

RESPONSE

A Theological Critique of Witchcraft: Ruminations from a Fellow African

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Accusations of witchcraft are matters of life and death in many parts of Africa today. They unmask the enduring human struggle to find happiness and meaning in a fallen, often perilous world. This publication by Bob Priest, Abel Ngolo, and Tim Stabell (2020) is brimming with wide ranging implications for the future of biblical Christianity in the Democratic Republic of the Congo—indeed Christians everywhere should listen in, for there are lessons aplenty.

I am grateful to the authors and to their team for this landmark research. Since there is so much to discuss, I am relieved that other contributors bring their expertise to issues I cannot dwell on here. In what follows, I shall focus my remarks on two salient theological areas that deserve further scrutiny—supernaturalism and Scripture.

The Dilemma of Supernaturalism

In their analysis of the perspectives among Congolese pastors, the authors write that “very few Kinshasa pastors are inclined to categorically deny the very possibility of witch causality. To do so before a Congolese audience would be to lose credibility. It would signal unbelief in the supernatural realities widely understood to be taught in Scripture. It would imply capitulation to white secularist unbelief” (34). This is very telling. It is okay for *Équipe Pastorale auprès des Enfants en Détresse* (EPED) pastors to deconstruct child-witch accusations; it is even okay to fight tooth and nail on behalf of children accused of witchcraft—but to *deny* witch causality outright, oh never! *That* is going too far, they worry, a caving into the post-Enlightenment naturalism of the West.

These Congolese pastors agree that child-witch accusations are a social and pastoral blight. Why then do they refuse to abandon witchcraft beliefs entirely? Once we see the situation from their perspective, such attitudes make sense. For most Bible-believing Christians alive today, the standard Western view of the world is inimical to faith. African traditional religion, by comparison, is far closer to the mentality of Scripture.

In the biblical picture, the realm of science and empirical things is only the *visible* portion of an unimaginably richer reality. The cosmos is teeming with supernatural beings, including holy angels and malevolent demons. As the apostle Paul explains, “our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Eph 6:12).

Modern interpreters tend to demythologize this biblical teaching about demonology. Walter Wink, for example, famously argued that the scriptural language of “demons” refers to the corruption of social structures and institutions within human societies—*not* to supernatural beings (1984; 1986; 1992). No Christian should sanction such blatant naturalism. The inspired text portrays the devil and his minions as supernatural creatures with personality, will, power. Thus, many Africans assume that, from a Christian perspective, indigenous religious assumptions are more or less trustworthy. Since they share the Bible’s supernatural view of the world, the default African traditional religion is innocent until proven guilty.

But this inference is mistaken—and it hides a multitude of sins. The fact that African traditional religion and Scripture share a supernatural worldview should actually lead Christians to *more* caution, even skepticism, about their indigenous beliefs. “Supernaturalism,” after all, comes in many shapes and sizes. Indigenous African ideas about the invisible realm may be more *or less* helpful depending on how much they align with Scripture. Just because African religious beliefs are supernatural does not make them biblical. To wit, this study by Priest, Ngolo, and Stabell provides sufficient evidence that witchcraft beliefs in the Congo are *not* biblical. At best, they are misinformed superstition; at worst, they are loathsome to God.

The Dilemma of Holy Scripture

Pastor Wallo Mutsenga tells us that symptoms of witchcraft include weight loss, bedwetting, talking

during sleep, waking up tired, forgetfulness, depression, bad hygiene, and so on. Witches are usually sickly and tainted by a mystical witchcraft seed—a malicious force that “can be transmitted into someone by means of contact with a gift of food, drinks, clothes, or toys . . . [or] in a dream, through sex, or acquired from one’s mother while still in the womb” (40). Mutsenga also claims that witches can turn into cockroaches, lions, rats, mosquitoes, and other animals (22). One report describes widespread beliefs that witches not only harm others by psychic powers, but they can transform “into an animal (owl, cockroach, ant, cat, crocodile or snake) in order to get into the victim’s house” (Cimpric 2010, 18). Such testimonies abound in the primary literature, but they have no basis in Scripture.

