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The Christian Church and Witchcraft Accusations in Africa

by Fabulous Moyo and Erwin van der Meer

Abstract

Contemporary African society is in crisis due to issues such as global warming, neo-colonial exploitation, corruption and other internal and external factors. These and other issues are increasing the levels of frustration in many African societies. Unable to address the more powerful forces which cause their sufferings, some people resort to the practice of scapegoating those who are weaker than them. In several African societies scapegoating takes the form of witchcraft accusations against children, the handicapped, the elderly and other vulnerable groups. The role of the church in all this has been ambiguous until date and needs to be re-examined.

Introduction

In this article we explore how the Christian church in Africa and beyond can make a positive contribution towards addressing the current wave of harmful witchcraft eradication movements in Africa. In order to understand the problem and suggest possible solutions, it is our opinion that we need to reflect on it from an interdisciplinary and global perspective.

Change and Crisis

In sub-Saharan Africa we encounter various competing worldviews that in one way or another influence our lives. We may think of the pre-modern African worldview, modernism, post-modernism, Islam, and Christianity as well as economic meta-narratives such as liberal capitalism, socialism and communism. Whenever a meta-narrative is discredited or called into question due to its interaction with other (meta) narratives, crisis or even conflict may be the result. The same occurs when conflicting meta-narratives are translated into policies and practices within the same context. Such a crisis can occur at an individual level, which may result in a psychological or spiritual crisis, and also at community, national, regional, continental and global levels.

Societal crisis may be the result of dominant global forces such as the interference of global capitalist interests of multi-national corporations in national politics, or economic and political power wielded undemocratically by global economic institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the World Trade Organisation and other international bodies. There is ample evidence that some of their policies and practices have contributed to the growing inequality between rich and poor in the world as well as facilitating corruption, money laundering and undermining the rule of

law and democracy as well as national sovereignty on a global scale.¹ Every year, \$1 trillion is spirited out of developing countries through corruption, smuggling, money laundering, and corporate tax evasion. The illicit financial flows out of developing countries dwarf the flow of development assistance going in. Illicit financial flows removed \$10 for every dollar spent on overall development aid, and \$80 for every dollar spent on basic social services.²

Contrary to popular opinion this flow of money does not just refer to funds transferred by corrupt dictators into bank accounts in Switzerland or the Cayman Islands. It also refers to profits illegally transferred by multi-national companies so that they avoid paying revenues and taxes in the developing countries where they operate. The current global economic and financial system allows these injustices to happen albeit in most cases not intentionally and actually maintains an unequal and unjust global environment where such things can happen. Africa's poor are not merely suffering because the Western world is providing too little aid. The poor are being actively and wrongly harmed by a system of global political and economic arrangements that is disproportionately shaped by and for the benefit of wealthy Western societies.³ The "indifferent masses"⁴ often hardly realise what is happening in their societies or the world at large, let alone raise their voices. Nevertheless, it must be pointed out that *indifferent* does not mean *neutral* because by going with the flow the "indifferent masses" may in effect "legitimise" and support whatever is happening.⁵

1. Scapegoating Mechanisms

Wherever there are major changes in society, whether socio-economic, political or cultural, a general sense of uncertainty, insecurity and confusion often results which leads to high levels of frustration. These frustrations may be repressed taking the form of depression, withdrawal and even suicide, but all too often they are expressed aggressively by means of intimidation, violence and war. This tendency may be labelled as displaced aggression whereby the frustrations of an individual or group are projected upon other individuals or groups of people who have nothing or very little to do with the actual cause of the frustrations.⁶

¹ Thomas Pogge, "Recognized & Violated by International Law: The Human Rights of the Global Poor," *United Nations Human Rights* (2007): 2-11, (accessed Aug 2, 2012), http://www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/poverty/expert/docs/Thomas_Pogge_new.pdf

² Thomas Pogge, "Illicit Financial Flows," *Global Justice Program - Yale University*, <http://www.yale.edu/macmillan/globaljustice/DirtyMoney.html>, (accessed Aug 2, 2012)

³ T. Pogge, *World Poverty and Human Rights* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), 29-33.

⁴ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1951), 306.

⁵ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 305-307.

⁶ Ross Vasta, Marshall M. Haith, Scott Miller, *Child Psychology: The Modern Science* (New York: John Wiley, 1992), 468; Lawrence S. Wrightsman and Fillmore H. Sanford, *Psychology: A Scientific Study of Human Behavior* (Monterey: Brooks, 1975), 449.

Displaced aggression often takes the form of scapegoating whereby a person or a group is blamed for conditions not of their making. We may think of Nazi Germany which blamed the Jews for all their economic and political woes, including losing the First World War.⁷ We may also consider extreme forms of Islamist ideology where it is common to scapegoat the Western world for all their woes and America is portrayed as the 'Great Satan' while in reality they may be not so much reacting to Western culture as to the impact of the exploitation of their resources by Western liberal capitalism in collaboration with their own political elites.⁸ We may also think of the expulsion of Asians from Uganda in 1972,⁹ the anti-Chinese riots in Lesotho in 2008,¹⁰ or of Zimbabwe where at the turn of this century the minority people of European descent were singled out by the ZANU PF government as the main cause of Zimbabwe's woes and dispossessed rather than seeking to address the real causes of the economic malaise in the country.

