Slow cooking: Some European historical parallels for the adaptation of Christianity in Africa

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ABSTRACT [2021]

In general, Christianity arrived in Sub-Saharan Africa from Europe. However, discussions of this often do not consider the implications of the fact that Christianity was not originally a European religion, and had arrived in Europe itself by a missionary process. This paper considers theological aspects of the early Christianization of Europe, and suggests parallels for modern African theology and religious history. In particular it suggests that the processes involved are much slower than is often considered.

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I. Introduction

This is a paper which will stray across the boundaries between history and theology. It attempts to provide some historical background for the theological question of this conference: How is theology to be cooked in an African pot? I suggest that it may help to remember that this is not the first time Christianity has had to become acclimatized in a strange environment. It has been said that until the last few centuries, Christianity was a "tribal religion of the Caucasian peoples".[1] Whether or not this is fair, it is remarkable that a

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[1] Andrew Walls, quoted in John Parratt, *Reinventing Christianity: African Theology Today*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995, p. 1.

religion introduced to Europeans by missionaries had become sufficiently naturalized to seem a badge of Europeanness. The British missionaries who came to Southern Africa were the descendants of peoples who, at the time when the gospel had already spread to Ethiopia,[2] bowed to Odin and Thor.

Analyses of the introduction of Christianity to Southern Africa have tended to be based on a relatively immediate focus: on the one hand, the nineteenth century, capitalist, European background of the missionaries; on the other, the specific societies of the region. I want to suggest that we may benefit also from a very long-term viewpoint, that of the dynamics of Christianity as a world-historical phenomenon.[3] The great organized religions represent collectivities of human endeavour and experience which show remarkable persistence and an essential continuity despite enormous change. At various different times, people have argued that contemporary forces were of such magnitude that they must overwhelm this continuity, yet it has never yet happened thus. The Christian Church has its own dynamics, which the historian must acknowledge. Its time scale is a long one. Even those who see Christianity as facing an unprecedented challenge and likelihood of radical transformation see such a challenge in terms of intellectual movements starting in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries; that is, between 250 and 150 years ago, and yet the belief that such challenges will prove fatal is still only conjectural.

Many discussions of the adaptation of Christianity to African conditions contrast the Ancient Greek world-view with the African world-view, as if Christianity had passed directly from one to the other. But in fact, Christianity was brought to Southern Africa by western Europeans, descendants of the peoples who themselves received the original Jewish/Greek Christianity from missionaries. The culture of pre-Christian western Europe was perhaps more closely related to that of ancient Greek and Roman Christians that is that of Africa. Nevertheless, Christianity came to north-west Europe as a new, alien religion, which contradicted many aspects of the traditional culture. The situation of Christianity in Africa is by no means as unprecedented as some seem to imagine.[4] Perhaps, by looking at this

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[2] Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions*, London: Penguin, 1986, p. 47.

[3] For some examples of how such a viewpoint can be applied, see Adrian Hastings, *A History of African Christianity 1950-1975*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979 pp. 69–73. Hastings suggests, for example, that the advent of African Independent Churches should not be seen purely as a local *reaction* to problems in missionary Christianity, but also as a proactive development, comparable to Protestant church-formation in other Christian contexts and reflecting the familiar Christian pattern of Biblically-derived criticism of existing structures.

[4] For example, consider the complaint that most Christological titles have no resonance for African thought patterns. (John Mbiti, quoted in Parratt, *Reinventing Christianity*, pp. 80–1.) It is far from clear that they would have had any more resonance for Europeans when they first heard them.

European[5] process of adaptation, we can learn something relevant to Africa. This paper will look at some examples of how Christianity in Europe interacted with previously-established cultural phenomena. With such a large subject, my approach will be rather eclectic, picking up examples which will, I hope, be suggestive and interesting for African theologians, rather than exhaustive or truly systematic. I will look particularly at Britain.

II. The old beliefs

What were the old beliefs which Christianity replaced? Unfortunately, our knowledge of European paganism is much less than could be wished; we have, for example, good information on the stories about the Germanic gods—there was a remarkably complex narrative of their origins, exploits and future demise—but much less on how they were worshipped or invoked.[6] These Germanic gods are associated with the Anglo-Saxons who became the dominant group in what is now England; the Celtic Britons whom the Anglo-Saxons gradually displaced, absorbed or subjugated had different traditions. Rituals took place in the open air as well as in temples. The Germanic peoples worshipped, for example, a sky and thunder god Thor, but Odin (Woden to the English) was the king of the gods. He seems to have had connexions to shamanism, and is the subject of some strange stories, such as how he hung on the World Tree for nine nights, pierced by a spear, to gain wisdom.[7] In practice, Thor may have been more widely worshipped than Odin. There are some parallels to Christianity, as in the story of Balder the Beautiful who was unjustly killed and (almost) resurrected,[8] but overall the tone of the myths is quite different. Both Germanic and Celtic religion seem to have involved human sacrifice, though it is uncertain how common this was.

What happened to the old gods? At the highest level, they simply disappeared. The myths remained as literary treasures, and a few aspects of them were used for a while in Christian art, but they were definitely excluded from the Christian orthodoxy. At a lower level, however, they lingered, but with declining status. In the shadow of Christian condemnation, some eventually came to be devils.[9] The names of the major gods remain in the days of the week; Wednesday is Woden's-day; Thursday is Thor's-day, etc.

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[5] For convenience, I will refer to the north-west European predecessors of the missionaries as "Europeans", though strictly speaking that term should include inhabitants of other parts of Europe who were Christianized earlier.

[6] It is interesting to note that in Botswana, some aspects of traditional religious belief which were abandoned are already quite hard to reconstruct. See e.g. I. Schapera & John L. Comaroff, *The Tswana*, rev. ed., London: Kegan Paul, 1991 pp. 53; Paul Stuart Landau, *The Realm of the Word: Language, Gender and Christianity in a Southern African Kingdom*, Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann, 1995, p. 5.

