Full Length Research Paper

An investigation of sin and evil in African cosmology

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The research has found out that, in our world, the appalling depth and extent of human suffering is evident and very much experienced. Evil and suffering are not just philosophical and theological aspects of human existence but is a personal problem that every human person experiences. There are occurrences in nature, for example, catastrophes, floods, earthquakes, which cause harm, misery and suffering to human persons. Human beings suffer from sickness, blindness, physical handicaps, which are very often accompanied by physical pain. The researcher has found out that every sensible human being questions why this should happen to humanity and individuals. The problem is even more crucial in Africa where we have rampart wars like in Somalia, Sudan, Rwanda, Burundi, Congo and so many other places. We are left asking the question: Why all this suffering in the world? How did it all begin? How can we be free from it? In this research we have looked at the concept of sin, sin and community, sin and God, moral culpability, consequences of sin, sin and covenant, sin and salvation in African perspective.

Key words: Evil, sin, wrongdoing, suffering, religion.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is an investigation of answering the questions of evil, sin and suffering that have disturbed humanity since time immemorial. We have explored the concept of evil and sin in our African thought which we have always been interpreting in relation to the other philosophical and theological explanations of these phenomena. A human being is social by nature as rightly noted by the old philosopher, Aristotle. Hence, in this article we have looked at sin and the community in our African context since the issue of the community seems to be more crucial in Africa. Since there is always a relationship between God and humanity, we have examined what sin is in relation to God. Finally, we have looked at the problem of evil and sin and its removal, atonement and restoration. In the final part we have looked at the subject of sin and salvation which are not favourite subjects of many African scholars of Religion.

OBJECTIVE

The objective of this research was to investigate the concept of sin and evil in an African cosmology.

METHODOLOGY

The information contained here comes from content analysis gathered mainly from secondary sources

CONCEPT OF SIN

To begin with, rather than define "evil" in terms of theological theory (for example, as "that which is contrary to God's will"), it seems better to define it ostensibly, by referring to that which the word refers. According to Hick (1983), evil refers to "physical pain, mental suffering and moral wickedness". The last one is one of the causes of the first two, for an enormous amount of human pain arises from humankind's inhumanity. This pain includes such major scourges as poverty, oppression, persecution, war, all injustice, indignity and inequality that occur in human societies. (Hick, 1983: 40). It is however, important to note that although a great deal of pain and suffering are caused by human action, there is much more that arises from such natural causes as bacteria an and earthquakes, storm, fire, lightening, flood and drought.
Another type of evil that can be identified is mental evil.

In many cases, mental evil is more serious than the purely physical evil. This applies especially to grave mental disorders such as insanity, mental retardation and depression. This article emphasises on the third type of evil, namely, moral evil. Accordingly moral evil which he also calls sin, is an act or an action performed by a free human person. Sin to him is an act of the will, because it is a decision and indeed a free decision. Moral evil is a relational category, but it is not necessarily limited to the human sphere. Base and inhumane treatment of others, as well as manipulation for personal ends, comprises of moral evil, regardless of its source.

Crenshaw (1983: 3) mentions another category of evil, namely, religious evil. According to him, religious evil signifies an inner disposition that perverts authentic response to the holy. This perversion may assume the form of idolatry, where worship is directed away from God to a pale reflection of the ultimate. This type of evil operates on the vertical plane; it concerns human relationship with God and thus extends to the innermost recesses of imagination. In this respect, religious evil is by its very nature more hidden than the other type of evils we have identifies above. It is therefore, more pernicious since its presence can easily be concealed from human eyes.

The Bible faithfully reflects the characteristic mixture of good and evil in human experience. It records every kind of sorrow and suffering, every mode of man's inhumanity to man and of our painfully insecure existence in the world. There is no attempt to regard evil as anything but dark, menacingly ugly, heartrending and crushing. There can be no doubt, then, that for biblical faith evil is entirely real and in no sense an illusion.

ORIGIN AND NATURE OF SIN IN AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

There have been various responses to the phenomenon of evil in every society. Worth noting at this stage are the three main Christian responses to this problem. The first one is the Augustinian response (354 - 430), hinging upon the concept of the fall of man from an original state of righteousness. To him then, the world was as perfect as created by God. Evil came initially in those areas that involve free will: the levels of angels and human beings. Some of the angels turned from the Supreme God (God) to a lesser god. Thereby rebelling against their creator; they in turn tempted the first man and woman to fall. This fall of angelic and human beings according to Augustine was the origin of evil or sin. Thus he could say, "All evil is either sin or a punishment for sin" (Hick, 1983: 43).

Recoeur (1967), discussing this question of original sin says that nothing is less amenable to a direct confrontation with philosophy than this concept of original sin, for nothing is more deceptive than its appearance of rationality. He states that on the contrary, it is to the least

elaborate, the most inarticulate expressions of the confession of evil that philosophic reason must listen. His suggestion is that we proceed regressively and revert from the "speculative" expressions to the "spontaneous" ones. To him, it is essential to be convinced from the start that the concept of original sin is not the beginning but the end of a cycle of living experience, the Christian experience of sin. He says that the interpretation it gives to this experience is only one of the possible rationalisations of the root of evil according to Christianity. Above all, this rationalisation belongs to a period of thought marked by gnostic pretensions to "know" the mysteries of God and human destiny. In this way he departs from the Augustinian interpretation of the fall of man.