The scapegoat is the victim of a group of people who unanimously come together to blame the victim(s) for all of their group's disorder. For the group to justify violence against the scapegoat, they often accuse the person(s) of horrendous acts that threaten the stability of the group. The victims are usually vulnerable and weak, or differ from the group and as such make an easy target acceptable to all. This is a far easier way of dealing with frustrations within a group, community or society than to change those beliefs, customs, practices and power relations that actually contribute to the suffering, hardships and frustration in the group. In a context of high levels of frustration in society it is certainly much easier to find a minority group to use as a scapegoat than, for example, to address economic inequality, political

⁷ *Webster's On-Line Dictionary*, s.v. 'Scapegoat', Definition of a Scapegoat in Webster's On-Line Dictionary, accessed April 24, 2011, (<http://www.websters-online-dictionary.org/definitions/scapagoat>); Kelly M. Sutter, "*Nazi Gods*" and "*Jewish Devils*": *The Dehumanizing Rhetoric of Nazi Propaganda*. (Boston College: A Senior Honors Thesis, 2008), <http://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/schools/cas_sites/communication/pdf/thesis08.sutter.pdf>, accessed January 2, 2012.

⁸ Henry J. Hyde et al, "Words have Consequences: The Impact of Incitement and Anti-American and Anti-Semitic Propaganda on American Interests in the Middle East," in *Hearing before the Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia of the Committee on International Relations of the House of Representatives, 107th congress, 2nd session*, <<http://commdocs.house.gov/committees/intlrel/hfa78802.000/hfa78802Of.htm>>, (accessed November 10, 2011); Thomas Pogge, "Poverty is a violation of human rights," *ON LINE opinion* (1 August 2005), <<http://www.onlineopinion.com.au/view.asp?article=3717>> accessed August 2, 2012.

⁹ BBC 1972: Asians given 90 days to leave Uganda, *BBC News* (7 August 1972), <http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/august/7/newsid_2492000/2492333.stm>, (accessed January 12, 2012).

¹⁰ IRIN, "Lesotho: Anti-Chinese resentment flares," *Humanitarian news and analysis: Africa* (24 January 2008), <<http://www.irinnews.org/Report/76405/LESOTHO-Anti-Chinese-resentment-flares>>, (accessed January 12, 2012).

oppression or unjust global socio-economic and political structures which are the underlying cause of the suffering that people experience.

2. Scapegoating and Witchcraft Eradication

In Sub-Saharan Africa scapegoating often takes the form of witchcraft accusations that entail a rather literal demonization of vulnerable groups in society. The 21st century, particularly the first decade, has witnessed an upsurge in witchcraft allegations levelled at vulnerable groups in society such as refugees, the handicapped, the elderly and children.¹¹ While it is outside the scope of this article to further explore historical witchcraft eradication movements and how they are linked to high levels of frustration in African society at the time, we must keep in mind that such movements have not been confined to Africa but also occurred in other parts of the globe including Europe and North America.¹²

Witchcraft beliefs and witchcraft accusations against socially undesirable persons have been part of African society for many centuries as an outlet of the many frustrations that are present in small agricultural communities.¹³ It is due to frustration on a much larger scale in society that witchcraft accusations and accompanying witchcraft eradication practices have reached epidemic proportions in many parts of Africa. It is important to note that in the past witchcraft eradication movements flourished in times of cultural, socio-economic and political change, particularly in the late 19th century as European colonial influence made itself felt.¹⁴ In the process of redefining their cultural identity in the wake of all the changes in their society new spirit possession cults were formed to cleanse the land from evil. Often these cults adopted Christian elements in an attempt to harness the apparently superior spiritual power of the Europeans.¹⁵

¹¹ Nathalie Bussien et al, *Breaking the Spell: Responding to Witchcraft Accusations Against Children*, *New Issues in Refugee Research* 197 (Geneva: UNHCR, 2011); Aleksandra Cimpric, *Children Accused of Witchcraft, An Anthropological Study of Contemporary Practices in Africa* (Dakar: UNICEF, 2010); Javier A. Molina, *The Invention of Child Witches in the Democratic Republic of Congo: Social Cleansing, Religious Commerce and the Difficulties of Being a Parent in an Urban Culture* (London: Save the Children, 2006).

¹² Puja Lalwani, "Facts about Salem Witch Trials," *Buzzle* (13 December 2010), <<http://www.buzzle.com/articles/salem-witch-trials-facts.html>>, (accessed May 24, 2012); Robin Briggs, *Witches and Neighbors: The Social and Cultural Context of European Witchcraft* (New York: Penguin, 1996).