[7] This may have paralleled the manner in which human sacrifices were made to Odin.

[8] There is a further parallel in his mother Frigg, the weeping Queen of Heaven.

[9] Aron Guverich, *Medieval Popular Culture: Problems of Belief and Perception*, trans. János M. Bak & Paul A. Hollingsworth, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. 84. See C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994 for the process whereby the airy spirits or "daemons" became "demons".

Medieval theology about previous religious beliefs varied. Some theologians saw paganism as simply deluded and false. Others, such as Snorri Sturluson, a thirteenth century Icelandic poet and historian who collected and recorded Norse myths, saw the old beliefs as gropings after truth by people who, although they had not yet heard the gospel, nevertheless recognized the existence of God. Still others suggested that the gods were in fact deified ancestors and heroes.[10] This range of approaches to traditional religion—condemnation, acceptance of it as a precursor, and rationalizing analysis—seems oddly familiar.

There were other supernatural beings besides the great gods, and some of these lived on in the minds of Europeans. There were for example the Little People, the fairies and elves.[11] These are curiously "apart", apparently neither good nor evil, sometimes helpful, but often capricious and dangerous. They live underground and dance in the fields at night. Twentieth-century children's stories have made them pretty and inoffensive, but when they were believed in, they were frightening, beautiful to behold but better avoided. A twentieth-century writer caught their fascination and menace:

> *Grizzlebeard:* And you... have you ever seen the Fairies?
> *Myself:* I do not think so... alas for me! But I think I have heard them once or twice, murmuring and chattering, and pattering and clattering, and flattering and mocking at me, and alluring me onwards towards the perilous edges and the water-ledges where the torrent tumbles and cascades in the high hills.
> *The Sailor:* What did they say to you?
> *Myself:* They told me I should never get home, and I never have.[12]

One of the more sinister activities of the fairies was to steal an infant, leaving an evil, pseudo-human "changeling" in its place.

Belief in fairies seems to have finally died, but belief in ghosts is still lively.[13] The fear of ghosts—discarnate spirits of the dead, wandering the earth or haunting a place or person—remains embedded in European minds, even in resolute rationalists. This fear is interesting in that the ghost is hardly ever supposed to be able to inflict any concrete harm; merely to *meet* a ghost is somehow deeply horrifying to the European. Ghosts can be fitted

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[10] Hilda Ellis Davidson, *The Lost Beliefs of Northern Europe*, London: Routledge, 1993, pp. 144-5.

[11] See C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, ch. 6, pp. 122–38. Although fairies have been somewhat standardized in European folklore, they were probably originally part of a much more complex and diverse world of supernatural beings inhabiting nature.

[12] Hilaire Belloc, *The Four Men*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984; first published 1911, p. 55.

[13] The word "ghost" originally means "spirit"—as in "the Holy Ghost"—and early medieval "ghosts" were not necessarily spirits of the dead. The modern European ghost seems to have become standardized more recently, possibly under the influence of popular understandings of Christian eschatology.

into the Christian schema to some extent, as souls which have for some reason not departed from this world, and the ritual of exorcism of ghosts by a priest is still performed.

Many of these motifs appear in European folklore, where they are reduced to stories which no longer challenge Christianity. The same elements, and even the same characters, appear in medieval accounts of "superstition" and in the folk stories which were recorded hundreds of years later, so there is clearly a continuity.[14] But these elements have transferred from the active category of belief to the hinterland of folklore, things told in stories but not thereby necessarily considered real. Few Europeans now believe in the elves, trolls, or werewolves about which they tell stories. In the case of ghosts, which retain a much higher degree of credibility, it is noticeable that stories about them are more often for adult audiences, and have an anecdotal rather than a fantastic character.

III. The arrival of Christianity

Although the Roman Empire had become Christian following the conversion of the emperor Constantine in the early fourth century,[15] Christianity lost ground in the west with the influx of Germanic invaders. Christianity was brought to north-west Europe by missionaries from the south and east. In England, for example, (then divided into a number of kingdoms) the missionary St Augustine of Canterbury arrived in AD 597.[16] There were also missionaries from Ireland, which had been converted earlier. (Ireland could also provide some interesting parallels, for example in the persistence of polygamy in Irish society for several centuries despite Christian condemnation.[17]) The King of Kent (in south-east England) met the visitor in the open air, rather than indoors, as a precaution against the strange magic. He expressed interest, but said that the Christian teachings were "new and strange to us, and I cannot accept them and abandon the age-old beliefs of the whole English nation."[18]

However, within a hundred years all the English kingdoms were officially Christian. Conversion was a matter of state policy, not individual choice; when the king converted all his people followed, at least nominally. In a way, therefore, Christianization had to come after conversion. The old beliefs had not simply disappeared. The Church recognized this,

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[14] Guverich, *Medieval Popular Culture*, p. 95.

[15] Constantine's conversion is usually dated at AD 312, when he had a vision of the cross superimposed on the sun. As the vision suggests, Constantine at first apparently tried to combine Christianity with his previous allegiance to the cult of *Sol Invictus*, the Unconquered Sun. When in 321 he declared the first day of the week as a holiday, it was declared as Sunday, the name it still bears in most European languages.

[16] There was already a Celtic British church in the west, surviving from before the Anglo-Saxon invasions, but it seems to have regarded any missionary activity toward the ferociously hostile English as impracticable. (Neill, *A History of Christian Missions*, p. 58.)

[17] Hugh Kearney, *The British Isles: A History of Four Nations*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 44.

