Overcoming Invented Ogres: African Traditional Religions and World Religions in African Christian Perspective

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This article seeks to challenge theological educators from the West, and those who use Western languages and resources, in their educational interaction with African and other majority-world students. It advocates for education rooted in indigenous rather than Western ways of understanding. As its primary illustration, the article shows how the categories of 'African traditional religions' (ATRs) and 'world religions' (WRs) turn out to be Western inventions with an incomplete grasp of reality. The implicit categorization of other 'religions' with respect to Western Protestant Christianity have become a major bias of which Western missionaries should be aware when they seek to share Christ outside their own comfort and competence zones. I address these issues from extensive experience in theological education.

1. Introducing the Problems of Inter-Cultural Truth

In many cases, cross-cultural difficulties arise from situations of incommensurability in translation.[1] I will present a few examples that build a foundation for my broader argument. Because they arise as a result of how indigenous languages are used in indigenous cultures, it may be hard for people not familiar with those cultures to understand them. To the extent such a difficulty exists, it reinforces the very rationale for this article.

In the West, truth is something that aligns with objective reality. In other

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1 'Cultural keywords [that] act as "focal points" for complex sets of culturally specific values … are very hard, if not impossible to translate without a great deal of paraphrasing.' John R. Taylor and Jeanette Littlemore, 'Introduction', in *The Bloomsbury Companion to Cognitive Linguistics*, edited by Taylor and Littlemore (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 4.

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parts of the world, however, translations of the English word *truth* often refer to what works or is productive. For example, some years ago I encountered a Tanzanian newspaper called *Msema Kweli* (Teller of Truth) that contained incredible stories of the exploits of witches. Being in Swahili kept the newspaper at arm's length from Western scrutiny.

In the West, the concept of love is inseparable from biblical notions of sacrificial giving of oneself for others. African translations of love are likely to be much more pragmatic, i.e. 'I scratch your back, you scratch mine'. David Maranz articulates this idea well with regard to friendship.[2]

In English, life is usually a quality that is either present or absent (i.e. something is either alive or dead). In contrast, other languages translate the word as a quantity of which one can have more or less. Hence, a common African greeting in African languages would be translatable back into English as 'Are you alive?'

Marriage in the West is a kind of legal union, but elsewhere in the world it may be a conventional or resource-based union (for example, if cattle are exchanged as part of the marriage contract).

In Western English, the term *supernatural* means something beyond the natural. But the term can be used elsewhere (and in my experience it is widely used in Kenya) to indicate something incredible to a people who really have no notion of the existence of a 'natural' world, i.e. one devoid of

divine content. Kenyan people use the term 'supernatural' as a translation of indigenous words like the Swahili *miujiza* or 'amazing things'. *Miujiza*, in their minds, have nothing to do with being either aligned with or beyond laws of nature.

Finally, in the West the notion of what is 'real' is closely linked to physical objects composed of a combination of elements such as nitrogen and oxygen. As a result, the West makes a clear separation between real and unreal. This dualism does not exist in other worldviews.

II. Teaching ATR at an African Bible College: Why Africans Used My Syllabus

In 1998, a Bible college in western Kenya asked me to teach a course on ATRs. The request was surprising. I would have expected a native African to be teaching that course. I considered the invitation an honour. I thought that teaching African people about their own traditions would help me to gain greater insight into what makes African people tick.

Much engagement between Africans and Westerners is on the white man's territory—using a European language, discussing funds coming from the West, meeting at a Western-sponsored mission station, etc. This was my chance, I thought, to circumvent that problem by talking with African students about their own religious self-understanding.

I did feel that I had a better grasp of ATRs than many other Westerners. By 1998, I had already spent about ten years engaging very closely with African people, using their languages

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2 David Maranz, *African Friends and Money Matters: Observations from Africa* (Dallas: SIL International, 2001), 63–64.

and resources on a daily basis. Now I wanted to build on this foundation.

I divided the aspects of ATRs, as I understood them, rigorously into about thirty different topics. I arranged the topics into a logical order and devised discussion questions, drawing on published literature on ATRs. I taught the course for two years. It was indeed an enlightening experience.