The second is the Iraenean response, hinging upon the idea of the gradual creation of a perfected humanity through life in a highly imperfect world. Iraeneus (c.130 - 202) distinguished two stages of the creation of the human race. In the first stage, human beings were brought into existence as intelligent animals endowed with the capacity for immense moral and spiritual development. In the second stage of the creation, which to him is still taking place, they are gradually being transformed through their own free responses from human animals into "children of God". Thus the human situation is that of tension between the natural selfishness arising from our instinct for survival and the calls of both morality and religion to transcend our self-centredness. The origin of moral evil to him is that it is a necessary condition in the creation of humanity from an epistemic distance from God. The third response is that of modern process theodicy, hinging upon the idea of a God who is not all-powerful and not in fact able to prevent the evils arising either in human beings or in the process of nature.

The common ground of all these responses has come to be called the free will defence at least as far as the moral evil of human wickedness is concerned; for Christian thought has always seen moral evil as related to human freedom responsibility (Hick, 1983: 41). To be a person is to be a finite centre of freedom, a (relatively) self-directing agent responsible for one's own decisions. This involves being free to act wrongly as well as rightly. There can therefore be no certainty in advance that a genuinely free moral agent will never choose amiss. Consequently, according to the strong form of free-will defence, the possibility of wrong doing is logically inseparable from creation of finite persons and to say that God should have created beings who might sin amounts to saying that God should not have created people.

Just like any human community, so also Africans are much aware of evil in the world and in various ways they try to fight it. Several views exist concerning the origin of evil. Many African societies say categorically that God did not create what is evil nor does he do them any evil whatsoever. Mbiti (1969: 204ff) examines various African myths which highlight the fact that when God originally created man, there was harmony and family relationships

between the two and the first people enjoyed only what was good. Where then did evil emanate from?

Some societies see evil as originating from or associated with spiritual beings other than God. Part of this concept is a personification of evil itself. According to Mbiti (1969: 204), the Vugusu say that there is an evil divinity which God created good, but later turned against him and began to do evil. This evil divinity is assisted by evil spirits and all evil now comes from that lot. Thus, a kind of duel exists, between good and evil forces in the world. There are other people who regard death, epidemics, locusts and other major calamities as divinities in themselves or caused by divinities. Among the Iteso, for example, Edeke is a god or spirit who brings death, epidemics and other calamities. The same word is used for the calamities themselves. Edeke is then the embodiment of evil itself.

In nearly all African societies, it is thought that the spirits are either the origin of evil or agents of evil. When human spirits become detached from human contact, people experience or fear them as "evil" or "harmful". Some are believed to possess individuals and to cause various maladies like epilepsy and madness. If the dead are not properly buried, or have a grudge, are neglected or not obeyed when they give instructions, it is thought that they take revenge or punish the offenders. In this case, it is human beings who provoke the spirits of the dead to act in "evil" ways.

In Africa also, there are people in every community who are suspected of working maliciously against their relatives and neighbours through the use of magic, sorcery and witchcraft. This is the centre of evil as people experience it. Mystical power is neither good nor evil in itself: but when used maliciously by some individuals it is experienced as evil. This view makes evil an independent and external object which, however, cannot act on its own but must be employed by human or spiritual agents. People here become incarnations of evil power. In fact, the African conceive that there are certain classes of people, age groups, clans, among others. (for example, those with red eyes, squinted eyes, shifty people, very old single people, the greedy) who possess these potentially destructive powers. They can harm their victims by just uttering evil words or gazing at them or applying some witchcraft, magic or sorcery.

CONCEPT OF "SIN" IN AFRICAN RELIGION

It is important to be clear about the use and meaning of concepts in this realm. These involve both abstraction and concreteness of expression. Magesa (1998) notes that what is elsewhere, especially in Christianity, is conceptualised and explained as "sin" or "evil", for example, is better expressed in African religion by the concept of "wrong-doing", "badness", or "destruction of life." Again citing from other community like among the Iteso of

Uganda, the Christian concept of sin is translated as "aronis" which literally means "a bad thing". Surprisingly, the same word is used to refer to the occurrence of death! This, however, does not mean that the more abstract notions of sin and evil are non-existent in African religious consciousness; it is to say that the moral perspective of African religion is quite concrete and pragmatic. The concept "sin/ evil" seems to give less emphasis on wrong or bad actions, which emanate from bad people, people who have an "evil eye" or "bad heart", which the African religious consciousness prefers.

In African religion, sin is always attached to a wrong-doer and ultimately the wrongdoer is a human person. The sense here, then, is that sin and evil do not and cannot exist in the human experience except as perceived in people. It is people who are evil or sinful, whether or not they are aided by invisible forces. For, even when invisible forces intervene in human life to cause harm, it is more often than not because they are "used" by evil people or are manipulated by forces on earth. Otherwise, these spirits (though without physical bodies of their own) are personalised by the African mentality to express their badness in what they do as "bodied" beings. If people or personalised beings who are evil, precisely because they actually entertain bad intentions, utter bad words or engage in wrong deeds. In other words, they are incarnations of evil powers, at least for the time they behave in an anti-life manner; they frustrate the flowering of life and life-energies (Magesa 1998: 148ff).

SIN AND THE COMMUNITY

In many societies of the world, social order and peace are recognised. In the African context, the social order and peace are seen as essential and sacred. Where the sense of corporate life is so deep, it is inevitable that the solidarity of the community must be maintained, otherwise there is disintegration and destruction. This order is conceived primarily in terms of kinship relationship, which simultaneously produces situations of tension since everybody is related to everybody else and deepens the sense of damage caused by the strain of such tensions. If somebody steals a goat, personal relationships are at once involved because the goat belongs to a member of the corporate body, perhaps to someone who is a father, or a brother, or a sister, or a cousin to the thief. As such it is an offence to the whole community and its consequences affect not only the thief but also the whole body of his relatives.