[18] Bede, *A History of the English Church and Nation*, trans. Leo Shirley-Price, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1955, I. 25, p. 69.

and planned for the long term. Pope Gregory I wrote to the missionary Mellitus in 601:

> We have been giving careful thought to the affairs of the English, and have come to
> the conclusion that the temples of the idols in that country should on no account be
> destroyed. He [Augustine] is to destroy the idols, but the temples themselves are to be
> aspersed with holy water, altars set up, and relics enclosed in them.... In this way, we
> hope that the people... may resort to these places as before, and may come to know
> and adore the true God.[19]

Similarly, pagan feasts should not be simply forbidden, but turned into Christian feasts.

> For it is certainly impossible to eradicate all errors from obstinate minds at one
> stroke, and whoever wishes to climb to a mountain top climbs gradually step by step,
> and not in one leap.[20]

This is an excellent summary of the Church's basic strategy. The holy place and the holy occasion would be given a new, Christian, meaning, which would gradually supersede the old. The strength of this was that the old religion lost its separate institutions; it could not survive as a separate entity because its signs had been appropriated by Christianity. However, this cut both ways; the Church could not always be sure that its new meaning was the only one. The strategy allowed many aspects of the old religion to flow into the Christianity of the ordinary people. To some extent the Church accepted this as unavoidable; it was playing a long game. But centuries passed, and still much remained in popular culture that the Church disapproved of.

It may sometimes still be possible to identify places where such a takeover of a holy site has taken place. English churchyards traditionally include yew trees, but the oldest yews are older than the churches, and seem to have had pagan significance.[21] Similarly, some very old churches are built next to holy wells, which may have pre-Christian connexions.[22]

The missionaries who came to Africa were aware of this tradition, and sometimes attempted to follow it, but generally in a far more timid manner than their early-medieval forebears, though they did at least follow the precedent of seeking indigenous words for religious concepts.[23] The medieval strategy described differed in intent from the modern

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[19] Bede, *A History of the English Church*, I. 30, p. 86.

[20] Bede, *A History of the English Church*, I. 30, p. 87.

[21] When such ancient yews are uprooted, a skeleton is sometimes found, apparently from a body placed under it when it was a sapling.

[22] It has been widely held that holy wells, and water in general, were important in pre-Christian British religion and in pre-Reformation popular piety, but doubts have been expressed about whether significant real connexions can be traced: James Rattue, *The Living Stream: Holy Wells in Historical Context*, Rochester, N.Y.:Boydell & Brewer, 1995.

[23] The Scottish missionaries David Livingstone and John Mackenzie were both well aware of survivals of Celtic belief in Scottish culture, and envisaged some takeovers of African custom, but neither took the idea very far. Livingstone believed that earlier missionaries had been wrong to condemn initiation schools, but did not try to reverse the policy. (David

theological approach of "adaptionism", since the goal was not a restatement of Christianity but a transformation of popular ideas. Nevertheless, the effect could sometimes be the same.

Following the strategy described by Gregory I, the Church often appropriated older festivals. The most famous case of this, of course, is the (earlier) takeover of the Romans' Saturnalia by Christmas, which has retained much of Saturnalia's character.[24] In England, Christmas is sometimes known as Yule, which derives from the name of the pagan winter-solstice festival. Mistletoe, which is known to have been sacred in pre-Christian tradition,[25] is traditionally hung in Christmas decorations in houses, but although churches are hung with greenery at Christmas, there is a certain reluctance to allow mistletoe to be included.

Easter takes its name from Eostre, goddess of the dawn and of the spring equinox. The festival, although now thoroughly Christianized, retains pre-Christian symbols of rebirth such as the egg. Modern English Christians like to see this as symbolizing a continuity with what was true in the old religion.

Hallowe'en, by contrast, represents an ancient festival which is only uneasily accommodated by Christianity. Hallowe'en is a time of ghosts, spirits and other aspects of the supernatural and uncanny, which however have by this century been largely domesticated to a sort of cathartic game for children.

IV. The appeal of Christianity

As Paul Landau has suggested, it is insufficient to discuss missionary activity as if it alone could explain conversion. The hearers, or at least some of them, must have had reasons for becoming Christians.[26] In the case of early medieval Europe, rulers often had motivations which we might classify as political.[27] But also, and mixed up with these, were reasons we would classify as religious. Bede, writing in the eighth century, describes in a famous passage the discussions held by King Edwin of Northumbria in 627:

> Coifi, the High Priest, ...[said] "...I frankly admit that, in my experience, the religion that we have hitherto professed seems valueless and powerless. None of your subjects

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Livingstone, *Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa* New York, 1971; first published 1858, pp. 166–7.)

[24] Saturnalia was a festival of feasting, hilarity, inversions of the normal order, and sexual licence. Medieval celebrations included a Lord of Misrule. Pre-Christian tradition approved over-eating and drunkenness on such occasions, which was a source of some concern to the Church. 25 December was also the date of the festival of Sol Invictus.

[25] It was revered by the Celtic Druids, and also appears in the Germanic story of Balder the Beautiful who was killed by an arrow of mistletoe, the plant which alone had never promised not to harm him.

[26] Paul Stuart Landau, *The Realm of the Word*, pp. 132–3.

[27] It is also worth noting that, as in Southern Africa, missionaries came as representatives of a prestigious culture. Bede records an incident, curiously reminiscent of African missions, in which Wilfrid gained the respect of the South Saxons by demonstrating new techniques of sea-fishing. (Bede, *A History of the English Church*, IV. 13, p. 223.)

has been more devoted to the service of the gods than myself, yet there are many... who receive greater honours, and who are more successful in all their undertakings. Now, if the gods had any power, they would surely have favoured myself, who have been more zealous in their service. Therefore, if on examination these new teachings are found to be better and more effectual, let us not hesitate to accept them."