When I relinquished the course, something surprising happened. The African who was taking over from me asked for a copy of my syllabus. I gave it to him. Then he asked for copies of my handouts, which I dug up and provided. Lo and behold, when this African teacher turned in his syllabus for teaching ATRs, it was almost identical to mine! I did not say anything; I had no objection to his use of my syllabus. But I did ask myself: why has an African borrowed my syllabus, designed by a Westerner, to teach his own people about their own cultures, traditions and religions?

Gradually, I came to understand the reason. Without a doubt, my African colleagues knew African religion, in the sense of what Africans do and believe, better than I did. What they did not know was how to communicate this information in a form that is acceptable to Western scholarship. Doing so was necessary because the students' exams would be based on American standards. Many exams were coming directly from the USA.

Given that situation, discussing their customs and traditions in a way that would be neither comprehensible or correct for Westerners would have been of little help. The students' primary need was not to understand ATRs in a generic sense; they already

had that information. Rather, they had to communicate what *the West* considers ATRs to be, so that they could pass their exams and earn credit. They had to understand ATRs as Westerners understand them.

I, as a Westerner, had been trusted to provide the right inputs about their own traditions that would give Africans credibility in Western eyes. They could not trust themselves to do this. Their own implicit knowledge of ATR was almost irrelevant. What they needed to know is how the West understands ATRs.

III. Teaching World Religions and 'Teaching through Europe'

A few years later, I was asked to teach WRs at the same Bible school. I planned this course in much the same way as the ATRs course, although this time by necessity drawing less on personal experience.

My explanations of WRs came from Westerners. This was unavoidable, as the available books were by Westerners and even the very notion of 'world religions' arose in the West.[3] As a Westerner, I noticed that, to a large extent, the books explained how WRs differed from my own European way of life.

In delivering the course, I was surprised to discover that as I tried to make my African students aware of the pitfalls of WRs, I was instead render-

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3 Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

ing WRs attractive to them. I became particularly aware during a field trip that my explanations of WRs were on a different page from my students' pre-existing notions. Many of my students had some prior experience of engaging with Hindus and Muslims. Their own experience seemed to give them an understanding on a very different level from what I was endeavouring to articulate.

I gradually came to realize what was happening. My explanations of WRs were, in effect, explaining how they differ from Western Protestantism. An implicit assumption was that, in areas in which WRs did not explicitly differ from 'us' (Westerners), they were the same as us. I was endeavouring to teach my African students about WRs on the basis of an inaccurate assumption that they (my students) and I were the same.[4]

When I described features of WRs that might appear exotic to a Western observer, my African students were tending, from their own experience, to see things very differently. It was as if I needed to first teach my students to be Westerners, to enable them to see where I was coming from, before they could grasp my points.

Even when I explained things that to me as a Western Christian were clearly wrong, such as some Eastern notions of reincarnation or the failure to acknowledge God at all in Chinese religions, my students did not necessarily perceive such wrongness at all. Instead, they were often attracted by the very things that I was classifying as wrong, especially when the people involved seemed to be prospering.

IV. World Religions and the Theologization of African Traditional Religion

In contrast to practitioners of WRs, Africa is said to have 'traditional religion' and hence ATRs are not treated as WRs. I soon discovered that scholars in general considered WRs to be more advanced than 'traditional religions'.[5] This discovery helped me to understand why, when I taught about WRs that to me were inferior (to Western Protestantism), my explanation could easily be interpreted as suggesting that they were superior (to ATRs).

In fact, I came to see that in one sense, I was teaching WRs as if they were slightly corrupted versions of a very intellectualized and deeply studied Protestantism.[6]

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4 I expound on this point in more detail in 'Anthropology's Origins, Christianity, and a Perspective from Africa', *On Knowing Humanity Journal*, 1, no. 1 (July 2017), 33–34. Anthropologists have long struggled to ensure that scholars do not make inaccurate generalizations about non-Western societies. This was supposedly to avoid scholarly bias. Yet *not* making such generalizations can itself induce bias by implying an assumed similarity without justification.