The biblical passages often cited by Africans do not support witch-demonology, i.e., the idea that the devil empowers witches to inflict harm on others and, therefore, that Christians should engage in deliverance ministries to liberate those in demonic captivity (Onyinah 2004, 2012). There is, of course, a form of demonic deliverance taught in Scripture and epitomized by Jesus (and his disciples), and with which I am in complete agreement. My point here is that none of the standard passages support the distinctive African concept of *witch causality* (e.g., Exod 7:11; 22:18; Lev 19:31; 20:6; Deut 18:10-12; Isa 8:19-20; Jer 27:9; Dan 2:2, etc.). A careful analysis of each of these passages would show that none of them sanctions the idea of an “evil person (male or female) said to harm others through inborn psychic power” (7).¹ Priest and his colleagues have laid out much of that evidence, particularly with reference to Bible translation, confirming that a wide gap lies between Scripture and African witch discourse (43-45). This problem is urgent and demands further attention.

Ironically, African witch accusations may reflect the work of Satan. As the authors write, “When we accept false child-witch accusation against orphans, we are inclined to treat orphans as dangerous and evil. Thus we are motivated to do the work Satan desires, rather than what God calls us to, to love and protect orphans” (37). The rituals that have developed around witch-demonology bring to mind the situation in late medieval Catholicism. At the dawn of the Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church prescribed good deeds, indulgences, pilgrimages, and other penitential rituals to relieve people burdened by sin. Luther’s Reformation was a protest against such extrabiblical practices. Does

Christianity in Africa need a similar Reformation in its extrabiblical views of child witches?

So far, I have noted that many African Christians conflate traditional religious beliefs and biblical supernaturalism. I have also suggested that the Protestant Scripture principle (*sola scriptura*) rules out indigenous notions of witchcraft. At this point, two related worries loom large: First, if African Christians are persuaded by my argument, will that open the door to secularization?² The logic would go like this: if witch causality is mistaken, then everything we Africans have thought about supernaturalism falls apart.³ The worry, then, is that my argument unwittingly sanctions the idea that supernaturalism is a childish myth we should set aside. Second, missionary history tells a cautionary tale—does my critique of witch causality commit the same error as early nineteenth century missionaries who dismissed the emic concerns of millions of African Christians?

In the first place, I do not apologize for privileging *sola scriptura*. Any theological tradition that does not habitually align itself with the teaching of Scripture deserves to die. “The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever” (Isa 40:8). In the second place, taking the Bible seriously is not a Trojan horse for the compromises of Western Christianity. True allegiance to Scripture is a long way from the “excluded middle” Paul Hiebert warned against in his classic essay (1982). As believers who are united with Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit, we are de facto protagonists in a life-and-death spiritual warfare. African Christians can help the global church retrieve an unflinchingly biblical supernaturalism. However, African Christianity will only lead the way if it jealously guards the canonical witness and its rule over the life of the church.

Scripture is the very word of God handed down to us by the apostles and prophets. Robert Yarbrough rightly argues that the future of global Christianity lies with *populists* rather than *elitists*; populists, he writes, “are apt to read the Bible in ‘populist’ fashion, meaning they find the truth of Christian doctrine affirmed in the ‘historical’ documents the Bible contains. ‘Elitist’ reading, in contrast, often denies saving efficacy, or accuracy, or even relevance to the biblical writings” (2019, 9). By God’s grace, African Christianity at its best is a populist movement that embraces all of Scripture and applies it directly to our lives in the twenty-first century.

¹ The limits of the present forum prevent such an analysis here, but see Priest (2019, 9-13) and the research by the Nigerian scholar Paul Cookey (e.g., Cookey 2015, 2019).

² One recalls the title and theme of Chinua Achebe’s classic novel *Things Fall Apart*. Denying witchcraft potentially threatens an entire worldview and culture, not just an idea.

At the same time, populist faith is not immune from corruption. Such manifestations of Christianity are often “ignorant, conservative in culpable ways, anti-intellectual, manipulative, and immoral through complicity in sins like racism, nationalism, and materialism” (Yarbrough 2019, 41). It is therefore noteworthy that theological education has a corrective effect on witchcraft attitudes. For example, Priest, Ngolo, and Stabell write: “Theological education had a small but significant effect on pastors’ inclination to believe in the guilt of accused children. Specifically, pastors with formal advanced theological education were less likely to endorse accusations than were pastors whose only training was informal in the context of church ministry” (32; see also 27, 29). Reliable theological education is an urgent need for African pastors. While I recognize that the academic accouterments of seminary training have not always served the gospel well in the West (theological liberalism flourished despite—and sometimes *because of*—academic training!), African Christianity tends to lie at the other extreme. The lack of theological leadership among pastors is a breeding ground for syncretistic and heretical Christianity. These matters are much easier to diagnose than to cure, for theological education (or lack thereof) is an extremely difficult problem in the African context. It nonetheless plays a central role in this discussion.