Another of the king's chief men... went on to say: "Your Majesty, when we compare the present life of man with that time of which we have no knowledge, it seems to me like the swift flight of a lone sparrow through the banqueting hall where you sit in the winter months to dine with your thanes and counsellors. Inside there is a comforting fire to warm the room; outside, the wintry storms of snow and rain are raging. The sparrow flies swiftly in through one door of the hall, and out through another. While he is inside, he is safe from the winter storms; but after a few moments of comfort, he vanishes from sight into the darkness whence he came. Similarly, man appears on earth for a little while, but we know nothing of what went before this life, and what follows. Therefore if this new teaching can reveal any more certain knowledge, it seems only right that we should follow it."[28]

Although Bede was writing about a hundred years after these events, and his account may be more literary than historical, there is something deeply convincing in this summary of the discussion. Pre-Christian belief did in fact give some answers about the future life, but they were vague and perhaps unsatisfying. Warriors possibly went to join Odin in Valhalla, but in general the dead descended into a shadowy and dismal Niflheim, which may have resembled the ancient Hebrews' Sheol.[29] Ancestors do not seem to have the same significance as in African and many other cultures; people apparently appealed to gods, not ancestors.[30]

It is interesting that in Bede's account a noble gives the profound theological allegory, while the priest gives a more prosaic analysis. The allegory of the sparrow's flight is still frequently quoted, and apparently expresses something fundamental about the appeal of Christianity to the European mind.

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[28] Bede, *A History of the English Church*, II 13, pp. 124–5.

[29] European cultural attitudes to death have varied considerably over time, and vary now within Europe. The late middle ages, for example, seems to have been characterized by a rather morbid fascination with the proximity of death, symbolized by the Danse Macabre. (In a window of Bern Cathedral, for example, a party-goer looks round and sees that Death, depicted as a skeleton, is playing the lute and putting his hand on his shoulder.) This seems to have begun in reaction to the catastrophe of the Black Death, a plague which killed about a third of the population of Europe in 1348 and which returned periodically for years afterward. Whatever its origins, though, this public and gloating fascination is a long way from present-day British attitudes.

[30] Ancestors may have had some role; our knowledge of household religion, to which such a role might have been relevant, is too sketchy to be certain. The *disír* of Norse religion may possibly have been female ancestors. (*Encyclopædia Britannica*, 15th ed., vol. 18, p. 900.) Any such role for ancestors seems to have vanished without trace, suggesting that they were much less central than in traditional African belief.

V. Medieval Christianity

Medieval Europe was a society of two cultures, a popular, oral culture, and a high culture of the written word, accessible only to the literate minority. (In this it has some parallels with modern Africa.[31]) The popular version, especially in rural areas, incorporated huge amounts of pre-Christian content. Although it accepted the new Christian framework, it often gave Christianity different emphases from those of the elite version.

Some scholars have argued, in fact, that medieval Europe was not really a Christian culture at all. By this argument, the Church had never really succeeded in converting the masses, but had imposed a Christian veneer on its culture. It was only with the Reformation and Counter-Reformation that the masses were seriously Christianized. Against this theory, which perhaps takes too rigidly orthodox a view of what can be counted as real Christianity, recent works such as Eamon Duffy's *The Stripping of the Altars* have emphasized the vitality of pre-Reformation popular Christianity, and shown that although the elite and popular versions may have been different, they were nonetheless coherently connected. (Indeed, in the Middle Ages it may be more accurate to envisage a spectrum of belief, rather than simply a high and low culture.) The question is perhaps one of timing: there is little doubt that Christianization was superficial at first but became increasingly real at some time during the middle ages.

A "parish Catholicism" was the eventual outcome; a Christianity able to link popular and elite interpretations. Some impression of this can still be got from the Catholicism of southern Europe, where festivals often include elements of popular tradition that north Europeans find bizarre, such as throwing a live goat off a church tower, or launching a rocket-propelled stuffed dove from the high altar.[32]

Medieval Christianity placed great emphasis on saints. Saints not only offered an example of the Christian life, they also interceded with God and performed miracles. The relics, physically linking the Christian with the saint's presence, were of enormous importance, and great efforts would made to secure them. Not only were relics bought, sold and stolen, but in the early middle ages there were cases where the option of killing a holy man before he travelled away was contemplated.[33] Miracles were central, and saints could be assessed by the number they had performed. Saints were potent and active; they could heal, but they could also be quick to take offence. In one story, St John the Baptist appeared to a canon in Bonn who had not paid proper respect in a church dedicated to him; the saint did not merely rebuke him but kicked him in the stomach. In another, the Blessed Virgin Mary

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[31] Another parallel with modern Africa is that of language. Medieval Europe had many vernacular languages, none of which had high status. The language of learning, including all theology, was Latin, a tongue no longer spoken as a first language, which had to be acquired before one could participate in elite culture. The medieval university was, like the modern African university, a place where all academic discourse was in a second language.

[32] These are both real examples.

[33] Guverich, *Medieval Popular Culture*, p. 41.

slapped a nun who was tempted by the endearments of a priest.[34]

Part of the attraction of saints was that they were *particular*, a patron saint brought benefits for the place or institution which honoured him or kept his relics. The shrine of an important saint—such as St Thomas at Canterbury—could become a pilgrimage destination, where those helped by the saint came to thank him with prayer and with gifts to the shrine. The particularity of saints is also evident in that they sometimes specialize in particular types of problem; for example St Apollonia helps in cases of toothache. There was a saint for every place, every profession, every occasion. If the life of a saint was not well recorded, the details could be supplied by what seemed likely for such a holy person, leading to such colourful stories as St Ursula and her eleven thousand virgins, St Wilgefortis who was assisted in her vow of chastity by miraculously growing a beard, and St Azenor, one of whose breasts was of gold, and who gave birth to St Budoc while on a five-month sea-voyage in a barrel.