5 Masuzawa, *Invention of World Religions*, 3–4.

6 Scholars who researched WRs were overwhelmingly of Protestant origins. This has led to an ongoing situation in which 'religious studies' globally, which supposedly explores various religious traditions objectively, always does so from a Western, Protestant vantage point. (Carole M. Cusack, 'Vestigial States: Secular Space and the Churches in Contemporary Australia.' George Shipp Memorial Lecture given at the Workers Education Authority (WEA), 72 Bathurst Street, Sydney, 1 October 2015, 4). The role of Catholicism and the dis-

In my depiction of WRs, they had orderly practices, teachings and doctrines that had brought many of their adherents prosperity and progress. On the other hand, there were the Africans in front of me, steeped in superstition, worship of spirits, fear of witchcraft, and poverty! But was this contrast always true, and is it always true now?

Vishal Mangalwadi has considered in depth the religious origins of contemporary prosperity in India. He argues that modern India's public life has arisen from Christian influence.[7] Christianity inspires its adherents to great feats. What has traditionally ruled India in pre-Christian days, Mangalwadi tells us, was not the desire to serve God, but terror.[8] India today remains plagued by massive poverty.[9] The same was true when the British arrived there, or India might not have been so easy to conquer.

Nevertheless, implicit in the logically ordered and systematically structured way in which I described Hinduism to my students was my presentation of it as a prosperity-generating religion. Although that approach might have been consistent with my students' observation that Hindus in Kenya tended to be much more prosperous than local Africans, the assumption ignores ways in which Hindus have taken advantage of an economic structure that was built by Westerners (on the back of Protestantism). The idea that Hindus could prosper economically on the basis of their own beliefs, without Western intervention, might thus be no more than a misleading myth.

In another example, Tomoko Masuzawa writes the following about Buddhism:

> The newly recognised tradition [of Buddhism] won designation as a world religion, of course, solely on the strength of the original, 'true Buddhism', sometimes called 'primitive Buddhism' or even 'pure Buddhism'—available only to European [Christian Protestant] scholars who read the ancient texts—and not on account of any of its later corrupt forms, that is the localized, nationalized, and indigenized Buddhisms actually found in modern Asia.[10]

On this basis, Buddhism as described in WR textbooks is based on an idealistic Christian Protestant interpretation of ancient texts, not on what early explorers found being practiced in today's so-called Buddhist lands.[11]

But now—how to teach WRs? I needed to teach them as African people might perceive them. How can I know how Africans might perceive Buddhism? I am not aware of even one book on WRs as perceived by traditional Africa'. Interestingly, I had occa-

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tinctions between Catholic and Protestant Christianity are also worthy of discussion, but I must leave these issues for further research.

7 Vishal Mangalwadi, *The Book That Made Your World: How the Bible Created the Soul of Western Civilisation (*Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2011), xx.

8 Mangalwadi, *Book That Made,* 28.

9 One in five of the Indian population lives below the poverty line. See 'India's Poverty Profile', The World Bank, 27 May 2016, http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/infographic/2016/05/27/india-s-poverty-profile.

10 Masuzawa, *Invention of World Religions,* 131.

11 Philip C. Almond, *The British Discovery of Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 13.

sionally come across oral comparisons between Islam and Christianity. Muslims are inferior, African Christians had told me, because they cannot drive out demons. I do not usually find this information in texts on WRs. Maybe I should write a book on WRs as perceived in Africa! However, European and Protestant thinking have already become so pervasive that it would be difficult to do so.[12]

My native people (Europeans) had been influenced by centuries of Christianity. When they encountered other religions, they interpreted them through a Christian lens.[13] Thus I was teaching about WRs as if they were slightly misled, perverse versions of Western Protestantism! No wonder my students were confused.

What was hardly explicit for me at the time has been confirmed by much reading, such as Masuzawa's book.[14] The strong parallels between my descriptions of WRs and my articulation of Western Protestantism meant that, to many of my students, I was promoting WRs as legitimate alternatives (or complements) to Christian belief.

If Western scholarship has so distorted WRs, then what of ATRs? The vocabulary that I was using to describe ATRs in English had originated in a very Christianized Europe. I had no choice but to use Christian or 'post-Christian' (i.e. influenced by Christianity) terms to describe what African people were doing. In doing so, I was equipping African students to describe their practices and traditions *as if* they were Western and Christian.