Harry Sawyerr supports this assertion when he says:

God does not enter directly into any discussion of sin among African peoples…Sin is seen within the context of community life (as opposed to individualism) in which the clan relationship embracing the living, the dead and the unborn is essentially a covenant relationship. Any breach

which punctures this communal relationship amounts to sin, whatever words may be applied to it. (So) the corporate solidarity of the family, the clan and the tribe becomes a fundamental factor of life … This solidarity is indispensable for the maintenance of ethical conduct and a common standard of behaviour… This sensus communis seems to us to play a very important role in regard to sin (Sawyerr, 1968: 30 - 32).

Sawyerr mentions two features of the attitude of sin. One is that "personal responsibility for one's actions is always to the fore. But usually this responsibility is extended to the other members of the family… The sensus communis assumes the role of a public conscience of which every member of the community is part…" The other is that "guilt is determined by motive and intention. Where these are to despoil the other man to one's own advantage, or where one is out to gain unfair advantage over the rest of the community, sanctions are invoked...They are regarded as offences against the society" (ibid,). The guilt incurred is now a sin, more so in the form of parabasis-the violation of a law…The essence of the sin lies in the violation of the solidarity of the community.

There exist, therefore, many laws, customs, set forms of behaviour, regulations, rules, observances and taboos, constituting the moral code and ethics of a given community or society. Wrong-doing relates to the contravention of these specific codes of community expectations. Some of these are held as sacred and are believed to have been instituted by God and national leaders. This gives sanctity to the customs and regulations of the community. Any breach of this code of behaviour is considered evil, wrong or bad, for it is an injury or destruction to the accepted social order or peace (Magesa, 1998: 153 - 154). It must therefore, be punished by the corporate community of both the living and the dead and God may also inflict punishment and bring about justice.

Many of these moral codes are well known to the adult members of a given community and have been inculcated from childhood through the normal daily process of socialisation. During initiation they are imprinted on the body and mind of an individual in a very special and practically unforgettable way. Some codes or taboos may be less well-known and a few known only to a limited number of people because they escape mention during the initiation period or are simply taken for granted. But all moral customs, whether known or unknown, require observance. In fact, Magesa (1998: 154) notes that these less known codes or taboos present greater danger since it is possible to transgress them without being aware of it. Ignorance though seldom exempts one from the consequences of a transgression, although it may occasionally lessen the force of the shame or ease the conditions of purification. Still, whatever the circumstances, any violation is wrongdoing.

The corporate nature of African communities, which are knit together by a web of kinship relationship and social structures, cannot be overemphasised. Within the tightly knit society where personal relationships are so intense and so wide, one finds perhaps the most paradoxical areas of African life. This corporate type of life makes every member of the community dangerously naked in the sight of other members. In Mbiti's (1968: 209) words:

It is paradoxically the centre of love and hatred, of friendship and enmity, of trust and suspicion, of joy and sorrow, of generous tenderness and bitter jealousies. It is paradoxically the heard of security and insecurity, of building and destroying the individual and the community.

In the community, therefore, everybody knows everybody else: a person cannot be individualistic but only corporate. Every form of pain, misfortune, sorrow or suffering; every kind of sickness and illness; every death whether of an old man or of the infant child; every failure of the crop in the fields, of hunting in the wilderness or of fishing in the waters; every bad omen or dream: these and all other manifestations of evil that man experiences are blamed on somebody in the corporate society. Natural explanations may indeed be found, but mystical explanations must also be given. People create scapegoats for their sorrows. Mbiti notes that the shorter the radius of kinship and family ties, the more the scapegoats there are. Frustrations, psychic disturbances, emotional tensions and other states of the inner person, are readily externalised and incarnated or made concrete in another human being or in circumstances, which lay the blame on the external agent (Mbiti, 1968: 209).

Here then, we find a vast range of occasions for offences by one or more individuals against others in their corporate community. The environment of intense relationship favours strongly the growth of the belief in magic, sorcery, witchcraft and all fears, practices and concepts that go with this belief. Although there are spiritual forces outside man which seem sometimes to function within human history and human society, the African belief in mystical power is greater than the ways in which that power might actually function within the human history. The researcher can rightly state that the African communities in the villages are deeply affected and permeated by the psychological atmosphere which creates both real and imaginary powers or forces of evil that give rise to more tensions, jealousies, suspicions, slander, accusations and scapegoats. It is a vicious circle.

In human relationships there is emphasis on the concept of hierarchy based partly on age and partly on status. In practice this amounts to a ladder ranging from God to the youngest child. God is creator and hence the parent of human kind and holds the highest position so that He is the final point of reference and appeal. Beneath him are the divinities and spirits, then the ancestors. After them come human beings whose hierarchy includes kings, rulers, rainmakers, priests, diviners,

medicine-men, elders, parents, older brothers and sisters and finally younger members of the community. Authority is recognised as increasing from the youngest child to the highest being. This is what we can refer to as the "principle of primogeniture". Sin or offence is seen from bottom to top not vice versa (Mbiti, 1968: 208). The ancestors do not offend against human beings, the king or ruler does not offend against his subjects, the elders do not offend against those who are younger or under them, the parents do not offend against their children. If parents do something that hurts the children and which constitutes an offence against the children, it is not the children as such who experience it as an offence; rather it is the community, the clan, the nation or the ancestors who are the real object of the offence, since they are the ones in higher status than the parents. Consequently it is not the children themselves but the offended community or clan or ancestors who punish the parents.

Of course, there are exceptions to this. For example, if the king departs from the laws and customs established by the founders of the nation, he would be considered as offending against his subjects because he has departed from the established order. Indeed, the offence is also against the founders of the nation and therefore, it is in effect an offence against beings of a higher status.

SIN AND GOD

From the principle of hierarchy or primogeniture stated above, God does not or cannot commit evil against His creation. Some societies like the Akamba and the Herero who firmly hold that since God does no evil, they have no need to sacrifice to Him. When people feel that a misfortune or calamity has come from God, they interpret this not as an offence, but as a punishment caused by misdeeds.