The cult of the saints represents one of the medieval Church's most successful linkages of elite and popular religion. Multiple, flexible understandings could be allowed with the saints, in ways which would not have been acceptable with reference to God. In the early middle ages, this tolerated ambiguity meant that saints sometimes absorbed aspects of pagan deities, allowing such devotions to be gradually Christianized.[35]

The saint was the ultimate popular hero of the medieval world. Whatever one's view of saints who kick sinners in the stomach, this point is worth emphasizing. This exaltation of the world-renouncing holy man represents a notable development of European culture, altering (though not destroying) the pre-Christian emphasis on physical prowess and civic virtue.[36] One of the interesting aspects of medieval culture is the way in which it emphasized the contradictions between the values of this world and those of the next. Depictions of the Last Judgment often showed kings, bishops and even popes among the damned. The ascendancy of the spiritual over the powers of this world was demonstrated by showing the saint as directly, even physically, triumphant.

The particularity of the saints, and the way in which they could absorb pre-Christian

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[34] Guverich, *Medieval Popular Culture*, p. 202. Not only saints behaved like this; in an even more startling story, a monk who dozed during a vigil was woken when Christ came down from the cross above the altar, and punched him on the jaw. (Ibid. p. 203.)

[35] The African-derived syncretist religions of the Americas, such as Santeria, show a comparable syncretism of saints with gods; for example St Barbara, the patron saint against lightning, with Shango the West African god of thunder. However, in medieval Europe, the Church's ultimate control of public articulation of belief led to the Christian identity slowly absorbing the other, which may not be happening in Santeria.

[36] Guverich, *Medieval Popular Culture*, p. 43. The two codes of heroism could overlap, particularly in the early middle ages. Christian kings sometimes became saints, especially if they were martyred, like St Edmund, the King of the East Angles, who was killed in 869 by the invading (and pagan) Danes. "Martyrdom" could be defined loosely in such cases, as with Edward the Martyr, who was killed for ordinary political reasons in 978, or St Cleodicus (Clydawg) a minor British ruler killed in an *affaire du coeur*. Non-martyred royal saints include Edward the Confessor of England (d. 1066) and Louis IX of France (d. 1270).

devotions, seem to have met a spiritual need for some supernatural patron who would be more local, more specialized, more approachable than the universal God. This may have implications for African theology. Whereas in Europe the need was to find something to meet the need formerly met by local gods and spirits, in Africa there is the issue of how the ancestors are to be related to Christianity.[37] I am not suggesting the cult of saints as a direct model, but as an example of how Christianity can incorporate such needs. John V. Taylor, for example, has suggested that the ancestors must somehow be included in the communion of saints of which the Creed speaks.[38] It should be noted that the cult of the saints took a long time to develop, and did so under conditions of high practical tolerance combined with a final insistence on orthodoxy.

Medieval Europe was an agrarian, peasant society, and fertility rituals were of great importance. The Church provided its own set of rituals, some of which still continue, such as the blessing of the fields on Rogation Sunday, but peasants continued to follow other practices as well. If rain was needed, eleventh-century German peasants might perform a ritual in which a naked girl dug up a certain herb, and was then chased by other girls to a stream.[39] This was condemned as pagan, but sometimes these rituals were blended with Christianity, as in the tenth-century English *Æcerbot* or Field-Remedy to make a field fertile, in which (among other ceremonies) four symbolic pieces of turf were taken to church, where four masses were said.[40]

One major difference between the European and African cases is of course the division of the Church at the present day. However, medieval Christianity was not completely united. To start with, at the time Christianity came to Europe, there was at least one major rival to the Catholic Church: Arian Christianity. When Clovis, King of the Franks, was converted from paganism to Catholic Christianity in 496, he was the only Catholic Germanic ruler—the Visigoths in Spain, the Ostrogoths in Italy, and the Vandals in North Africa, were all Arian. Even when Arianism had been overcome, unofficial or heretical versions of Christianity kept appearing. These (perhaps nascent "European Independent Churches"?) however, were continually suppressed if they became large enough to attract notice. In the

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[37] Early missionary attitudes to the veneration of ancestors were negative. John Moffatt, notoriously, tried to equate *badimo* (Tswana ancestors) with evil spirits. In some small Tswana villages, where African ministry was more important than that of the missionary, *badimo* have become identified with angels. (Landau, *The Realm of the Word*, p. 93n.48.)

[38] John V. Taylor, *The Primal Vision: Christian Presence amid African Religion*, London: SCM Press, 1977, first published 1963, pp. 146-63. Taylor uses an image of the African holding hands with his or her ancestors, and suggests that neither party should be asked to let go. It is noteworthy that one of Sechele's first responses to Livingstone's preaching was concern about the position of his ancestors.

[39] Guverich, *Medieval Popular Culture*, p. 82.

[40] Kathleen Herbert, *Looking for the Lost Gods of England*, Pinner: Anglo-Saxon Books, 1994, pp. 12-15.

early middle ages the suppression was slow, erratic and relatively mild. Later it would become increasingly forceful, culminating in the Inquisition, and events such as the Albigensian Crusade against the Cathars. Unlike in Africa, the Church had access to direct political power to enforce orthodoxy.

Whether or not medieval Europeans were completely Christian, Christianity was the dominant paradigm of thought. Intellectual debate took place within the framework of this paradigm; Theology was the "Queen of the Sciences". There was a lack of alternatives to Christianity, in a way which had not been true earlier in the Church's history and would not be true later. Within Europe, the pre-Christian religions were on the way out, and direct mission was no longer necessary (although in some parts of the far north the process of conversion continued into early-modern times). On its borders, however, Christianity could not expand. To the west was the uncrossed Atlantic, and to the south and south-east there was the border with Islam, the rival. No mission was possible there; relations between Christendom and Islam were openly hostile. The Christians gained ground, very slowly, by the reconquest of the Iberian peninsula; attempted less successfully to take the middle east in the Crusades, and eventually lost ground in Asia Minor and the Balkans to the advancing Ottomans. From the east, out of Central Asia, came invaders such as the Mongols on whom the Europeans could make little impression. Thus missionary activity was not generally practical. The concept of "Christendom" indicates this rather static conception of the Church.