(Indeed, African scholars these days recognize that it is becoming increasingly difficult to draw a clear line between ATR and Christianity.[15] African people go to people whom they call pastors, and who lead congregations one day in seven, wear collars, and quote the Bible, for help in dealing with threats of witchcraft. Some of those pastors may be promoting means of dealing with witchcraft that hardly differ from those previously prescribed by so-called witch doctors.)

I was thus in effect sanitizing what was African, or at least helping my students to articulate who they are in ways that would appear sanitized. Thus, insofar as there were aspects of ATRs that might have been contrary to Christianity, I was enabling them to be concealed from view.

V. So What?

Having looked at how concepts of religion are shaped or distorted in the course of inter-cultural engagement between the West and Africa, I now want to consider the implications of what we have discovered, especially for missionary service and for the church.

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12 In saying that European and Protestant thinking have become so pervasive, I am not saying that they have become hegemonic. Many African people's thinking is deeply rooted in their own traditions. Yet their articulation of their thinking cannot help but be influenced by Western Protestantism, which substantially underlies the education systems and languages used in Africa.

13 See for example Almond, *British Discovery,* 2–3.

14 Masuzawa, *Invention of World Religions*, xiv and 107–20.

15 Caleb O. Oladipo, 'African Christianity: Its Scope in Global Context,' in *Wealth, Health, and Hope in African Christian Religion*, edited by Stan Chu Ilo (London: Lexington Books, in press), 6.

In our contemporary world, following the identification of eleven or so religions as WRs, we have a bipartite division of 'religions'.[16] On one hand, we have WRs, which are considered 'on board' with Christianity. That is to say, Christianity was the first to be recognized as a WR; other religions considered comparable to it were later added to the list. Because Christianity, especially Western Protestantism, initially defined the category of WRs, WRs are broadly speaking considered to be similar to, or at least in some way equivalent to, Christianity.

This implied similarity seems to indicate that Christian believers should respect WRs as mature and sophisticated equivalents to native European practice. By implication, it also follows that religions not falling into the category of WRs, such as ATRs, are inferior and less similar to Christianity than are WRs.

The concepts of both WRs and ATRs have been profoundly influenced by Christianity. WRs have, by their classification as somehow parallel to Christianity, acquired (in literature produced or influenced by the West) an advanced status. Other religions not viewed as WRs, such as ATRs, are also packaged in a Christian-oriented format for presentation to the West, but are considered primal and inferior. In both cases, the framework for understanding and evaluating other religions is not indigenous (relative to their own practitioners); rather, they are under-

stood in terms of their implicit relationship with Western Christianity.

As we have noted, however, an important difference is that WRs, unlike ATRs, are treated as 'equivalent' to Christianity. This equivalence, at least in some circles, implies a requirement that Christians respect WRs as being equals in some ways.

One consequence of this perception is that rather than seeking to bring the adherents of WRs to Christ, some Christian bodies enter into dialogue with them.[17] This dialogue may achieve mutual respect, but it also further heightens the WRs' legitimacy as equivalents to Christianity. In contrast, ATRs and other traditional religious groups are appropriated by Christianity, not seen as appropriate subjects for inter-religious dialogue.

We might ask, then, where the Christianization of ATRs is leading them. If my analysis is correct, then the impact of Christianity on ATRs is very different from its impact on WRs, because WRs are already considered somehow equivalent to Christianity whereas ATRs are not. Therefore, contemporary mission tends to respect WRs but aims to transform ATRs.

According to this logic, Christians should dialogue with WRs rather than seeking to convert them.[18] ATRs, on

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16 Masuzawa's list of WRs (see *Invention of World Religions*, 3, 262) includes Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Jainism, Confucianism, Taoism, Shintoism and Sikhism.

