

## NEO-WITCHCRAFT MENTALITY IN POPULAR CHRISTIANITY

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The belief in witchcraft and practices associated with it has in recent times gained prominence especially in the Neo-Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches and in Charismatic Movements within the mainline churches. The prominence given to witchcraft in these churches is gradually creating what can be described as a revived witchcraft mentality in popular Christianity. The result is that today in Ghanaian popular culture, Christianity is perceived as a religion with the power to deal with the old threat of witchcraft. The result is the emergence of what might be called a neo-witchcraft mentality in the neo-Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches, which uses witchcraft as an interpretative scheme for dealing with misfortune. This new prominence of witchcraft has become one of the dominant features of popular Christianity in Ghana today.

This mentality is sustained by a dualistic worldview in which one can account for almost every misfortune in terms of the activities of evil forces and witches. This dualistic world-view or ideology raises serious theological questions with implications for the future of African theology and the mission of Christianity as an agent for change and transformation. (Akrong 1991: 31).

The purpose of this paper is to show the relationship between the emerging neo-witchcraft mentality in the Charismatic movement and the traditional theory of evil. It also analyzes this witchcraft mentality theologically to show its implications for the mission of the church and our place in the modern world.

Witchcraft mentality in contemporary Ghanaian society can be described as a theory of evil that allows one to concretize evil by making it specific and identifiable with an external agent. It can also be viewed as an ideological construct that provides an interpretative scheme or an existential hermeneutic for making sense out of life, providing meaning especially to those aspects of life that are perceived as inimical to human existence or dangerous to human well being. It operates on a dualistic construction of reality in which events in human life are viewed in terms of a struggle between the forces of good and evil, and human existence is believed to be caught up in this complex web of interaction between good and evil forces. The witchcraft mentality creates structures that allow one to deal with what one experiences as negative, dangerous or inimical to his/her well being as the result of the intervention of evil forces in our lives. Sometimes the presence of evil is conceived of in terms of an evil principle in the terms of the devil or in concrete personal manifestations in the form of the evil spirits and witches variously conceived as agents of the devil.

The ideological framework and the cultural infrastructure for the construction and maintenance of this new witchcraft mentality of the Charismatic movement is deeply embedded in the traditional African metaphysical construction of the world. The African worldview is the matrix from which the neo-witchcraft mentality is constructed. And therefore to understand the presuppositions and the structure of this new witchcraft mentality in popular Christianity in Ghana, we have to analyze the structure of the African worldview to uncover the sub-structures and the presupposition that sustain the neo-witchcraft mentality as an interpretive scheme.

### **African Ontology and Metaphysic of Being**

The African reality is rooted in a religious paradigm and therefore for the African mind reality unveils itself in forms that are intertwined with spiritual categories. One can say that Africans construct their social reality on the basis of a religious paradigm or within the context of a sacred cosmos (Eliade 1961: 10). To the African mind the universe is a complex mixture of spiritual and material forces. Within this complex mix of forces reality unveils itself in terms of power points or in entities that are dynamic (Zahan 1992: 10). This means that what we see as matter is active because it is imbued with an internal power or a spiritual energy. Matter then from this perspective is active. Activity is therefore a quality of matter because of its internal or inherent power. Matter to the African mind is therefore not a brute lifeless entity but an active living process. And the essence of matter, which is power, accounts for its activity (Tempels 1967: 3). This leads to the idea that the essence of being is power or spiritual energy and therefore the ultimate source of causality is power conceived as spiritual energy. In Platonic parlance one could say that the forms, universals or ideas that give identity to reality is power or spiritual energy.

Since causality is assumed to be ultimately spiritual, material causality is assigned a secondary role or sometimes regarded as inadequate. The emphasis on spiritual causality, as ultimate and sufficient cause of events most of the time down plays material causality which is mechanical, internal and predictable.

Furthermore, the assumption that ultimate causality is spiritual energy introduces the idea of an agentive causal principle. It means that causality, to the extent that it is spiritual rather than mechanical, must be personal and traceable to an agent ... a spiritual being. If causality is agentive, personal and spiritual, and not mechanical and material, then causality must be external rather than internal and mechanical (Akrong 1991: 16).