¹³ John Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, (Oxford: Heinemann, 1975), 117-118, 165.

¹⁴ Simon Barrington-Ward, "The Centre Cannot Hold; Spirit Possession as Redefinition," in *Christianity in Independent Africa*, ed. Edward Fashole-Luke, Richard Gray, Adrian Hastings and Godwin Tasie (London: Indiana University Press, 1978), 455-460.

¹⁵ Barrington-Ward, "The Centre Cannot Hold," 461-463.

3. Contemporary Witchcraft Eradication

Another upsurge in witchcraft eradication movements arose in the late 20th century, including several movements within African Pentecostal Christianity, often resulting in violent exorcism rituals, torture and even murder.¹⁶ Joseph Kony's infamous Lord's Resistance Army, responsible for thousands of kidnappings of children as child soldiers and sex slaves, rapes and deaths in Uganda, Sudan, Congo and the Central African Republic started as a witchcraft eradication movement.¹⁷ The failure of post-colonial governments to fulfil the dreams and aspirations of their people is at least partially due to the unequal distribution of wealth in their respective countries as well as inequalities due to unjust global economic structures that favour the rich countries of the Western world.¹⁸ Other factors may include the devastating impact of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, inter-ethnic tensions, environmental degradation, the effects of global warming and many other problems that affect life in modern Africa. It is hardly surprising that in countries with high levels of economic inequality as well as environmental degradation such as Angola, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Malawi, the oil rich Niger delta of Nigeria, as well as post-apartheid South Africa, witchcraft accusations are reaching epidemic proportions with the most vulnerable in society bearing the brunt.¹⁹

In Malawi a well-documented case made headlines when a 12 year old boy was beaten to death because his relatives suspected that he was a witch.²⁰ Another well-documented case was the burning to death of a 12 year old boy in Mwanza, Malawi by his aunts after a prayer meeting against the demons in the 'boy-witch'.²¹ In Nigeria many similar cases have been documented by Stepping Stones Nigeria.²² Another case that hit international

¹⁶ Nathalie Bussien et al, *Breaking the Spell*, 3-5; Wim van Binsbergen, "Witchcraft in Modern Africa as Virtualised Boundary Conditions of the Kinship Order," *African Religion* (2000), <http://www.shikanda.net/african_religion/witchtxt.htm>, (accessed August 5, 2012); Rijk A. van Dijk, "Fundamentalism and its Moral Geography in Malawi: The Representation of the Diasporic and the Diabolical," *Critique of Anthropology* 15, no. 2 (1995): 171-191.

¹⁷ Peter B. Clarke, *Encyclopaedia of New Religious Movements*. (London: Routledge, 2006), 337-338.

¹⁸ Pogge, "Recognized and Violated by International Law," 2

¹⁹ Bussien et al, "Breaking the Spell," 1-5; Cimpric, "*Children Accused of Witchcraft*," 1-11; Molina, *The Invention of Child Witches*, 1-3.

²⁰ Caroline Somanje, "3 Beat boy, 12, to death, accuse him of witchcraft," *The Nation*, 27 January 2011, 1-2.

²¹ Malawi News Agency. "Three arrested for torching 12-year-old to death," *The Nation*, 2 February 2009, 3.

²² Gary Foxcroft. *Saving Africa's Witch Children - A Documentary* (Lancaster: Stepping Stones Nigeria, 2008).

headlines involved the torture and drowning of a 15 year old boy in the United Kingdom by his sister and other relatives who accused him of being a witch.²³

The Response of the Church

It is our belief that the Christian church is to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world in addressing local, regional and global issues from the perspective of the teachings of Christ. In light of the above we are convinced that when it comes to issues of witchcraft and witchcraft accusations in African society and beyond, the Christian church has both the mandate and the tools to make a constructive and positive contribution. Unfortunately until date the response of the church to such issues has been inconsistent, ambiguous and sometimes even harmful.

For example there has been an increase in the number of Christian leaders who have joined the bandwagon of the witch doctors and witch finders of Africa and pose as professional exorcists and witch finders. They claim to be able to 'divine' and 'sniff out' witches by the power of the Holy Spirit.²⁴ They perform cleansing ceremonies, exorcisms and protective prayers thereby replacing and usurping the role of the traditional diviner and witch doctor.²⁵ The services performed by these anti-witchcraft specialists do provide an outlet for the frustrations which have emerged in families and communities. They also may bring a measure of comfort and reassurance to dysfunctional families or communities that they are not the problem but the problem is the one identified as the witch. But this process is not only very harmful for the person(s) who gets the blame but ultimately harms the whole community as the underlying more complex causes of stress in the family or community are not properly identified or addressed. Scapegoating actually maintains the status quo by diverting the attention from the real issues to a scapegoat and may therefore be condoned if not actively encouraged by those who are responsible for the genuine causes of the suffering of the community. In Sub-Saharan Africa the consequences have been devastating. In the past decade hundreds of thousands of children, mostly orphans, have been victimised as scapegoats, being branded as witches by traditional healers as well as by unscrupulous pastors, prophets and apostles specializing in witchcraft

²³ Timon Woodward, "Relatives Accused in Witchcraft Killing," *ABC News*, 9 January 2012, <<http://gma.yahoo.com/relatives-accused-killing-teen-thought-witch-080508832-abc-news.html>>, (accessed 20 May 2012).