17 See also Muthuraj Swarmy, *The Problem with Interreligious Dialogue: Plurality, Conflict and Elitism in Hindu-Christian-Muslim Relations* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

18 For an example, see the World Council of Churches document 'Dialogue with People of Living Faiths', www.brill.nl/files/brill.nl/specific/downloads/31740_Brochure.pdf. When inter-faith dialogue endorses other WRs' identity, the stance is often contrary to the historic claims of Christianity.

the other hand, are available for conversion to Christianity, and indeed the evidence shows that much of Africa is taking this step: 'Christianity is now perhaps the most salient social force in sub-Saharan Africa.'[19] While praising God for this development, we may also feel that it is a gross injustice for even the instruction given in a theological college to define WRs in such a way as to legitimize their resistance to the Gospel.

Furthermore, African Christianity as understood in the West is created as it is described. People describing African Christianity using English are either Western Christians or Africans who have been taught by Western Christians.[20] As a result, Christianity so described is different from Christianity as lived. To the extent that lived Christianity in Africa does match Westerners' descriptions, one reason is that the African church still remains heavily dependent on the West for its continuity. The need for charity from the West translates into pressure driving African Christians to imitate Western Christianity as a means of facilitating ongoing good relationships with donors.

Here is one practical example of how African Christianity is created as it is described. African Christians are, of course, grateful for the grace of God

through Christ. In the West, people understand that feelings of gratefulness are of themselves valuable. Thus, for instance, children are told to say 'thank you'. The expression of thanks is itself considered a kind of payment for a service rendered; no further reciprocation is required or expected. Many African languages now have terms to translate 'thank you'. Careful study reveals, however, that some indigenous languages had no such term. The Swahili terms for 'thank you' (*asante* and *shukran*) are both of Arabic origin, as is the term used in the Kikaonde language in Zambia. The term for 'thank you' in the Kenyan Dholuo language, *erokamano*, implies 'so be it'.

Why did these languages initially have no word for 'thank you'? Because in African patron–client systems, thanks is not expressed through mere words of appreciation, but through praise and gift exchange. Western interpretations assuming that African Christians are thankful to God in the Western Protestant sense are therefore somewhat inaccurate. The reality in Africa is something more akin to the prosperity gospel, consistent with the patron–client perspective. When God is seen as the patron, then he should disperse material rewards in exchange for praise. In Africa, God deserves praise, not 'thanks'. Those who praise him deserve gifts in return.

Both ATRs and WRs present a deceptive front, especially to the West, and especially when communicated in English. For WRs, the deceptive front is the supposed existence of a *religion*, which is actually an invention mod-

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19 Paul Gifford, *Christianity, Development and Modernity in Africa* (London: Hurst and Company, 2015), 11–12.

20 Many, if not all, internationally respected (i.e. those with a voice in the West) African theologians have been trained in or by the West. Even as Africans, they are obliged to articulate their own Christian traditions as if they are Western in nature.

elled on Protestant Christianity.[21] WRs are systems that have been artificially designed in opposition to Christianity. In such a case, to try to get to what is truly happening in people's hearts, a Christian missionary must consider how to side-step the WR discussion (how to do this will be discussed below). Because they have not had a WR, much of Africa is, in contrast, aspiring to be Christian.

The difficulty faced by missionaries in Africa is that because the continent is frequently described using Western Christian language, it has the misleading appearance of already being Western-Christian (more on this below). A Westerner must be discerning to know what is actually going on. Westerners seeking to engage an African community authentically can overcome these difficulties more effectively if they are equipped to work in non-Westerners' own languages.

A missionary working in Africa must be concerned about redressing an imbalance with regard to ways in which African people's practice has been too closely identified with Western Christianity. A foreign missionary who wants to engage with people where they are needs to get 'under their skin'. This requires greater attention to what is happening indigenously, in terms that are indigenous (and not in Western terms, like the dominant discourse on ATRs).

The simplest and most straightforward, although perhaps still not very easy, way of doing this is by working with African people in their own languages. Conventions have been built up over decades or even centuries that align indigenous African practices with what are considered 'equivalents' in the West. Relying on those conventions is generally far from adequate. It is thus vitally important to begin to build up an understanding that is true to local contexts and reflects local categories and practices, to learn and use an indigenous language.[22]

Both ATRs and WRs, when expressed in English, are not fully accurate representations. Most (if not all) scholars would concede a degree of inaccuracy or even bias, but they usually fail to realize how much bias is introduced and maintained by the use of English to describe non-Western people. It seems that the reason for this lack of perception is exactly that the differences are rendered invisible by the use of English.