Omosade Awolalu has this to say about sin:

In African communities, there are sanctions recognised as the approved standard of social and religious conduct on the part of individuals in the society and the community as a whole. A breach of, or failure to adhere to the sanctions is sin… It includes any immoral behaviour, ritual mistakes, any offences against God or man, breach of covenant, breaking of taboos and doing anything regarded as abominable and polluting…To disregard God, the divinities and the ancestral spirits, is to commit sin. Likewise to disregard the norms and taboos of the society is to commit sin (Omosade, 1976: 1 - 23).

Awolalu sees also the dimension of sin that reaches God (and other spiritual realities). This means that sin can be a breach by the individual against the corporate community; it can also be a breach by the community against the "will" of God as this may be communally agreed upon and expressed through traditions, taboos, sanctions and fixed rituals. In effect the community cannot offend itself, cannot "sin" against itself, nor against the individual. But it can sin against God and/or where these are included in the worldview, against spiritual beings like divinities or clan or tribal heroes and heroines.

In many African myths, man originally lived in paradise with God. But through man's disobedience, usually attributed to a woman or some detestable creature (such as a vulture, hyena, etc.), there was separation. This was the beginning of evil in the world. Some authors like Awolalu and Dopamu regard or interpret the loss of man's original bliss and fellowship with God in African Religion as having occurred when man "sinned" through disobedience to God. They state:

The disobedience of man can be seen as sin against God…Sin is seen as coming between man and God; it is disharmony with the will of God (Awolalu and Dopamu, 1979: 67ff, 214ff).

It is true that some of man's creation stories and loss of bliss lend themselves to the interpretation that man's "moral" sin caused this catastrophic loss of paradise. However, as Mbiti (1968) correctly states, it is not justified to inject morals and ethics into these stories of "separation" between heaven and earth, God and man. There is no follow up of the consequences in terms of blaming suffering, sickness and death, on a kind of "original sin". We do not hear of this separation in ethical terms. Mbiti (1968) prefers to see this separation as an ontological separation that affirmed that God is God and man is man. According to African Religion, this primal separation did not involve any direct act on the part of primeval man. It is then important to avoid advancing the same kind of interpretation to these African myths as has been done to the Genesis story of the "forbidden fruit". This would be a deceptive import and introduce a Christian concept into the African mythology. The myths must be seen in their own context and this is what phenomenology is all about.

It is clear from what we have seen that for the Africans, sin is "sin" when it occurs and that it is sin because it injures the community or fellow members of the community. Consequently, this is also injury to the higher moral welfare of which God is the "Giver", the "Watcher", the "Judge" and the "Sustainer". It is important to note that in Africa, man is not a "sinner" by birth but by deed. As long as man is clean before his community and before his conscience, there is no sin in him. Sickness, suffering and other misfortunes can be pointers (but not in each case) that someone has done wrong before the community and its sanctions, for example, stealing, disrespect, adultery, incest, breaking a taboo, killing another person, etc. Where these forms of suffering are not caused by another person through sorcery, magic and witchcraft, or in some cases through the begrudged spirits of the ancestors, it is generally assumed that the concerned person has committed some moral offence or

broken a taboo. He is a "sinner".

MORAL CULPABILITY

In Christian theology, sin is in thought, word and deed and sin has a lot to do with conscience. According to Karl Rahner, what makes sin really sin is guilt. Guilt is the free decision to evil, evil with regard to God and man. He, therefore, distinguishes in guilt an inward element and a social one, to which culpa and debitum correspond in Latin. The inward element lends itself to psychological analysis, which can often distinguish between inauthentic feelings of guilt in real consciousness of guilt. He continues to say that the social element is embodied in juridical guilt, which means being subject to a penalty and (or) being bound to make compensation. This juridical guilt is only ascribed in the administration of justice in the society (Rahner, 1975: 1583ff).

In African thought, moral culpability, the admission of wrongdoing by an individual or group of people, follows several interlinked steps between the wrongdoer and the community. It entails much more than personal, interior feelings of guilt. As Magesa notes, such personal feelings constitute only an initial step in a wrongdoer's possible acceptance and confession of guilt. But the most decisive element in the recognition and acceptance of moral culpability involves the community. The community's perception of a person's act or attitude as contrary to accepted codes of ethical living may have two possible effects. On the one hand it may trigger in the wrongdoer an awareness of failure, of having let down oneself and the community. If so the wrongdoer feels remorse or "shame" for the wrong, a sense of personal shortcoming, of betrayal against oneself and the clan. If the matter in question is serious and the community insists that the wrongdoer redress the wrong, the culprit may be led to admit and confess. There are rites that are carried out to achieve this purpose. On the other hand if the person presumed guilty by society does not feel shame and refuses to admit the wrongdoing, there are means sought to prove innocence or guilt. While they can be legal, like a trial before the elders, most often the means are religious. They may include divination or trial by ordeal (for example, jumping over fire, leaking a burning iron rode, killing an animal and the verdict is believed to establish, beyond reasonable doubt, innocence or guilt.

The role of shame has a very important significance in the African religious psychology of wrongdoing. In Western psychology, shame is associated with "being", whereas guilt is associated with "feeling" and these are seen as radically different. Bradshaw (1998) says:

Shame is a being wound and differs greatly from the feeling of guilt. Guilt says I've done something wrong; shame says there is something wrong with me. Guilt says I've made a mistake; shame says I am a mistake. Guilt says what I did was not good; shame says I am no good (Bradshaw 1998: 2).

