization of ATR has led to the demonization of those Christian Africans who continue to practice traditional religion in some way, shape, or form. It is true that in some cases Pentecostalism has constructively transformed witchcraft-eradication movements into positive opportunities for people to confess their witchcraft and be integrated back into community (Maxwell 1995:320-322). However, the diabolization of ATR has resulted in the marginalization of many individuals from their local communities and has contributed to larger societal conflicts between those who continue to practice traditional religion and those who do not.

As belief in the spirit world shows no sign of waning in most African contexts (Onyinah 2012:174-176), it seems that African Christians must continue to seek ways of reconciling Christianity and the African spiritual realm. While AICs and neo-Pentecostals have begun to do this constructively, they sometimes struggle to find positive categories for the spiritual beings of ATR, and some of them seem to lack a nuanced understanding of the biblical conception of the spiritual realm. Onyinah (2012:162-168), Ezigbo (2010:242-249), and Fedinando have underscored the need to emphasize God’s sovereignty over African divinities, since this limits the overblown power of “Satan” and traditional spirits. Suggestions such as these are insightful, but do they go far enough?

This leads to a fourth critique of African-Christian theologies of the spirit world: the lack of a robust, Christian mythological narrative that explains the origin and nature of the spiritual realm<sup>5</sup> — a narrative that emphasizes God’s sovereignty but allows space for the variegated spirit beings of ATR. Narratives are fundamental components of worldviews, and “all worldviews are at the deepest level shorthand formulae to express stories” (Wright 1992:77; cf. Nuagle 2002:297-310). Without such a theological narrative to support an African-Christian worldview, the Devil can effortlessly

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<sup>5</sup> By “myth” I do not mean something that is untrue, but rather a foundational story that explains why things are the way they are.

be perceived as an all-powerful deity, equal in might to the one true God. Without a robust, biblical theology of the spiritual realm, it is easy to neglect the testing and discerning of spirits (cf. 1 John 4:1-6; Gal 1 :8-9; 1 Cor 12:10; 1 Thes 5:21; 1 Tim 4:1-10; Mark 9:38-40) and unwittingly to condemn the entire realm of spiritual beings as in league with Satan. (Indeed, texts such as Deut 4:19-20; 1 Cor 10:20-21; and Rev 9:20 affirm a demonic association with idols, and passages like Lev 19:31; Deut 18:10-14; Gal 5:19-20 prohibit forms of divination. But does Scripture teach that all spiritual beings besides God, humans, and the Devil are demonic? It does not appear so to me.)

I submit that a rigorous investigation and *ressourcement* of the supernatural worldview and mythological narratives regarding the unseen realm proffered in the Bible and the early church could provide theologians valuable resources for constructing an African-Christian theology of the spiritual realm capable of reconciling the various spiritual beings of ATR. A careful and responsible retrieval of this supernatural worldview and its encompassing narratives could contribute to a solution of the problems identified above. (I am not suggesting an adoption of an ancient cosmology, a Gnostic worldview, or anything of that sort; advances in modern science and the verdicts of Christian orthodoxy render those approaches and others like them gravely misguided.)

## **5. The Supernatural Worldview of Scripture and the Early Church**

What is Scripture's supernatural worldview, and what are its mythological narratives that explain the origin and nature of the spiritual realm created by God? This is, of course, an immensely complicated question that cannot fully be answered here. I am only able to present an all-too-brief and over-simplified (but hopefully enlightening) biblical-theological sketch. My aim is that readers will be encouraged to study in greater detail the remarkably rich theology of the spiritual realm in Scripture and the early Christian tradition. (It is important to recognize that these theological concepts contain significant diversity and sometimes disagreement, and that they developed over the course of hundreds of years. The cultural context and influence of ancient Mesopotamian and Greek religions and apocalyptic Judaism is crucial for understanding these developments. It is not my intention to provide a critical analysis of such historical developments here.)