In turn, Westerners also often fail to realize the impact of this resulting bias on how Christian mission work is understood. The biases introduce misunderstandings that undercut the purpose and the urgency of mission work. The so-called prosperity gospel is just one particularly visible example of the outcomes to which I refer here: gospel teachings that sound spiritual when in English incorporate, when expressed in African languages and interpreted

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21 Masuzawa, *Invention of World Religions*, describes how the invention of WRs occurred in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

22 Attention to categories of language use is a part of recent focus in cognitive linguistics; for example, see Daniel Sanford, '2.6 Bybee's Usage Based Models of Language', in *The Bloomsbury Companion to Cognitive Linguistics*, edited by John R. Taylor and Jeanette Littlemore (London: Bloomsbury: 2015), 110, who points to the centrality of category in understanding.

through African cultures, the material with the spiritual.

Both ATRs and WRs, as known to the West, are systems that make sense when expressed in European languages, especially English. They are, after all, interpretations of other people's traditions made with the purpose of communicating to English speakers. Westerners draw on the Western logic that attempts to comprehend what initially seems very strange and unfamiliar by comparing it with the familiar—usually something Christian.

It follows logically, I believe, that because descriptions of WRs and ATRs work according to a certain Western logic, they will *not* work according to the non-Western logic of either African people, Hindus or Buddhists. (Recall my examples of discrepancies between English and African terms presented earlier.) The very 'structure of European languages' dictates ways of thinking, as Woodley says.[23]

The reason why adherents of so-called WRs maintain the WR discourse in English is not that it is functionally effective in describing who they are or how they think or operate. Typically, the reason is that the West offers generous rewards, in the form of resources and opportunities, to those who can articulate, debate and expound on either WRs or ATRs in ways that make sense to the West. There are great incentives for non-Westerners to demonstrate that they have appropriated Western ways of expressing who they are.

Because the concepts of ATRs and WRs work only when one uses European languages and European logic, it follows that they will not make sense if communicated using indigenous languages. That is, Hinduism as articulated in languages indigenous to Hindu people will not be the same as Hinduism as known in the textbooks. The same applies to ATRs. In practice, this linguistic dependency means that when indigenous languages are used according to indigenous logic, both ATRs and WRs can be said to disappear. When WRs or ATRs are identified as being the opposition faced by a Christian missionary, the resulting cultural reorientation is rather revolutionary.

The above paragraph is hard to explain to Western people who speak only English and other languages that have a similar Western cultural context. An illustration of the implications for denominational relationships may be helpful, however. A Lutheran missionary visiting a Mennonite church in Africa is likely to perceive issues arising from different doctrines held by the two churches, arising from their historical relationship in Europe. Indigenous African Christians taught about the two denominations' peculiarities, however, may perceive differences at the intellectual level, but probably not at the heart level.

Thus, indigenous African Christians who appropriate the gospel into their own ways of life using their own languages are likely to be much less aware of denominational issues that divide Westerners. For example, because Mennonite Christians in Africa are less likely than their Western compatriots to uphold pacifism as a foundational doctrine, they will be less affronted by cooperation with churches that are not

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23 Randy S. Woodley, *Shalom and Community of Creation: An Indigenous Vision* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2012), 62.

pacifist. For those who have not studied Western Christian history, which is written in European languages, pacifism may simply not be perceived as a relevant issue.[24]

From my three decades of personal experience in Africa, I have found that I need to be wary of doctrinal clashes only when teaching at churches where foreign missionaries continue to have a controlling influence, and when using English. After the missionaries have withdrawn (along with their funding), and if indigenous languages are used, many old doctrinal clashes of European origin simply fade out of sight.

The fact that WR and ATR discourses do not make sense when translated into non-European languages has major ramifications that go beyond the scope of this article. It means that they will also not make sense to non-Western people reading European languages, if that reading is based on the presuppositions underlying their own worldview. This is why Western education (not limited to the realm of religion), taught in Western languages, cannot function properly in African countries.[25]

VI. Related Concerns

My exposition as presented above has several additional ramifications.