In African moral consciousness, however, guilt and shame are so intrinsically linked. Magesa has this to say:

…feeling results intrinsically and radically from being and being leads ineluctably to feeling and doing. Thus, it is not possible for a person to have done wrong if there is nothing wrong with the person. An individual with an evil eye harms others because he/she is evil…(Magesa, 1998: 157).

This means that being and doing cannot be divorced in the African understanding of things. Guilt in African thought, then, is a moral stage of development where a person "owns up to" personal worthlessness or shame. In this case, shame is the primary factor in the recognition and confession of guilt.

CONSEQUENCES OF SIN

Wrongdoing can never be neutral. It always has consequences to the perpetrator and very often to the perpetrator's community. The story of Genesis 3 serves as introduction to what amounts to a series of anecdotes intended to show how sin, once admitted in the world, spreads everywhere, bringing death and destruction in its wake (McBrien, 1981: 162ff). St. Paul in the New Testament talks about the effect of the sin of Adam. (I Corinthians 15: 21 - 23, Romans 5: 12 - 21). He states that we are affected by the sin of Adam. Because of Adam, we are all sinners without the Spirit (verse 19). He does not of course tell us how this is so without any personal decision. Instead, he argues from the universality of death. Because we all die, we are all implicated in sin, since death is the effect of sin. This sense of our corporate involvement in sin cannot be separated from the biblical belief in the solidarity of the human community and its notion of corporate personality. St. Augustine developed this teaching of original sin and its effects on humanity. He portrayed original sin as a situation in which every human being finds himself/herself, but from which only some are rescued. He links it to concupiscence, that is, the human person's spontaneous desire for material or sensual satisfaction. It is an effect of original sin and is transmitted by the libido in the parents' love by which a person first comes to existence. To the extent that concupiscence infects every human act, all our deeds are in some sense sinful.

According to Africans, although they have no established doctrine for the origin of sin comparable to that of the biblical concept presented above, they all the same accept the effect of sin on the individual and the community. Consequences come in the form of calamities: blight, failure to kill game or acquire food, murderous

anger and all kinds of anti-life phenomena be they personal, social, physical, psychological or natural. Magesa (1998: 155) categorises these calamities as affliction, usually perceived as illness or disease. There is disease if rains do not fall so there is no food in the land or if so much rain falls and crops are spoilt; or if cows do not give birth so there is shortage of milk. Any failure that befalls the individual or the community is interpreted as disease. Human illness, of course, forms the deepest core of this conception.

The causality of disease in humans can be explained in three ways, using the description of Westerlund (1989). There is the religious (suprahuman) causality, which presupposes a belief that human beings in different ways are influenced by spiritual powers beyond the human such as God and spirits. Then there is the social (human) causality which refers to relations between living human beings, such as in Africa, witchcraft and curses. Finally there is the natural (mainly physical) causation which refers to entities of nature, for example, insects, germs, natural substances and weather (Westlund, 1989: 179ff).

Religious, social and natural causes of affliction cannot be seen in Africa as entirely separated and unconnected. Rather, they all constitute stages in the psychological and spiritual awareness of an immoral situation. The order of conceptual awareness and any attempt at analysis and understanding of an affliction usually, though not necessarily always, begins with a natural explanation. Unless witchcraft, spirit, ancestral or divine causes are immediately suspected, a natural cause is first sought and then initially accepted as reason for a particular happening. In fact, natural causes are often very obvious, such as a tree falling on a person or hurting oneself while hunting. If the particular affliction does not grow in seriousness, the natural explanation will suffice. However, when afflictions grow worse, as often happens, the second and third causation is sought. In fact, it is more correct to say that social causality is already contained in the natural causality. For example, if a tree falls on the man cutting it and gets hurt, the person will certainly know that the falling tree hurt him. But at the back of his mind, he will be asking the question: Why me? Why did it have to fall this way not that way? Why at this particular time? To answer these questions, one must resort to human or religious explanations. It is on this level that misfortune begins to make sense in the African moral perception of the world.

The reason here as described by Magesa goes back to the African world-view. The world ought to be harmonious, balanced and good. Accordingly, misfortune, which means imbalance and disharmony in the universe, does not just happen. If and when it does, it is because there is a malevolent cause, either human or superhuman. Morality demands that these causes of disruption and affliction in human life and their motivations must be identified. Even if the offender is the victim, it is still important that the fact be known and something be done about it (Bjerke, 1981: 112ff).

In the religious category, the ancestors may cause illness and suffering. This is often diagnosed by religious specialists (diviners) to be the case. This happens when the living neglect their duty of remembering the ancestors such as pouring libation. The sick person must then realise his neglect of responsibility and correct the situation. Ancestral spirits may cause affliction because they desire sacrifice and offerings.

Non-ancestral human spirits and human spirits may also cause misfortune. Many are simply malevolent spirits who bring disorder for no good reason. They might be spirits of people who did not receive proper burial at death who are resentful and seek to avenge themselves and are never satisfied. Spirits of children who did not undergo initiation process also belong to this category. They are extremely dangerous in their potential to cause harm to the living. Nature spirits sometimes also cause affliction because they have been harmed in the early elements they inhabit. It is known, for example, that certain things and places are their dwelling places and reserved for their use. There are certain trees, caves, or forests, which should neither be put to human use nor trespassed. To do this invites their anger and brings calamity.

SIN AND COVENANT

One of the deepest levels of relationships is in covenants. Covenants normally involve two parties that draw up a binding agreement and commit themselves to the contents of the agreement. The most known covenant we read of in the Bible is the Sinai Covenant. The Sinai Covenant is a decisive moment in the history of Israel. Through this covenant, Yahweh became head of the nation and the Israel became his chosen people. In return, Yahweh exacted a pledge of fidelity to the Law (Exodus 20: 1 - 17) or to the "Ten commandments" (Exodus 34: 28). The Law discloses the divine will. Obedience brings blessings; transgression brings malediction. The whole destiny and subsequent history of Israel was now tied inextricably to this covenant (MacBrien, 1981: 203 - 204).