Nevertheless, despite this lack of alternatives in practice, it was possible in principle to conceive of Christianity as a system which could be accepted or not;[41] even within Europe there existed a non-Christian minority, the barely-tolerated Jews. However, the medieval Christian was in no doubt about the choice: "The Christians are right, the pagans are wrong."[42] Whether the belief of the Albigensians should be regarded as a Christian heresy or as a distinct religion is a debatable point; what is certain is that it was ruthlessly attacked as treason to God. Albigensian churches in orthodox towns would have been no more possible than a Pro-Apartheid Society on an African campus.

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[41] The anti-hero Reynard the Fox includes in his confession that he has been "a perfect heretic and apostate, having denied Christianity" (*The Romance of Reynard the Fox*, trans. D.D.R. Owen, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 134.) Admittedly Reynard's confession, in which he goes on to propose a system of weekly sex for monks, was mainly a prelude to eating his confessor.

[42] *The Song of Roland*, laisse 79 (trans. Dorothy L. Sayers, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986, p. 91).

VI. Medieval culture

Medieval Europe had a remarkably varied culture in terms of mood. On the one hand, from some sources it seems full of gloom, fear of damnation, and unhealthy horror of sexuality. Yet it was also a culture capable of great gaiety. The medieval story of *Reynard the Fox* is full of the most extraordinarily vivid humour, sex and violence; a sort of X-rated Tom and Jerry cartoon.[43] The two extremes could co-exist; indeed Guverich suggests that it is this coming together of opposite poles, the *grotesque*, is peculiarly characteristic of medieval culture. Stories about devils provide an example: medieval Christians were terrified of devils, to an extent we can hardly imagine, yet they could also joke about them. The vitality of medieval Christianity can be seen in the artistic heritage to which it gave rise, above all the immense stone cathedrals with their dizzying perspectives and brilliant stained glass.[44] The medieval Christian lived in a spiritual world of appalling vividness; heaven and hell were both close at hand.

VII. Witchcraft

Witchcraft has an interesting history in Europe. The early medieval Church generally denied the reality of witchcraft. Some people, admittedly, attempted to practise witchcraft, but this was considered sheer delusion. An eleventh-century penitential prescribed a two-year penance for anyone who had believed such things.[45] However, popular belief continued: ordinary people believed in the power of witchcraft and attempted to protect against it by magic.

In the late middle ages, however, official opinion altered to incorporate this aspect of traditional belief. Witchcraft came to be seen as a real and powerful activity, using the power of the Devil. Witches were therefore enemies of God. In the early-modern period, especially the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a "witch-craze" gripped Europe. Alleged witches, the majority being women, were sought out and executed (often by burning) in large numbers. Many aspects of popular supernatural belief became suspect as connected to witchcraft; for example a woman was burnt in Edinburgh in 1576 for consorting with the fairies.[46] The witch-craze eventually abated, and belief in witchcraft faded away.

There is some debate as to how far Europeans actually attempted to practise witchcraft, and whether such practices can be linked to pre-Christian beliefs. The idea of diabolism or Satanism, which has a certain fascination for Europeans, is paradoxically a Christian phenomenon in that it is defined essentially as a sort of anti-Christianity, centring on reversals of Christian holiness such as the Black Mass, and makes little sense out of a

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[43] I owe this analogy to the Reynard scholar, my friend Dr Jim Simpson of Glasgow University.

[44] The cathedrals are also notable, in the context of this paper, for their grotesque carvings and gargoyles, strange playful or demonic figures whose significance is disputed.

[45] Guverich, *Medieval Popular Culture*, p. 85.

[46] Lewis, *Discarded Image*, p. 124.

Christian frame of reference.[47]

The episode of the witch-craze suggests that incorporation of popular elements is not necessarily always a good thing. Europeans now look back on the witch-craze with revulsion.. This historical background is a major cause of European unease with African witchcraft beliefs—probably a more important cause than any general Eurocentric attitudes to African culture—and should be appreciated by Africans discussing the issue with Europeans. How far African and European witchcraft beliefs are in fact comparable is another question.

VIII. Fate and the future

It has been suggested that concern over health has been more central to the ideologies of Africa than to those of other continents,[48] perhaps reflecting the relatively dangerous heath environment. European thought shows a comparable pre-occupation with fate and the future, which is rooted in the pre-Christian cultures of the region. The ideas involved are not entirely consistent,[49] but there is a general sense that the future is partly, but not necessarily completely, determined. The future may be foretold by dreams or magic, but such foretelling may sometimes enable one to avoid dangers and thus alter one's future. In its strongest form, one's "Fate", "Destiny", or "Doom", such predetermination is unavoidable, at least in its important aspects. In the ancient world, fate was personified as three sisters who determined everyone's destiny. In the Norse myths fate may be something more impersonal, something grim and remorseless against which no-one can triumph. Even the Norse gods, according to the myths, were doomed to final catastrophe and destruction in Ragnarök, the Twilight of the Gods. Among educated medieval Europeans the concept took the form of Fortune, a personified force which turned the wheel of chance, bringing some up, and putting others down, defeating all attempts to manage one's destiny. The medieval philosophy of history was that "the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all."[50]

Early medieval European people had a continuing interest in foreseeing the future, despite the Church's strong disapproval. A great variety of techniques were used. Around the winter solstice, people would sit on the roof or at a crossroads (locations symbolic of seeing

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[47] There have been recent claims, especially by some Evangelical groups, that such activities are widespread and include abuse of children.

[48] John Iliffe, *Africans: The History of a Continent*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995 p. 4.