To begin, as biblical scholar Michael Heiser (2015:23-37) illustratively demonstrates in his work, *The Unseen Realm*, Yahweh has a divine family in the Old Testament. This family is called the "divine council" (Ps 82:1), and it is comprised of the "Sons of God" (cf. Walton 2006:87-112). The members of this council are *not* the Christian Trinity, but lesser divine beings (Ps 89:5-7) created by the God of Israel (Neh 9:6; cf. Col 1:16), who were with God before the creation of the earth (Job 38:4-7), but who are also mortal (Ps 82:7) and capable of corruption (Ps 82:2-4). According

to Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28, the “serpent” of Genesis 3 was one such council member who rebelled against God (Isa 14:13-14; Ezek 28:14-17) and persuaded the first humans to do the same (Gen 3:1-5). The author of Revelation identifies the serpent as “the Devil and Satan” (Rev 12:9; cf. 2 Cor 11:3; 1 Thes 3:5).<sup>6</sup>

The narrative thickens in Gen 6:1-4 when rebellious members of the divine council descend and cohabit with the daughters of men (cf. Wright 2005). The third-century BCE Jewish retelling of this story in the *Book of Watchers* (1 Enoch 1-36) greatly influenced the early Christian understanding of Genesis 6. This apocalyptic work describes the rebellious angels as teaching secret arts to humans and having sexual relations with them, thereby generating supernatural beings called Giants whose spirits continue to live in the world as demons (1 En. 6-16). These spiritual entities are the “evil” and “unclean spirits” with whom Jesus wages war in the Synoptic tradition (Wright 2016). The Enochic reading of Genesis 6 was a mainstream interpretation within Second Temple Judaism. The New Testament writers are familiar with it and appropriate it on a number of occasions (e.g., 2 Pet 2:4-5; Jude 6; Matt 22:13; 25:41; 1 Pet 3:19-20; Rev 20:1-3, 10; 1 Cor 11:10; cf. VanderKam 1996; Reed 2005; Stuckenbruck 2013; Harkins, Bautch, and Endres 2014). A leading scholar on the topic, Annette Reed (2005:148) remarks: “If our extant evidence is any measure, virtually all Christian exegetes in the second and third centuries [CE] adopted the angelic interpretation of Gen. 6.1-4.” (While I do not believe in the inspiration of the Book of Enoch, its influence on the New Testament and early Christianity must be taken seriously.)

What is more, due to the disobedience of Noah’s offspring in constructing the Tower of Babel (Gen 11:1-9), God disinherited the nations and placed them under the authority of members of his divine council, but claimed Israel as his own (Deut 4:19-20; 32:8-9; cf. Acts 17:26-27; see Heiser 2001). This is why Daniel speaks of spiritual rulers of certain nations (Dan 10:12-14, 20-21), why Satan is able to offer Jesus “all the kingdoms of the world” (Matt 4:8-9), why Paul asserts that Christ was exalted over every “ruler, authority, power, and dominion” (Eph 1:20-21; cf. 2:2; 3:10; 6:12; Col 2:15; 1 Cor 2:6-8), and why Pentecost reverses the curse of Babel, the disciples being sent to reclaim the nations as God’s own inheritance (Acts 1:8; 2:1-21; cf. Luke 10:1, 17-20). In short, what Heiser (2015:110-115) calls a “Deuteronomy 32 worldview” plays a major role in the Bible’s overarching salvation-historical narrative.

This supernatural worldview was pervasive among the early Christian church as well. For example, Papias (*Frag.* 11; Holmes 2007:748-749) claimed that God

<sup>6</sup> To be sure, the figure of “the Satan” undergoes a considerable historical development from the Old to the New Testament. My purpose is not, however, to trace such developments here.

assigned the angels “to rule over the orderly arrangement of the earth and commissioned them to rule well . . . But as it turned out, their administration came to nothing. And the great dragon, the ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, was cast out; the deceiver of the whole world was cast down to the earth along with his angels.” Justin Martyr (*2 Apol.* 5.5; Barnard 1997:77) wrote that God had “entrusted the care of men and women and of things under heaven to angels whom He appointed over them.” These angels rebelled and produced children called demons. According to Clement of Alexandria, God set guardian angels over each nation, but some of them revealed forbidden knowledge to humankind, leading to their corruption (*Strom.* 6.17; 7.2). Athenagoras (*Leg.* 10; Crehan 1956:41) held that God set “a multitude of angels and ministers. . . to be in charge of the elements and the heavens and the universe and all it contains.” A similar story of angelic corruption follows (*Leg.* 24). The pseudo-Clementines report the same tale (*Hom.* 18.4; *Rec.* 2.42; *Hom.* 8.12-18), as does Origen (*Cels.* 5.30-31) and Eusebius of Caesarea (*Dem. ev.* 4.6-10). Many more examples like these from the early church could be cited (see VanderKam 1996:62-88; Nickelsburg 2001:82-101).