²⁴ Erwin van der Meer, "The Problem of Witchcraft in Malawi," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 47, no. 1 (2011): 78-85.

²⁵ Nii Narku Dowuona, "Children, Women Disgraced As Witches On Metro TV," *Ghana Web-News* (29 November 2006), <<http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/artikel.php?ID=114658>>, (accessed August 2, 2012); Victoria Ojeme and Caleb Ayansina, "Child witch accusation: FG warns churches, parents, others," *Vanguard Nigeria - News*, 21 June 2011, <<http://www.vanguardngr.com/2011/06/child-witch-accusation-fg-warns-churches-parents-others>>, (accessed May 25, 2012).

eradication. The children who are branded as witches are subjected to horrific abuses and are often expelled from their families and communities. Others are murdered as in the cases referred to above while others are murdered indirectly as they die of starvation and neglect.

Similar to many perpetrators of crimes against humanity in the Nazi era in Germany, those who kill children or adults accused of witchcraft do not see themselves as murderers but as doing humankind a service. They are the spiritual warriors, agents of justice and peace, who cleanse the community of the presence of the evil witches who they believe are the main cause of all misfortune. Narratives, testimonies, newspaper articles, even 'Christian' propaganda films which depict children as witches continue to fan the flames of violence against children branded as such.²⁶

The question that faces the church in Africa is how should we respond to these issues? What makes the issue more complex is that some of the perpetrators who victimise children and other vulnerable people in witchcraft eradication commit their crimes in the name of Christianity just as some did in the Nazi era in Germany. Until date the responses of the Christian church in Africa can be categorised as "avoidance", "collaboration" and "intervention".

1. Avoidance and Maintenance of the Status Quo

Confronted with the suffering of those who are accused of witchcraft in Africa, the evidence on the ground shows that the majority of theologians and theologically trained clergy tend to simply ignore such issues let alone intervene in behalf of the victims. Largely this tendency can be attributed to the fact that theological training in Africa, both in the universities and seminaries, is heavily influenced by Western theological education which has not done much thorough reflection on issues such as witchcraft and magical beliefs. Even if an institution offers a course in African pre-Christian religious beliefs and cultural practices this course usually is rather superficial and rarely provides the students with theological and pastoral tools to respond to issues such as witchcraft accusations in society. Discussions with several hundred clergymen in Southern Africa confirmed that they all felt ill-equipped to handle matters of witchcraft. In many cases the clergy themselves were fearful and intimidated by witchcraft and afraid they could fall under its influence. In Evangelical institutions the tendency is to equip students with a wide range of hermeneutical and exegetical tools to interpret scripture without the hermeneutical and exegetical tools to interpret complex issues in society including deviant religious beliefs. It is a positive development that many

²⁶ IRIN, "Rights: Child witchcraft allegations on the rise," *Humanitarian news and analysis-Africa* (16 July 2010), <<http://www.irinnews.org/Report/89858/RIGHTS-Child-witchcraft-allegations-on-the-rise>> (Accessed 01 May 2011); Sharon LaFraniere, "African Children Falsely Accused of Witchcraft: African Crucible: Cast as Witches, Then Cast Out," *New York Times* (15 November 2007), <<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/15/world/africa/15witches.html>>, (accessed 10 January 2011).

theological institutions have introduced courses in African pre-Christian beliefs in response to the revived interest in African philosophy and African theology. It is also partly due to the romanticizing of the African cultural heritage and the search for a post-colonial African identity. As good as these efforts are, they are often superficial, descriptive and insufficient to address complex issues such as witchcraft. Yet, the well-known African scholar John Mbiti described the issue of witchcraft, witchcraft accusations, and the fear of witchcraft as one of the most disturbing elements in African religion and life.²⁷

Serious philosophical enquiry, intellectual debate and scholarly interaction with African worldviews, cultures and religious experiences is often inadequate in theological education and reflection. Sometimes courses on African pre-Christian religions resemble a 'Hogwarts defence against the dark arts' course rather than meaningful reflection. The fear of syncretism at times stifles any initiative to engage meaningfully with such issues. Ironically in this manner syncretism may be encouraged as clergy are left ill-equipped to deal with cultural and other contextual issues in society. Without an alternative frame of reference they may resort to a non-Christian frame of reference to make sense of such issues. Among those of a Charismatic and Pentecostal persuasion there may be the added fear that the study of non-Christian religious thought and practices is tantamount to venturing into a world of demons. Unfortunately many other evangelicals concur that African pre-Christian religions are demonic in nature and therefore not worthy of serious theological engagement leaving them ill-equipped when confronted with such issues.