[49] There may be a further parallel with African beliefs here. John Iliffe goes on to suggest that Africans tended to apply empirical criteria to ritual practices; what was wanted was not so much consistency with some schema but the belief that they *worked*. (Iliffe, *Africans*, p. 87.) This seems to be the attitude to Europeans to the sources of good and bad luck.

[50] Ecclesiastes 9:11 (AV).

far) or peer into the fire, in order to see the future.[51] If seen, it could perhaps be averted. Rituals could be performed over a corpse. Omens, such as the direction in which a bird flew, could tell you what would happen.[52] Such beliefs have continued into modern times in some parts of Europe.[53]

A more day-to-day form of the same phenomenon is to be found in the European preoccupation with *luck*. Whether good or bad things happen follows a trend or pattern of good or bad luck. This luck is a curiously impersonal and arbitrary force, which can nevertheless be controlled to some extent. Particular events and behaviours bring good or bad luck. For example, to spill salt is unlucky; to do so would generate bad luck which would lead to something unfortunate happening to you. In this case the bad luck can be averted by throwing a pinch of salt over your shoulder. In most cases, there is no answer to the question "*Why* is it unlucky?"—not only a lack of reasons to identify a particular action as unlucky, but a lack of any intelligible theory as to why any such action should be unlucky. It is not, for example, postulated that God is displeased by spilling salt.[54] One possible explanation is that the system of luck represents part of a pre-Christian religious system; not so much the survival of particular customs (though some such beliefs may have pagan origins) as the persistence of a habit of thought.

It is noteworthy that such patterns tend to surface when Europeans are under stress, even among people who normally discount such ideas. In the war film *Memphis Belle*, the story concerns a bomber crew on a dangerous mission. At one point, one of the men thinks he has lost his medallion (a representation of a Catholic saint) and starts to panic. To calm him, a comrade gives him "my lucky rubber band" which he puts around his wrist. Two points should be noted here. The first is the fact that the medallion, an orthodox Catholic symbol, is apparently equated with a random "lucky" object. Both "bring luck"; *how*, evidently is not an issue. The second is that this incident is not humorous. At most times modern Europeans might laugh at the lucky rubber band, but in the airmen's situation of terrible danger, with sudden unpredictable death near at hand, their clutching at luck seems unsurprising, and the viewer does not laugh. Situations of danger or stress seem to encourage such interest in what will bring luck: for example sailors had many powerful superstitions.[55]

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[51] Aron Guverich, *Medieval Popular Culture,* p. 82.

[52] Guverich, *Medieval Popular Culture*, p. 88–9. This type of omen is known to have had an important place in pre-Christian religion.

[53] See Eugenie Fraser, *The House by the Dvina: A Russian Childhood*, London: Corgi, 1995, p. 146 for a traditional Russian ceremony, performed at homes at Epiphany, to foresee the future.

[54] Some such beliefs do have Christian implications, although they are popular beliefs, not endorsed by the Church. For example, Friday is unlucky because it was the day Christ was crucified. Thirteen is unlucky (especially as the number at table) because it was the number present at the Last Supper. One might have expected the Last Supper to be positive, but the popular idea focussed not on the institution of the sacrament but on the presence of Judas as the thirteenth.

[55] One of my own nineteenth-century ancestors recorded in his diary how, on a sailing ship

The variety of lucky and unlucky things is enormous. Even for Europeans who think they do not take them seriously, such ideas can be embedded in common customs or sayings. It is widely thought to be very unlucky to say anything that presumes success before the issue is decided; for example, to say "I am doing well in the exams" before they are finished. This is "tempting fate" and makes it more likely that something will go wrong. If such a statement is made, the speaker should touch wood, or at least say the words "touch wood"; this will avert the bad luck. This practice is still extremely common even among those who dismiss ideas of luck.

The popularity of astrology in western culture reflects these ideas about the future: the stars are supposed to predict, not exactly what will happen, but what is likely to happen. By knowing this, one can improve one's chances of a good outcome. Medieval Christianity did not reject astrology outright; it was acceptable to believe that the stars had an influence on events and personality, such influence being a natural phenomenon not necessarily of any greater theological significance than other environmental influences.[56] In practice belief in the stars' influence and predictive power tended to go beyond this:

> ... for certainly
> The death of every man is there to see
> Patterned in stars clearer than in a glass
> Could one but read how all will come to pass.[57]

New systems of astrology and prediction, imported from other cultures (such as Chinese astrology) or simply invented, find ready acceptance in the west, because they fit into an already-established habit of thought. Similarly, the frontier Boers in South Africa consulted African traditional doctors about the future;[58] apparently they were ready to accept this aspect of the traditional doctor's work, although, for example, they were unlikely to ask him to make rain.

Although this interest in the future has some connexions with the Jewish and

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bound for New Zealand, when the ship was becalmed the sailors believed that it was due to the presence of a man who had abandoned his wife. They proposed, apparently quite seriously, to maroon him.

The tendency to develop rituals of reassurance in stressful situations may have a universal dimension—the Behaviourist psychologist Skinner claimed to have induced superstitions in pigeons by rewarding behaviour randomly. However, the rationalization of such rituals as *lucky* is a more culturally specific phenomenon.

[56] Lewis, *Discarded Image*, pp. 103–9. Medieval Christian attitudes varied somewhat over time.

[57] Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, trans. Nevill Coghill, London: Penguin, 1977, p. 144 ("The Man of Law's Tale", part I).

[58] See e.g. John Mackenzie, *Ten Years North of the Orange River: A Story of Everyday Life and Work among the South African Tribes from 1859–1869* London, 2nd ed., 1971; first published 1871.p. 52. The practice is referred to in the work of Herman Charles Bosman, e.g. "Yellow Moepels", in *Mafeking Road*, Cape Town: Human & Rousseau, 1971.