Some Concluding Thoughts

In much of the witch discourses in Kinshasa, Christians seem to be searching for a practical theodicy.³ They are haunted by life’s deepest questions: Why do evil things happen in the world? Why am I going through this particular suffering? Who is to blame for my present predicament? These are ancient, eminently human questions. Augustine, Origen, Irenaeus, and other early church fathers—almost all of them fellow Africans—had much to say on these matters. As an African-in-diaspora, my judgment is that the witch theodicy should be retired for good; it is myopic and reductionist. It superficially conflates indigenous beliefs and Christian concepts, and it overlooks Scripture and broader Christian theological reflection on evil and suffering.

In his book *Why Do Men Barbecue?*, Richard Shweder observes that every culture has a causal ontology, a way of making sense of pain and suffering. He describes seven different causal ontologies, among them the *biomedical* causal ontology associated with Western medicine. Job’s friends, on the other hand,

appealed to what Shweder calls a *moral* causal ontology—our misfortunes are the result of personal failing or sin. The most common causal ontology globally is the *interpersonal* causal ontology, “the idea that one can be made sick by the envy or ill will of colleagues, neighbors, and associates” (2003, 77). One might conclude from this research by Priest, Ngolo, and Stabell that African Christians should abandon witchcraft ideology *and* its associated interpersonal causal ontology. I agree that Christians should abandon witchcraft beliefs, but I think they should retain a *modified* interpersonal causal ontology. To be sure, the typical human-to-human causal ontology associated with black magic and evil eye is a pagan concept, but Scripture routinely depicts *divine-to-human* and *demon-to-human* causal ontologies. For example, God regenerates people; he smites sinners with disease and even death (e.g., 2 Kgs 15:5; Lk 1:19-20; Acts 12:23); he heals sickness in answer to prayer (e.g., 2 Kgs 5:10-14; 20:1-21; James 5:14-16)—not always, but sometimes. Demons, though mere creatures, can possess individuals and instigate human afflictions (e.g., Lk 13:10-17; Acts 10:38)—not always, but sometimes. The Christian position is thus consistent with a modified interpersonal causal ontology, though not exhausted by that category.

This fine study on witchcraft beliefs in Kinshasa signals a need for a compelling practical theology for lay Christians in Africa. In their analysis of cultures with the witch idea, Priest et al. write: “there is strong evidence in such societies that people not only feel deep insecurity, but that they respond to this insecurity by methods thought to protect from the witch attacks of neighbors, relatives, or colleagues. Such methods may include use of protective charms and amulets, or of prayers to God for protection” (43). Instead, pastors should be offering a robust theology that produces men and women who are confident in God’s sovereignty and his promise that the Spirit who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world (1 John 4:4). Such a theology affirms the reality of Satan and the powers of darkness but only as a subplot in the biblical story. Demonic forces are definitely real, but they are not the main attraction in the canonical drama. The focal plot is the triune God redeeming his people. As Luther said, the devil is *God’s* devil; he can do nothing without divine permission (e.g., see Job 1-2). Believers are more than conquerors, for no power on earth or in heaven can ever separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord (see Rom 8:37-39).

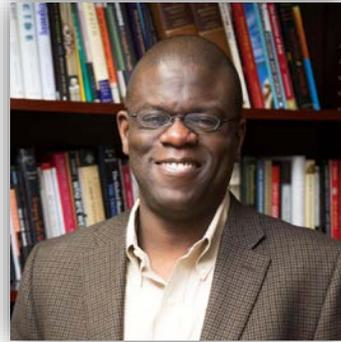
In sum, we need African Christian theodicies over against syncretistic witch theodicies. We need a richer,

³ I am ignoring the academic debates surrounding Christian theodicy. Here I am using the term “theodicy” loosely, to capture the human desire to make sense of personal suffering and misfortune.

supernatural, and truly *African* theology, magnificent in all its glory, yet always in continuity with the catholic tradition and rooted in the whole counsel of God.

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