Shenk (1983: 45 - 75), deals with the different forms of covenants in African society. He points out that there are mainly two most serious or most common covenants in Africa: namely man-to-man covenants and God-to-man covenants (though not to the same degree as the Biblical covenants). He tells of the "friendship covenant" among the Abaluya, which was drawn up in the presence of elders. A chicken is roasted and eaten together and from then on the friendship is declared as binding forever. Blood brotherhood covenants are common in Africa where people share each other's blood thus furthering the dimension of friendship. Even among enemies, a blood pact would be a solemn declaration of reconciliation, peace and forgiveness.

There are other kinds of covenants in Africa. Kinship covenants, though not practised in many places were said to restore broken relationships among family members. These, according to Mbiti (1988), are more or less confined to those who are closely related through kinship or marriage. Some communities had Adoption covenants that covered both children and strangers who may settle in a particular region away from their own biological relatives. Shenk writes:

Through adoption the stranger becomes a family member… Appropriately the Meru call it "to be born with a goat" …for it was sealed through the sacrifice of a spotless goat…the sacrificial blood united all the participants: the father and the new son, the living-dead and the living clan (Shenk, 1983: 54).

Other covenants included the marriage covenants, land covenants, peace covenants.

The most serious form of "sin" in African Religion is the breach of the covenant. It is believed to involve and affect the relationship between individuals, among communities, the ancestors and God. Shenk sums it all in this way:

Covenants establish relationships which are different from kinship…A covenant is a very serious and profound matter…To break a covenant is to invite a curse…Covenants require some form of sacrificial shading of blood…The covenant is celebrated by feasting together…The eating is a communion, a celebration of life in a community (1983: 72).

Covenants, then, in their manifold forms and purposes, establish, re-establish, cement, bridge, purify, strengthen, initiate, personal, individual and community relationships with one another, the community and ultimately God. Sin is the undermining of all these. The breach of the covenant is a direct blow to the vital force- it is in effect a deathblow. In this way, sin becomes deadly and threatens the life of the individual and of the community. It becomes intolerable.

DEALING WITH SIN

Dealing with sin and evil depends on the nature of and evil and may differ from community to community. Christian theology tells us that God had to send His only Son Jesus Christ to free the world from the power of evil and sin (John 3:16ff.). The solution to overcoming evil is then to confess one's sins and to believe in Jesus Christ His Son:

For God so loved the world that He gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life…By his wounds on the Cross, we are saved…(John 3:16).

African Religion recognises various ways to deal with affliction and has different religious experts whose task is to discover the reasons for disharmony in the universe. These experts are generally expected not only to know the causes of calamities, but also to prescribe antidotes or cures for these problems.

As we have already noted, the order of conceptual awareness and any attempt at analysis and understanding of evil usually, though not necessarily always, begins with a natural explanation of causation. Unless witchcraft, spirit, ancestral or divine displeasure is immediately suspected, a natural cause is first sought and then initially accepted as the reason for a particular happening. Among the Zinza of Tanzania, for example, diseases that people contract is "just disease". According to Bjerke (1981), such a disease will typically either be ascribed to an accumulation of too much blood in the affected area. There are medicines intended to drive away disease. Although cupping, the use of a specially made animal horn, a sharp razor or tin to suck "bad" or "harmful" blood form the body is used among many African peoples, herbs and roots with medicinal qualities are a usual means of treatment.

If the affliction persists, then other causation is looked for. In the religious "category," if the ancestors are the cause of suffering as diagnosed by religious experts, morality demands that they are placated. The necessary sacrifices and offerings are made by those concerned. The living must fulfil their responsibilities to the ancestors, because that is the condition for order in the universe. A central element of order is peace and peace is expressed by way of commensality (Magesa, 1987: 161). Human beings destroy this peace if they do not adhere to the principle of commensality where their ancestors are concerned. The Sukuma say:

If descendants suffer from maladies caused by the ancestors, it is because the descendants have neglected them. For example, the living may have disregarded the possessions of the ancestors, failed to observe the lineage rules, or neglected to conduct rituals in the name of the ancestors. A descendant may also suffer because of the past grievances (Westerlund, 1989: 188).

The way of dealing with such an affliction 5is by performing "cleansing" rituals and ceremonies usually officiated by ritual elders, medicine-men, priests or diviners. They usually involve the slaughtering of an animal (like chickens, sheep, goats, bulls), the use of blood, sometimes the use of internal organs of the animal, or rituals mixed with ritual powders. Drinking the blood or any other liquid and sprinkling with it, or performing other symbols of cleansing, are important aspects of the ceremonies of removing sin or evil concerned. These can be comparable to the animal sacrifices that the Jews used to have as a means of atonement. Ritual words, litanies, prayers, or other words are said, as part of the cleansing ritual and ceremony. Acts of reconciliation, peace making and new beginning may be performed.

These are what Mbiti (1969: 79) called "formal" or "communal" measures.

Whereas ancestral and sometimes nature spirits need to be placated through sacrifices and offerings, those spirits that are merely malevolent and unknown must be "expelled" or "driven away" so that they will not cause affliction. The Ateso word for it is "acakar Edeke", literally meaning "to throw away the calamity or the god of calamity." The services of a religious specialist are required for this. When such a spirit of affliction is diagnosed, it must be disowned and made to go "where it belongs", that is, to its proper habitat. It is scolded some-times using very dirty language in order to show that it is not welcome at all in the area (Magesa 1987: 89).