Christian concepts of time, it also has significant differences. Popular European understandings of what a "prophet" is, for example, have focussed on prediction: in everyday English "prophecy" simply means "prediction". While authentic prophecy is concerned with recalling the hearer to responsibility, ideas of fate can easily lead to a rejection of responsibility.[59] The time of European culture is not exactly the same as the time of Christian eschatology and salvation-history, a point worth bearing in mind when considering how Christian theology can relate to the time of African culture.[60]

To summarize: in spite of the importance of these ideas, fate and luck were never significantly incorporated into the theology of European Christianity,[61] although the common people appropriated some aspects of official Christianity for the system of luck, such as holy medals. Here we see a case where the Christian Church refused to accommodate European habits of thought, even though these habits have not thereby been extirpated.

IX. Conclusions

It is interesting to note that many of the criticisms Europeans made of traditional African society—superstition, cruelty, irrationality—were the same criticisms they made of their own medieval ancestors. "Medieval" has in most contexts been a term of abuse. These attitudes have been persistent among non-specialists: a generally very good basic history textbook published in 1978 describes a sixth-century book as "filled with outrageous and silly miracles", and states that the sixth-century world was "dominated by savage cruelty and beclouded by superstitious fantasy."[62] It is perhaps only with the rise of more tolerant attitudes toward other present-day cultures that most Europeans have begun to appreciate medieval culture as different rather than simply inferior.

The medieval Church, like the modern African Church, had to operate in an environment where popular culture was by no means always in accordance with the new ideas. Overall its approach can be summed up as great tolerance in practice, and in the short-term, but low tolerance in theory, and in the long term. In the short term,.which for the medieval Church could be hundreds of years, it was inevitable that ordinary people would continue to follow old habits of thought, and the Church was ready to arrange an easy transition by retaining selected elements of the old ways. But the theologians never deliberately cultivated a "European theology". Some modern African Christians have spoken of a sense of a split between their African culture and their Christianity: for example Kenneth

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[59] Indirectly, such attitudes have been involved in movements such as "scientific racism" which have sought to deny responsibility by appealing to some "inevitable" biological or historical process.

[60] As in the work of John Mbiti.

[61] The Calvinist doctrine of predestination may owe something to European ideas of the future, but I would argue that it has a rather different character. In any case, predestination has fallen out of favour in Europe, even in churches with an historically Calvinist background.

[62] C. Warren Hollister, *Medieval Europe: A Short History*, 4th ed., New York: John Wiley, 1978, p. 41.

Kaunda described a "tension created by the collision of two world-views, which I have never completely reconciled."[63] Such an experience would have been quite familiar to the early medieval peasant, had he put it into words. But the medieval Church saw its duty not as being to reconcile the world-views, but to secure the triumph of one over the other.

To some extent, it succeeded. The fact that, as I remarked earlier, present-day writers contrast the Ancient Greek world-view with the African world-view, as if Christianity had passed directly from one to the other, must be taken as evidence that they did. But background belief can be very subtle. As Rabbi Lionel Blue wrote, comparing different traditions within Judaism:

> I realized that Jews had not lived on the moon, and had been more influenced by their surroundings than they cared to acknowledge. The "Authentic Judaism" of my childhood years was Orthodox, and suspiciously like the Orthodox Church in its attitudes, with the same mixture of long liturgy, warm piety, and a heady combination of saintliness, dottiness and superstition. The resemblance was hardly surprising because we all crept out of the same marshes in White Russia.[64]

It is one thing to exclude a specific belief, another to exclude a way of believing. This is important because it is the adaptation to ways of believing that is most often the goal of African theologians seeking an African theology. An adaptionist European theology may not have been deliberately sought, but to some extent it happened anyway, very slowly. The most successful adaptations, in Europe, reflect a combination of great practical tolerance with a theological insistence on orthodoxy, over a long time-span.

Possibly this may be the best way to find such adaptions, through slow imperceptible interaction. But the situation of the Church in modern Africa is different. For one thing, the medieval Church had a secure monopoly; the modern African Church exists in a situation of pluralism and competition. For another, the world of medieval Europe, although not static, changed much less rapidly or dramatically than that of modern Africa.

In the case of European theology, I suspect that the greatest cultural adaptations, in official theology as opposed to popular practice, came much later than the period of Christianity's arrival in Europe. The European culture which modern African theologians seek to disentangle from Christianity is a culture of (for example) individualism, and mechanistic concepts of the world. But these are hardly aspects of the pre-Christian culture of Europe; their roots are to be sought in what has happened to Europe since that time; that is, in the context of an officially Christian society, even if these developments are not especially Christian.

Another point to note is that caution must be exercised when considering the links

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[63] Quoted in John Parratt, *Reinventing Christianity*, p. 14.
[64] Lionel Blue, *A Backdoor to Heaven*, London: Fount, 1985 pp. 57–8. Rabbi Blue (a prominent rabbi of the Reformed Jewish community in Britain) goes on to show cultural similarities between German Judaism and German Protestantism.

between Christianity and European culture. While the example of Europe shows examples of Christianity adapting to existing cultures, it also shows examples of resistance to such adaptation, and of cultural elements which have either been displaced by Christianity (such as Irish polygamy) or which have continued to exist uneasily beside it.

The example of Europe can, I suggest, provide a useful background for comparison; an awareness of precedents. It is however a source to be used with care and does not provide many easy lessons for those seeking to cook their theology in an African pot, except—that it may take a very long time; that some tough bits will eventually boil down into the soup, but that some may never do so; and that it is valid, and perhaps sometimes necessary, to live with unresolved questions. I conclude with a quotation from C. S. Lewis's last novel, *Till We Have Faces*, a neglected and profound book about (among other things) the reconciliation of different sorts of truth:

> Only this I know. This age of ours will one day be the distant past. And the Divine Nature *can* change the past. Nothing is yet in its true form.[65]

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[65] C.S. Lewis, *Till We Have Faces*, London: Fount, 1978, p. 316.

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