The colonial 'witchcraft suppression acts' also reflect this failure to engage the underlying worldview in any meaningful manner and also an unwillingness to acknowledge their socio-economic and political failures which frustrated the population giving rise to more witchcraft eradication attempts.

We also need to recognise that people do not change easily their worldview unless it is specifically engaged, and not once or twice but consistently. If we acknowledge that a worldview is the "fundamental cognitive, affective, and evaluative presuppositions a group of people make about the nature of things, and which they use to order their lives", then we may appreciate that it is not something that changes easily.²⁸ Of course one may also wonder whether a change of worldview to the semi-secular worldview promoted by Western Christianity is the best alternative for Christianity in Africa. Maybe we should be more concerned about the Christian transformation of local cultures and worldviews rather than replacing them. In early Christianity a Jewish Christian was not required to embrace Greek culture nor was a Greek Christian required to embrace Jewish culture but rather they were allowed to remain fully Jewish or fully Greek and yet embrace

²⁷ Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 117-118, 165.

²⁸ Paul Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 15.

Christ and Christ's teachings. We must avoid proclaiming Christ plus foreign cultural ideas.

The current approach to African cultures, religions and worldviews has resulted in a lack of meaningful interaction between these and Christianity. Knowingly or unknowingly more effort was put into replacing African culture by means of Western education. Evangelists were usually content once a convert professed Christianity, confessed the right creed and adopted what they perceived as a Christian lifestyle and culture. In line with the assumptions of the colonialist government, it was generally assumed by the early missionaries to Africa that the worldview of the individual would gradually change. However, one of the problems associated with proselytizing is that it is impossible to transform a worldview unless it is deliberately and consistently engaged. Failure to do so will only result in superficial changes. Only by meaningful engagement in teaching, discussion and careful reflection can someone modify or substitute beliefs and practices that have always been part of a person's worldview. Even then it is a gradual process. If we choose the biblical approach of bringing Christian transformation within an existing worldview we need to do a lot more than providing people with theological and exegetical tools to exegete and evaluate their worldview in the light of the example set by Christ and Christ's teachings.

In the area of witchcraft many African Christians feel that their church is unable to help them adequately. Some feel that the church does not address their witchcraft concerns properly or that the prayers offered by their church are not powerful enough. As a result many visit Pentecostal churches to receive specialist services whenever they are convinced their problems are related to witchcraft. Of course, the very presumption that some prayers are more powerful than others is itself rooted in a long magical tradition that attributes power to the shaman or the religious specialist who does the praying, rather than to the God who can answer even the weakest prayer of the smallest child. The emphasis is on the 'powerful' method, manner and wording of the prayers. Consequently they may rely on traditional healers or 'prophets' who provide specialist prayers and exorcisms.

2. Pentecostal Collaboration

In contrast to mainstream Evangelicals, those of a Charismatic or Pentecostal persuasion do not shy away from confronting witchcraft related issues. However, among many we observe a tendency to, on one hand avoid meaningful theological reflection on the issue, while on the other hand engaging it superficially and aggressively as something demonic. The emphasis is on spiritual warfare and spiritual deliverance. They understand people as being in bondage to demonically inspired false beliefs and in need of spiritual liberation. However, liberation is not understood in the biblical sense of teaching the truth that sets people free but as exorcism, spiritual cleansing and the breaking of demonic spiritual ties and curses. Traditional

healers specialise in divining spiritual causes of bewitchment and who is the one who did the bewitchment. Increasingly Charismatic and Pentecostal deliverance practices mirror those of traditional healers with pastors, prophets and apostles specialising in identifying the witch. We may then conclude that while on the surface attacking the African pre-Christian worldview, many Charismatic and Pentecostal leaders have assimilated its concepts, beliefs and practices. When it comes to witchcraft accusations the underlying beliefs are rarely questioned but simply redefined in terms of Satan and the demons. By praying against magical curses, and prayers to break alleged spells, many Pentecostals are validating the belief in witchcraft and its efficiency and in so doing they contribute to more fear in society and oppression of the accused. The Charismatic and Pentecostal witch finders of Akwa Ibom state in Nigeria are a good example of how such things can get out of hand as some Pentecostal witch finders detain, exorcise and even murder children accused of witchcraft.²⁹

Positive Intervention

In the 21st century many Christians in Africa have expressed their concern about issues arising from the pre-Christian worldview such as witchcraft beliefs, witch hunts, albino murders and child sacrifices. Unfortunately intervention has been limited to addressing symptoms. Several shelters and safe houses have been opened in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Malawi and Nigeria, to accommodate child victims of witchcraft accusations or victims of ritual mutilation although little is done to address underlying causes.³⁰ In a few instances Christian activists have been involved in calling for legislative reform and involved in awareness campaigns.³¹ We propose that the church in Africa becomes more proactive in promoting a multi-pronged intervention which among other things should involve theological reflection, awareness creation, engaging the media, involve civil society and advocating as well as reviewing existing legislation and promoting legislative reform in order to combat witch hunting practices.