First, the confusion between Christianity and WRs described above has major implications for Westerners'

understanding of what is happening around them, because they are presented with views of WRs that resemble Christianity. Because WRs are studied using historically Western and Christianized languages, by people who are long accustomed to Christian ways, they are portrayed as if they are Christian.

I do not mean, of course, that Buddhists or Muslims are said to believe in Christ. Rather, Buddha and Muhammed are assumed to be Christ-like. Writings about Buddha (and Hinduism, Islam, etc.) all presuppose things about these other religions that derive from Western Christianity. Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam are seen as filling the same space for other people as Christianity fills for Westerners. In other words, as indicated earlier, they are (very misleadingly) considered equivalent to Christianity unless stated otherwise.

As Troeltsch observed,[26] this has made it difficult to make a clear logical case for Christianity in the West. The resulting confusion has encouraged some Westerners to ditch their Christian monotheistic origins in favour of a sort of polytheism in which a multiplicity of gods (including the deities of Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism) compete for supremacy, sowing considerable disorder and theological doubt. This problem plagues Western societies today. Agnosticism and atheism can be the ultimate fruit of such confusion.

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24 I derive this insight, in part at least, from a personal conversation with a Mennonite believer in Tanzania in 2008.
25 In practice, such education generates dependency by the people being taught on those who grasp foreign ways of thinking.

26 Ernst Troeltsch, 'Christianity and the History of Religion,' in *Religion in History*, translated by James Luther Adams and Walter F. Bense (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991 [1897]), 77–86.

Calhoun et al.[27] make a strong case that the West is unique in its view of 'godlessness' and secularism. According to Western secularism, 'the "lower," immanent or secular, order is all that there is and … the higher, or transcendent, is a human invention.'[28] This is the basis of Western godlessness. When Indians use the term 'secular', they mean something very different. For them, secularism does not posit the absence of 'religions', but principled ways in which the state engages with religions.[29] Indian secularism 'accepts that humans have an interest in relating to something beyond themselves, including God.'[30] So also, other peoples around the world understand the secular and religious spheres differently from the West.

The God that many in the West do not believe in is a supernatural God.[31] That is to say, the West holds the notion that if God were to exist, he should be supernatural.[32] In contrast, Cassaniti and Luhrmann, when conducting research on religion in Thailand, used a translation of 'supernatural' to represent God for Thai people; their representation made no sense to a Thai monk.[33] There is apparently no notion of the supernatural in Thailand, but does that mean that Thai people do not believe in God?[34]

Second, when African scholars use English, they enable Westerners to 'keep a check' on what they are doing and saying. This applies particularly to written work, as Westerners are keen to find out what majority-world theologians are writing, which they assume reflects their thinking. Many are keen to correct such writing. To a lesser extent, this tendency applies even to oral discourse, which can be transcribed or heard, by Westerners.

This situation becomes problematic when people make judgements, as they often do, in the absence of full contextual knowledge, including full understanding of the African language on the scene. This easily results in the draw-

27 Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer and Jonathan VanAntwerpen, 'Introduction', *Rethinking Secularism.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 3–30.

28 Charles Taylor, 'Western Secularity', in *Rethinking Secularism*, edited by Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 33.

29 Calhoun et al., 'Introduction', 23.

30 Rajeeve Bhargava, 'Rehabilitating Secularism', in *Rethinking Secularism*, edited by Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 105.

31 Even Richard Dawkins considers 'only *supernatural* gods [to be] delusional'. Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 36.

32 Jim Harries, *The Godless Delusion: Eu-*

rope and Africa (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2017), xxi.

33 Julia Cassaniti and Tanya Marie Luhrmann, 'Encountering the Supernatural: A Phenomenological Account of Mind', *Religion and Society: Advances in Research* 2 (2011): 38–39.

34 Gary Deason explains that the insistence that God be 'supernatural' arose after the Reformation, i.e. before many of the scientific discoveries that subsequently 'raised the bar' for what God had to do to convince people that he existed. See Deason, 'Reformation Theology and the Mechanistic Conception of Nature', in *God and Nature: Historical Essays on the Encounter between Christianity and Science*, edited by David C. Lindberg and Ronald L. Numbers (London: University of California Press, 1986), 173–78.

ing of premature conclusions, which in turn makes African theologians reluctant to communicate honestly.