It is also important to note the importance of prayers in an African religiosity. Prayer in Africa is the commonest act of worship (Adeyemo, 1979:35). When life is threatened or weakened by evil and sin, prayer is most abundant, both in the public and private domain. Prayer becomes a means of restoring wholeness and balance in life. The African prayer is comprehensive, requesting the removal of evil and sin and demanding the restoration of all that was good. Nothing less satisfies the African religious mind. It is significant to note, that the very act of prayer sheds light on the centrality of relationships in the African moral vision. It acknowledges the mutual interdependence of the visible and invisible worlds. Prayer says that there comes a time when order and harmony in human life and in the world depend on powers greater than human power. This is especially so when humanity has done wrong or harbours anti-life elements within it. Praying places the individual or the community in the hands of the invisible and mystical powers and intends to overcome or to assuage their displeasure.

There also existed specifically communal atonement if the community as a whole experienced severe misfortunes like epidemics, drought, disastrous flooding, famine, locust invasion. It was customary in these cases in many African societies to seek help from God. The commonest method was through communal sacrifice, at which also an acknowledgement of people's ill-doings (sin) would be made and God's forgiveness requested. Mbiti (1969: 120) notes that this does not seem to have been common practice for individuals alone to ask for God's forgiveness of Sin, although in some cases individuals would ask God to cleanse them before they could approach Him or speak further to Him.

 Another important area of departure in thought of African system of thought from Christianity is the punishment for sin. The majority of African peoples believe that God punishes in this life. Thus, He is concerned with the moral life of mankind and therefore, upholds the moral law. With a few exceptions, there is no belief that a person is punished in the hereafter for the sins committed in this present life. It is for this reason that misfortunes are or may be interpreted as indicating that the sufferer has broken some moral or ritual conduct against God, the spirits, the ancestors, the elders or members of his society. The belief seems to suggest that neither punishment nor special rewards await a person in the hereafter, for the deeds of this present life. There may be some exceptions in some areas in Africa but this seems to be the major trend of thought (Magesa, 1987: 98).

There are other forms of evil that are directly sanctioned by the community. Each community or society has its own set forms of restitution and punishment for various offences, both legal and moral. In some cases, sin is punished very severely, brutally or even unjustly by fellow individuals, families, communities, chiefs, kings or according to the traditional systems of judgement and justice. These ranges from death for offences like incest, committing murder or practising witchcraft, to paying fines of cattle goats, sheep or money for minor cases like adultery, quarrels and fights. It is generally the elders of the area who deal with disputes and breaches arising from various types of moral harm or offences against ritual and custom. Traditional chiefs and rulers, where they existed like Buganda kingdom in Uganda, have the duty of keeping law and order and executing justice in their areas. In most cases, the sinner is given opportunity to regenerate, improve, avoid repetition, reintegrate and lead a normal life in the family and community. But in some cases repeated acts of sin detach the culprit from society and may eventually force him to leave the community or be banished by the community. In effect, this becomes his death (Mbiti, 1969: 210 - 212).

There is another form of justice administered through the use of a curse. Among the Iteso, it is called "aigat". The basic principle here is that if a person is guilty, evil will befall him according to the words used in cursing him. It is believed a person can curse an unknown thief or offender. "Aigat" for example, involves the slaughtering of a dog, decapitating it and putting the head in an anti-hill with some curses of death pronounced. It is believed that the culprit, his family or animals will begin falling sick and eventually die. It is also used for arbitrating a dispute between two individuals or families. Among the Akamba, the breaking of the pot and jumping over it is believed to cause harm to the offending party while among the Meru, one party repeatedly stabs a he-goat on the back of the other party in the proximity of the item in contention. Formal curses are so much feared in Africa especially by parents (Magesa, 1987: 89)

SIN AND SALVATION IN AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

The word "salvation" in simple terms can be taken to mean "the act of saving or being saved; it is a preservation from loss and calamity, "(Oxford Dictionary). In theology it has to do with the deliverance from sin and its consequences and admission to heaven, brought about by Christ.

The word itself has a long history because man has al-

ways searched for salvation in one form or another. All religions of the world have also addressed themselves to the question of human salvation and have provided different answers to it. Mbiti (1969:56), in his article, Some Reflections on African Experience of Salvation Today, rightly notes that salvation is never outdated: it is always "salvation today", for each generation of people.

The doctrine of salvation in Christianity caused a rift between Catholic and Protestant theology and spirituality. The Catholic tradition insists that God not only makes a declaration of our unworthiness for salvation, but actually transforms us and makes us new creatures in Christ and the Holy Spirit. God offers this inner transformation to every person, without exception. No one is excluded before hand. Only a free act of the will, rejecting the divine offer of grace, can impede God's saving designs (McBrien, 1981: 309). This doctrine was a modification of the pre-Trendentine doctrine that man must work for his salvation with good works which lent itself to abuses in the Church, especially in connection with indulgences. The Protestant reformation was in reaction to this view of salvation. They emphasised the radical unworthiness of the person, even after God's redemptive activity on our behalf. Luther emphasised that no amount of our own actions can "earn" us salvation. We can do nothing of our own except by the grace of God (Lectures on Romans, chapter 8).

When Christianity came to Africa, different concepts of salvation have been preached in different languages sometimes without fully appreciating the cultural and social background of the words used in the proclamation. The researcher has observed that to give an example of Ugadan language, Ateso, the word for salvation is "aitajario". The word "aitajario" is the abstract noun of the concrete verb "aitajar" which means "to rescue from a difficult or debilitating situation, for example, from hunger, danger, death, sickness, war, drowning, captivity, animals and calamity. It is practical and is not conceived as an abstract concept. The "Saviour" in the Christian concept is translated as "eketajaran" which is also abstract and never used in daily Teso life. The one who saves another is in effect a "saviour" but he is not referred to as such in Ateso. Neither is the one who saves necessarily always a human person. It can be God, ancestors, spirits, another person, an animal, a thing such as a branch of a tree and stone. There is no continuous act of "saving". Mbiti notes that there is no profession of saving or redeeming and there have never been traditional saviours or redeemers. In effect, linguistic considerations do not yield a great deal of meaning of the term salvation as understood in christianity.