Angels, benevolent members of the divine council, and other spiritual entities possess a diversity of roles in Scripture and cognate literature. For example, the Cherubim bear God’s throne and are his means of transport (1 Sam 4:4; Ezek 1:4-28; 10:18-22). The Seraphim are leaders in the celestial liturgy (Isa 6:1-7; 1 En. 71:7; Rev 4:8). Of the archangels (cf. 1 Thes 4:16; Jude 9), Michael brings judgment (1 En. 10:11-16; 68), leads the fight against the Devil (Rev 12:7-9), and transports human souls (Jude 9; 1 En. 71:3-13; *T. Abr.* A 10:1; Mach 1999:571). Gabriel is a revealer (Collins 1999:339), who interprets visions (Dan 8:16-26; 10:10-21), unveils God’s plan of salvation (Luke 1:19-20, 26-39), and battles spiritual rulers (Dan 10:13, 20). Raphael is a healer (Tob 3:17; 5:16; 1 En. 10:7; 40:9), binder of fallen angels and demons (Tob 8:3; 1 En. 10:4-6), and a conveyer of prayer to God (Tob 12:12). Other angels deliver divine messages (1 Kgs 13:18; Gal 3:19; Heb 1:14), protect and guard the saints (Gen 24:7, 40; Ex 14:19; Ps 91:11-13; Matt 18:10; Acts 5:19), interpret visions (Zech 1:9; 2:2; 4:1-6), bring death and destruction (Ex 12:23; 2 Kgs 19:35), and record the deeds of men (1 En. 89:62-64).

Early Christian writers embellished this portrait. Angels and other divine beings possess free will (Tert., *Apol.* 22; Orig., *Princ.* 1.5.3; Euseb., *Dem. ev.* 4.9.5) and carry out their tasks in a heavenly hierarchy (Clem. of Alex., *Ecl.* 1.2, 3.1). Some writers describe seven heavenly firmaments where angels of various rank reside (Mart. Ascen. Isa. 7-10; Ep. Apos. 13; *T. Levi* 2-5). Celestial liturgies take place in the upper levels, and angels of the lower tiers execute important tasks on earth and interact with humans in a variety of ways (Daniélou 1964:182-184). Geographical regions are ruled by certain spiritual powers (Athen., *Leg.* 24.5, 6; 25.1, 4; Orig.,

*Princ.* 1.5.2, 4; *Hom. Ezech.* 13.1; Euseb., *Dem. ev.* 4.9.12.), and there are guardian angels of individuals and churches (*Herm. Vis.* 5.1-4; Origen, *Hom. Num.* 11; Basil, *Adv. Eun.* 3.1; cf. Rev 2-3): “They protect the soul against troubles from within and without; they reprimand and punish the soul that turns aside from the right way; they assist it at prayer and transmit its petitions to God” (Jean Daniélou 1953:71). Demons of the lower firmaments contribute to the promulgation of human vice and sin (*Herm. Mand.* 2.3; 5.2; *Herm. Sim.* 9.22; *Test. Reub.* 3.3-6; *Barn.* 16.7; Clement, *Strom.* 2.114.3; Ps-Clem., *Hom.* 9.10).