Ironically, and sadly, Western critics rarely seem to realize that what they are overhearing from Africans is an intimate part of a more complex whole. The 'whole'—that is, the complete lives of African people, including their beliefs and practices in relation to Christianity—is largely invisible to the West. It is rooted in indigenous African languages and obscure rituals. When African theologians make proclamations about their faith in English, they are responding to things that remain invisible to the West. It is often not helpful to try to judge their pronouncements in the absence of full contextual knowledge.

I am suggesting that African Christian theologians should be permitted to freely discuss issues that concern them without fear of premature judgement from the outside. A major barrier to this freedom is the widespread use of European languages in Africa, which immediately opens African discourse to contextually ignorant foreign critiques. This is another reason why African theology should be engaged in an African language.

Westerners who are qualified to evaluate such discourse are those who have immersed themselves in use of the same language. This immersion will, along the way, enable those Westerners to pick up essential contextual information. Other Westerners could then engage not with occasional texts in English extracted from unknown African contexts, but with an existing body of texts (oral and written) that form a part of a contextually rich discourse, articulated to them by fellow Westerners who have immersed themselves in that discourse.[35]

Such use of an African language would enable Westerners to grasp a context other than their own. This degree of understanding is impossible in English, because English presupposes Western and not African categories.

Third, the above considerations do not imply that we must now translate theological and other texts into the thousands of languages reputed to be in use in Africa today.[36] Using this frightening prospect as an excuse to avoid African languages altogether has inadvertently perpetuated Western ignorance regarding Africa. Western scholars do not need to learn a thousand African languages; they ought to begin with one. In very practical terms, perhaps university departments in the West could select one African language and then focus on training Western experts in its interpretation.

This proposal raises another issue that also deserves attention: any African language that became the focus of study in the West would thereby be enriched. In the current system of international scholarship, wealth and opportunity would flow to the owners of that particular language. The presence

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35 I suggest that those interpreting African discourse to Westerners need to be Westerners, because learning should move from the known to the unknown. Therefore, Westerners should become immersed in Africa and then interpret what they learn to fellow Westerners; conversely, the best explanation of the West to Africa would come from Africans who have been immersed in the West. See Harries, *Godless Delusion*, 136.

36 Africa has 2,144 languages according to Ethnologue, 'Languages of the World', https://www.ethnologue.com/region/Africa.

of such a prize would make the choice of which African language to teach highly politically charged. This is probably another reason why African languages are neglected: Africans could not agree on which language Westerners should learn. In patron–client Africa, where jealousy is translated into witchcraft, major efforts are always made to avoid giving someone else an advantage over oneself.[37]

The West's powerful but decentralized university system cannot solve the need for detailed study of African contexts. Instead we need 'vulnerable missionaries' who commit to using local languages *and resources*, seeking not to materially enrich a particular African people through aid from the West but to communicate the gospel in an effective way, and to enlighten the West.[38]

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[37] Jim Harries, 'Witchcraft, Envy, Development, and Christian Mission in Africa', *Missiology: An International Review* 40, no. 2 (2012): 129–39.

[38] For more on 'vulnerable mission' see vulnerablemission.org.

VII. Conclusion

My reflections on teaching ATRs and WRs in Africa have eventually led me into a profound critique of contemporary understandings of the Christian missionary task. My primary conclusion is that, wherever possible, missionary endeavours outside the West should use indigenous languages and indigenous presuppositional foundations. Only in this way can invented barriers to gospel penetration, such as the concepts of ATRs and WRs, be accurately perceived and averted.

The pervasive parallel identification of other WRs and Christianity is foundationally problematic. Widespread use of Western languages is hindering the articulation of profound African theology. Use of African languages by Westerners would enable them to begin to hear African theology authentically.

We do not have to start translating Christian theological works into every African language, but Westerners seeking to serve God in theological or missionary work in Africa should begin by learning to communicate in and listen carefully to one African language and then work from that starting point.