We can then ask a question at this juncture: Does African traditional religion has the concept of salvation? The answer is strongly affirmative. Mbiti out rightly affirms that many of the practical expressions of African religion all over the continent are basically salvatory. These are particularly prayers, offerings and sacrifices made towards God and to other spiritual realities. They arise out of the feeling of man's need for help which comes from outside of his own abilities. African religion is rich in these acts.

In probably all African societies, sacrifices and offerings are made as an essential part of African Religion. Whatever theories of interpreting them may be put forward, the basic need and idea behind them is to acknowledge the saving activities of God and other spiritual beings as the case may be. Man wants to be free and feel safe in an otherwise insecure world of sickness, death, droughts, floods, wars, epidemics, accidents, misfortunes, witchcraft and malevolent spirits. Some societies of old used to have human sacrifices where either some people offered themselves to be sacrificed so that others may be saved or were forced to be sacrificed or in other times were captured from other tribes for the purpose. Only major communal or national needs necessitated the sacrificing of human beings. The rationale behind this was that one or more persons would die so that the majority would be saved from calamity or other adversity something comparable to the act of Jesus Christ. However, human sacrifices were very rare. What was more common was the animal sacrifice. The ultimate aim is fairly similar: to affirm, renew, protect or rescue the life of the community, that is, to keep that life in a state of "salvation" (Mbiti, 1969:86).

In Africa, there are some places that are held sacred. These can be shrines, sacred mountains, rocks, caves, shrubs, etc. These places are considered to provide safety (salvation) for human beings, animals, birds and trees. Any animal or person hiding in any of these places may not be killed or molested. Trees in sacred places may not be cut down nor the vegetation destroyed. This means in effect that sacred places save life from destruction even if paradoxically they are spots where sacrifices and offerings are made. According to Mbiti, the concept of salvation is thereby given a geographical concretization. Salvation is experienced in practice and it extends to other forms of life, to nature itself. It is not just an abstraction.

In Africa, God is regarded as being ultimately the Saviour of the people and other living things, since He is their Creator. Although the word "Saviour" may not be one of His titles, there are other names, titles and sayings about Him which indicate clearly that people regard Him to be the ultimate Saviour. He is the Giver of life (thus in effect saving death, annihilation); the Giver of Rain (thus saving man and nature from drought and shortage of water). The fact that so many prayers are addressed to God, shows that people regard Him to be their Saviour, at least in practical terms, even if they may not directly call Him Saviour. In some African histories and mythologies, it is told of how God intervened and saved people from great calamities, famine, war, floods or other destructive forces of nature.

Concluding this aspect of salvation in African thought, we can say that Salvation in Africa has to do with physical and immediate dangers that threaten individual or community survival, good health and general prosperity

or safety. Salvation is not just an abstraction: it is concrete and pragmatic. Okorocha (1987: 82) observes that salvation is never experienced once and for all or awaited at a futuristic eschaton, but rather encountered and experienced situationally and in context. There is no evidence in which people ask to be saved from an "evil" of a moral nature or from an "evil" which may have intervened between God and man. African Religion has not produced a doctrine or concept of spiritual salvation. There is no logical necessity for God to intervene in a personal and cosmic way in human history, to bring a new course of human history whose goal in the future would be a consummation of time and history, a salvation of mankind, a new creation of all things.

CONCLUSION

The concept of sin in African thought system is quite a neglected area of study and discussion. Many who venture to do so cannot avoid relating African myths of the origin of evil and death to the biblical story of the fall. These African myths of the origin of sin and evil must be examined in their own right and must be allowed to speak for themselves rather than forging an unwarranted uniformity to fit the Christian teaching of the origin of sin and evil. It is interesting to note that although many books on Africa do not mention the concept of sin as such, it is compensated in part by the use and discussion of other related concepts, such as evil, magic, witchcraft, sorcery, sickness, misfortune and death. The reality is therefore, that evil and sin are a reality in African thought which may radically differ from the Western concept.

We have also established that sin in African thought refers almost exclusively to the area of inter-human relations. While God is ultimately the Judge of human actions and condition, it is rare that sin is seen or said to be "against" God. The community as a whole, or through its representative, such as a king or chief, can commit acts that constitute sin "against" God. Individuals do not generally sin directly "against" God. Since sin has the communal dimension, dealing with it is normally at the level of inter-human relations and God is rarely brought into the picture as far as individuals are concerned, although at community level this may happen.

We also note that christian teaching and use of the terms sin and salvation in many African languages is confusing and inconsistent. The missionaries often transferred the terms sin and salvation into the African setting without much consideration of language and different Christian traditions. It is, therefore, imperative for African scholars to clarify both African notions of sin and salvation and the Christian use of the terms without any apologies for the discrepancies. It is true that Christian missionaries were the main importers and distributors of the terms without due consideration to the Africans.

Finally, we do not in any way intend to deify everything African as though nothing was wrong with it. Far from it, neither should we aptly dismiss everything African as some missionaries and explorers did. Rather, salvation within the African cultural heritage must mean redeeming and sanctifying the good and destroying the evil.

The challenge remains with Africans to articulate themselves without any apologies for who they are and what they stand for. Only then can we talk about inculturation, indegenisation, Africanisation and dialogue.

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