The cosmology of the Bible and the early church is far more dynamic than is usually acknowledged and contains more similarities to ATR than is usually recognized. For example, there is a hierarchy of spiritual beings, and within that hierarchy there is a great diversity of roles and functions: healing, protecting, delivering messages, binding demons, issuing judgment, and leading the divine liturgy, to name a few. The divine beings of Scripture clearly possess free will and therefore may be morally ambiguous.<sup>7</sup> While a “moral dualism” exists in the cosmology of the Bible and early church, it is a dynamic dualism that morally gauges creatures on a sliding scale. A classic example is the ambiguous figure of “the Satan” in the Hebrew Bible (Job 1:6-2:7; Zech 3:1-2; 1 Chr 21:1), a functionary of the divine council who frequently challenges Yahweh but “is certainly not an independent, inimical force” (Breytenbach and Day 1999:728). Demons and demonic possession in early Christianity contain many parallels with spirits and spirit possession in ATR (Ferdinando 1999:386-389). While no ancestral concept exists in early Christianity, some understood the human soul as capable of an angelic-like transformation and translation into the heavenly realm (Fletcher-Louis 2002; Gieschen 1998:152-183; Daniélou 1964:191-192). In sum, the parallels between the spirit world of ATR and early Christianity are intriguing and deserve a much more exhaustive treatment.

In summary, an approach to Scripture that takes seriously its supernatural worldview and its mythological narratives possesses far greater potential for reconciling the spirit world of ATR in African Christianity than the thin, rigid cosmic dualism of the early missionaries. Such an approach grounds belief regarding the spiritual realm in a robust biblical theology, which, on the one hand mitigates the power of the Devil and other malevolent spirits by explaining their origins, nature, *telos*, and subordination to God, but on the other hand provides space for benevolent spirit-beings to possess significant roles and functions in the world. Studying the cosmology of the early church affirms and expands the biblical portrait. An academically rigorous and theologically responsible attempt to find common ground between the supernatural worldviews of ATR and the Bible is sure to yield new pathways

<sup>7</sup> Ferdinando (1999:382-383) disagrees, but see Brand's (2002:47-48) rebuttal.

for inculturating Christianity into the African context. Of course, the discernment of spirits must remain a crucial part of this task (cf. 1 John 4:1-6; Gal 1:8-9; 1 Cor 12:10; 1 Thes 5:21; 1 Tim 4:1-10; Mark 9:38-40) and true worship reserved alone for the one true God (Ex 20:5; Matt 4:10; Gal 3:20; 4:9-11; Rev 19:10; 22:8-9).

## 6. Conclusion

To clarify, I am not advocating for the total adoption of an early Christian cosmology, as this would be not only anachronistic, but to reject advances in modern knowledge. The practical application of biblical theology usually requires the mediation of contemporary natural theology. For example, most western Christians do not believe in an actual firmament in the sky, that the stars and planets are spiritual beings, that God literally resides above the earth, etc. Western natural theology has, to a certain extent, influenced the way biblical phenomena like these are interpreted. Similarly, any application of the supernatural worldview and mythological narratives of Scripture in an African context calls for the mediation of contemporary African natural theology. As seen earlier, most Africans hold a natural theology in which the spiritual realm is a crucial aspect of everyday life—"the world is full of gods." Insights from Scripture and the Christian tradition must be contextualized in this setting in order to be meaningful. Whether an African theologian decides to incorporate modern scientific knowledge into his or her natural theology is a decision each individual needs to make for him- or herself. I would maintain that an adoption of a modern scientific cosmology does not necessitate the total rejection of traditional African cosmology. It only means that the latter should be modified in the light of the former. This is the same process western Christianity has had to undergo, and questions still remain as to how to reconcile modern scientific cosmology with the Bible's supernatural worldview. Given the strong tendency toward demythologization, it has become difficult for some theologians even to think in terms of the supernatural. For this reason western theologians stand to benefit from learning about the African spiritual realm. Indeed, many look to Africa as the "privileged Christian laboratory for the world" (Bediako 1995:62) for help in resolving this tension.

To summarize, I have suggested that a retrieval of the supernatural worldview of Scripture and its mythological narratives concerning the spiritual realm can help theologians reconcile the spirit world of ATR within a biblically-informed African theology, thereby yielding new pathways for the inculturation of Christianity in the African context. Many concepts and connections need to be explored in far greater detail than I have been able to do here. Finally, we have seen that the study of the spiritual realms of ATR and the Bible can be mutually beneficial and edifying. Their relationship should no longer be viewed as a one-way street.

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