1. Further Theological Reflection

There is an urgent need for more reflection on issues such as witchcraft in theological education, missionary training, leadership seminars, workshops, and within Christian scholarship in Africa and beyond. Special attention must be given to the issue of spiritual truth claims that are based on anecdotal

²⁹ Foxcroft, *Saving Africa's Witch Children*.

³⁰ Isaac Phiri, "Saving Witches in Kolwezi: Accused of Witchcraft by Parents and Churches, Children in the Democratic Republic of Congo are Being Rescued by Christian Activists," *Christianity Today* (September 2009), <<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2009/september/27.62.html>>, (accessed 10 November 2011); Van der Meer, "The Problem of Witchcraft in Malawi," 78-85.

³¹ Coalition Against Child Witchcraft Stigmatization in Africa, <<http://stopchildwitchcraftaccusations.blogspot.com>>, (accessed 23 August 2012).

evidence and to how the church responds to these both theologically and pastorally.³²

How do we respond to an old woman being convicted of witchcraft by a magistrate after a ten year old girl confesses to have been taken by the old woman on a magical plane and on return caused the death of a boy by magically hitting him with a hammer?³³ How do we respond to the teenage girl who genuinely believes that she is responsible for all the deaths in the community because she is a witch? How do we respond when someone in an apparent state of 'possession' makes all kinds of malicious revelations?³⁴ Is such information truly reliable as some have suggested?³⁵ What are the theological, legal and other consequences if such ideas are embraced as truthful revelations? In the African context many anecdotes are taken as Gospel truth both by many African Christians and foreign missionaries alike without thorough investigation and careful critical reflection. A thorough study and understanding of both biblical theology and the African context is essential in order to respond adequately to such issues.

Theological educators in Africa, whether at an institutional or congregational level, need to be well conversant with the African worldviews, especially beliefs and practices rooted in these beliefs. This also applies to those who prepare missionaries and other Christian personnel for working in Africa. The Africanisation of faculties in theological institutions on the continent is critical in this regard. Africanisation is not just necessary as a means for assuaging racial tensions in predominantly European staffed evangelical colleges within Africa or to be implemented just as a matter of political correctness, but it is critical if there is to be a genuine transformation of worldviews and a nurturing of Christians who are comfortable in their African worldview, cultural or philosophical skins. It is also crucial in developing a Christianity in Africa that exudes both Christ-likeness and 'Africanicity' – the two realities embodied in harmony within an individual African Christian and the same reality also being expressed communally in the African churches and other Christian institutions. This is not an argument for affirmative action on racial grounds for there are Africans of Bantu origin who operate almost solely from a non-African worldview and have less understanding and appreciation of the African worldview than some Europeans who are ardent students of African culture.

³² Erwin van der Meer, "The Strategic Level Spiritual Warfare Theology of C. Peter Wagner and Its Implication for Christian Mission in Malawi," *DTh Thesis* (Pretoria: UNISA, 2008), 229-232.

³³ Caroline Kandiero, "72-year-old jailed for witchcraft," *Daily Times*, 29 Aug. 2007, 15.

³⁴ Robert J. Priest, Thomas Campbell and Bradford A. Mullen, "Missiological Syncretism: The New Animistic Paradigm," in *Spiritual Power and Missions*, ed. Edward Rommen (Pasadena: Carey, 1995), 9-87.

³⁵ Charles H. Kraft, "Christian Animism" or God-Given Authority? In *Spiritual Power and Missions*, ed. Edward Rommen (Pasadena: Carey, 1995): 91.

Theological educators in Africa, whether at an institutional or congregational level, should make a conscious effort to relate biblical teaching to the worldviews, beliefs and practices rooted in these beliefs. This requires hermeneutical tools not only for the exegesis of Scripture but also anthropological, philosophical and psychological tools for gaining an in-depth understanding of a worldview and the people who are influenced by it.

We need to reflect upon the lessons learnt by the early Christian church as reflected in Scripture whereby Jewish Christians had an antagonistic attitude to the worldview and culture of the Gentile Christians and attempted to impose their culture upon them. The apostle Paul vehemently opposed this and sought to promote Christian transformation within the culture. In this endeavour he tried to be Greek with the Greeks and Jewish with the Jews, and he even employed pagan philosophies in order to relate the gospel to the host culture. It is essential that we seek to bring Christian transformation within a culture and worldview rather than seeking to make people embrace our worldview. This requires a thorough understanding of the worldview of the people we minister to as well as a thorough understanding of Scripture and a thorough understanding of our own worldview.

Christians should live differently because they are Christians.³⁶ Their allegiance to the person and teachings of Christ should be reflected in everything they say and do. However, if their behaviour is based primarily on traditional or contemporary societal beliefs rather than Christian beliefs, then their day-to-day lifestyle essentially remains unchristian and will at times even be anti-Christian. In recent history we have seen extreme examples of this in Europe with Christian Serbs massacring Bosnian Muslims, the on-going Irish Catholic-Protestant tensions and in Africa Christian Hutu massacring Christian Tutsi and vice versa. In South Africa it is about 20 years after *Apartheid* but worship on Sundays does not largely reflect this reality as evidenced by many Christians worshiping largely with people who share the same racial background. In Europe there is a proliferation of African migrant churches that celebrate their African identity at the expense of integration and building cultural bridges to reach the largely non-Christian population of their host nations. Whenever our cultural background and worldview dominates our belief system and behaviour, Christ is relegated to the side-lines and our lives will reflect the world rather than our allegiance to Christ. Conversion must involve a transformation of beliefs, but if it is a change only of beliefs and not of behaviour, it is false faith. Conversion may include a change in beliefs and behaviour, but if the worldview is not transformed, in the long run the gospel is subverted and the result is a syncretistic christo-paganism, which has the form

³⁶ Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 2008, 12.

of Christianity but not its essence. Christianity becomes a new magic and a new, subtler form of idolatry that will mislead millions.³⁷

2. Creating Awareness of the Situation

When it comes to issues such as child witchcraft accusations or child ritual mutilations and human sacrifice that affect a whole nation or society, we need to go beyond the walls of our church buildings. The church is called to be salt and light in society and as such should be at the forefront of addressing social evils. Creating awareness in churches, in schools and various other forums are some of the interventions the church can be involved in.

Even though many Christians are hesitant to work together with government agencies, multi-lateral organizations and NGOs such as human rights organizations, social activists and the like due to differences of opinion, we must consider that just because we disagree on a number of things does not mean that we cannot work together in other areas. There are many examples in the Bible where men and women of God worked for and worked with ungodly governments and rather ungodly allies for a common goal which was not in conflict with their loyalty to God, like Joseph in Egypt, Daniel in Babylon and Esther in Persia. We can only be the 'salt of the earth' if we are in the world. At the same time we must not compromise our beliefs and we must avoid becoming 'of the world' in the sense of compromising Jesus' teachings.

3. Engaging the Media

In the case of child witchcraft accusations in Malawi, the albino murders in Tanzania or child sacrifice in Uganda the role of the media is often ambiguous. On one hand we read reports condemning such evils while on the other hand there are many reports of supernatural events, the efficiency of witchcraft and the power of ritual sacrifices that indirectly may encourage such evils.³⁸ The church can engage the media positively by encouraging them to be careful, critical and objective in their reporting. This may be done in special seminars for journalists or by means of encouraging the development of a code of ethics that does not sensationalise preternatural stories.

When it comes to the film industry, several studies have suggested a correlation between witch-hunts and ritual killings and the showing of Nigerian religious horror movies on television and in the cinemas.³⁹ Many of these movies mix Christian and pre-Christian African religious elements and should be discouraged in the church as they confuse many believers. In society as a whole we may encourage age restrictions on these movies just as government censorship bodies deal with violent Hollywood movies and also clearly stress

³⁷ Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 2008, 12-20.

³⁸ Van der Meer, "The Strategic Level Spiritual Warfare Theology," 252.

³⁹ Linda Battarbee, Gary Foxcroft and Emilie Secker, *Witchcraft Stigmatisation and Children's Rights in Nigeria: A Report Prepared for the 54th Session of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child* (Lancaster: Stepping Stones Nigeria, 2009), 2-10.

that what is shown is fiction and not factual in nature. In a bid to protect what it called 'the poor portrayal of Nigerians' that country's government banned the screening of 'District 9' a film produced in South Africa as it depicted Nigerians as criminals and cannibals.⁴⁰ However, the same government failed to stop the screening of Helen Ukpabio's "end of the wicked", a movie in which she depicts children as witches responsible for misfortunes, harm and death which befall adults.⁴¹ For the protection of the children and other members of the African communities at risk due to witchcraft accusations, it would not be too heavy a price to ask for an age restriction and a warning that this is fiction to be printed on selected African movies that feature themes such as witchcraft, demonology, Satanism, curses and other occult matters.

The media industry should be discouraged from sensationalizing witchcraft stories as part of responsible journalism and part of their duty towards community building. As an old African saying goes 'it takes the whole village to raise a child', it also takes the whole village to protect a child, or all those that are vulnerable within the community. Multi-pronged efforts are needed from various sectors of the communities in the countries heavily affected by the witchcraft accusation phenomena if its negative effects are to be curbed.

4. Calling for Legislative Reform

Societal reform from a Christian perspective also involves engaging the judiciary in order to lobby for just laws that mirror the Biblical foundation for law and order, namely 'love your neighbour as yourself' as the apostle Paul refers to in Romans 13:8-10. It is interesting to note here that Paul stresses love for our neighbours as the core philosophy of the law in the context of relating to the government. Seeking the good of the land, promoting love, goodness, mercy, peace and justice wherever we are is part of our biblical mandate as salt and light in the world, shining as stars in the darkness.

In terms of legislation we may need to call for a repeal or revision of the inefficient and ambiguous witchcraft suppression acts still in effect in various African countries. The situation in Malawi and other African countries where vulnerable people are convicted of witchcraft and jailed shows that these laws do little to curb witchcraft eradication practices.⁴² Most 'Witchcraft Acts' in the

⁴⁰ Julie Bloom. "Nigeria Says 'District 9' Is Not Welcome," *The New York Times*, 20 September 2009. <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/21/movies/21arts-NIGERIASAYSD_BRF.html?_r=1>, (accessed 20 August 2012).

⁴¹ Helen Ukpabio, "End of the wicked," *Film fragment*, 20 February 2012, <<http://ieet.org/index.php/IEET/more/helenukpabio20120212>>, (accessed 11 August 2012).

⁴² Carrie Byrne, "Hunting the Vulnerable: Witchcraft and the Law in Malawi," *Consultancy Africa Intelligence*, 16 June 2011. <http://www.consultancyafrica.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=783:hunting-the-vulnerable-witchcraft-and-the-law-in-malawi&catid=91:rights-in-focus&Itemid=296>, (accessed 5 December 2011).

affected countries imply or claim that witches and witchcraft does not exist. In one sense what these Acts affirm is true but in another sense it isn't. Understanding this paradox is not that complicated: Witches do exist and so do their 'witch' crafts; but we want to contend here that they only exist and operate in the natural world with natural means albeit at times with impressive results using ventriloquism, poisons, drugs and other natural means. It is their claims and operations in the preternatural realm that should be questioned, put under scrutiny and many times be discarded. We may think of claims such as flying on brooms or winnowing baskets or the transmigration of souls to inflict harm on others, claims of shape changing into nocturnal animals or claiming to ride on hyenas at night.

However, while we may discard any supernatural claims, people who label themselves as witches and admit to practising witchcraft do exist in the natural sense. Among them you may even find some who put poison in people's food or drinks or use other natural means of causing harm and then ascribe the effects of their acts to some supernatural force. Whether some supernatural forces are real or unreal is a theological matter and not one for the legal fraternity. However, any natural means, such as poison, employed by either so-called witches or witch finders that inflicts harm must be dealt with by the law. Legislation against witchcraft beliefs or supernatural assumptions will not achieve much. Repealing the current 'Witchcraft Acts' may be a good starting point. The natural acts of witches or witch finders such as poisoning are easily prosecutable under other laws. Possibilities on whether accusers can be prosecutable under already existing defamation laws should also be investigated.

The missionary led church in the colonial period supported the 'Witchcraft Acts', but now in post-colonial Africa and in light of the recent history of witchcraft accusations, the African led church should call for their repeal as part of championing the protection of those being affected by witchcraft accusations. If as a church we keep quiet about such evils in our societies, we make a mockery of the quintessential mark of true spirituality, namely the protection of widows and orphans who represent all vulnerable groups in our societies. After all, at the heart of the Gospel is love for God and for our neighbour, particularly the weaker and hurting neighbour as Jesus so aptly illustrated in the parable of the Good Samaritan. Witch hunting is not just an issue for human legislation but is indicative of a serious spiritual problem, because its practices and underlying beliefs are contrary to the Law of Christ.

Final Remarks

This article is meant to provide an introductory discussion to the phenomena of witchcraft accusations being experienced in several African countries. We sincerely hope that we have demonstrated that the Christian church in Africa, and beyond, can actually make a positive contribution towards addressing the problem of the current wave of harmful witchcraft

eradication movements in Africa. Apart from raising awareness within the Christian community we call for further discussion and research on several aspects relating to dealing with witchcraft in general and witchcraft accusations in particular within the Evangelical community where there is unfortunately too much collaboration. We advocate for a multi-pronged and interdisciplinary approach at local, regional and a global level. There is also an urgent need for Christian academics, theologians, ethicists, philosophers, activists and others to be actively involved in addressing some of the contributing global factors that cause so much frustration in African societies. We can think of the unjust global economic and political structures, the effects of global warming, and the exploitative and often corrupt practices of multinational corporations as well as other global issues. This could be done in the form of participation in the world social forum or joining hands with those who call for a more just economic order such as Thomas Pogge.⁴³ The few suggestions we have made so far with respect to possible solutions are meant as a starting point for discussion and intervention and are by no means meant to be exhaustive. It is our hope that others will pick up the challenge to address some of the issues we have discussed and take constructive action.

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⁴³ Thomas Pogge, "Poverty, Human Rights and the Global Order: Framing the Post-2015 Agenda," in *MDGs and Human Rights: Past, Present and Future*, eds. Malcolm Langford, Andy Sumner, Alice Yamin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2012).

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