The conceptualization of causality in terms of external spiritual agency does not always make it easy for the African mind to separate clearly spiritual or mystical causes from secondary material causes. The agentive causal principle makes internal, mechanical and material causality inadequate as a comprehensive theory of causality. The cosmological implications of an

agentive causal theory lead to the conceptualization of nature on the pattern of personality, which infuses nature with personal qualities like human beings. The view of nature as living reality on the pattern of human nature is what has often been wrongly described as animism.

### Principle of Identity

The agentive causal principle ties in very well with the way in which Africans construct individual identity. The communalistic ethos of the African society leads to what might be called a socio-centric construction of individual identity. This is captured succinctly in Mbiti's dictum: "I am, because, we are and since we are therefore I am" (Mbiti 1970). The "other" who is included in the definition of my identity is not a neutral "other". This "other" could be my enemy or benefactor. This idea is expressed beautifully by the pithy Ga saying: *ke afɔ bo pe afɔ ohenyelo ke osuɔlo hu*, "once you are born both your enemy and your benefactor are born with you."

The socio-centric definition of identity, which makes the "other" a necessary part of the world of the individual, may be responsible for what happens to the individual, the reason being that the "other" could chose to be the agent of evil or a benefactor. In this sense the "other" can represent both human and non-human or spiritual agents that are against the individual or for the individual (Adams 1997). Thus whether the "other" who inhabits our social world with us is either benevolent or malevolent, at least there is an agent who may account for misfortune or otherwise. The "other" which is essential to self-identity gives one a reference point for dealing with evil or making sense of the world. Whether the "other" is benevolent or malevolent, it represents an external agent whom one can use for explaining misfortune. It is therefore not uncommon to hear a Ghanaian in situation of pain and suffering exclaiming: "who is doing this to me". The idea is that pain and suffering must of necessity be caused by an external agent who is an enemy (Adams 1997).

This socio-centric construction of personhood can bring social tension within a family where the common good sometimes comes into sharp conflict with the self-realization and self-fulfillment of the individual, especially under the pressures of social change. The struggle to maintain group solidarity that may compete or stifle individual self-expression can create suspicion between the individual and members of his or her family. This social tension in families as a result of the struggle between group solidarity and individual self-expression creates an atmosphere of suspicion in which witchcraft is always used as explanation for misfortune. This suspicion is reinforced by the belief that the power of witchcraft is operative among family members. As the Akan put it, *se aboa bi beka wo a, na efiri wo ntoma mu*, "one can only be bitten by an insect that is under one's own cloth". The social tensions in the modern African society tend to accentuate the conflict between group solidarity and individual self-fulfillment in

families. Beneath these conflicts and tensions in families and groups are deeper clashes of values between the communalistic values of the African family and the individualism of modern culture. These tensions are sublimated into the spiritual realm and witchcraft is used as the explanation for their existence.

In the context of escalating social change in modern Africa, conflict between individual self-expression and group solidarity and its attendant conflict of values have been explained in terms of witchcraft. For example, witchcraft is used as the reason for individual success and prosperity outside the family. The individual on the other hand is suspicious of the jealousy of family members and therefore tries to protect himself or herself from witches within his or her family who might want to destroy him or her because of envy. In the end witchcraft mentality is created in which everybody comes to believe that there is an enemy out there to destroy one. And this enemy could be the cause of any misfortune that might occur. It is out of this atmosphere of hearsay and suspicion of the "other" that the witchcraft mentality is developed as an existential hermeneutic that helps the individual to cope with evil and misfortune. The witchcraft mentality provides an interpretation scheme that helps to account for evil and misfortune in a way that makes it possible to deal with misfortune through spiritual means. It also helps one to interpret or sometimes transform socio-economic and political forces into spiritual forces that can be handled on the spiritual level, thus giving a sense of control over systems and structures that cannot ordinarily be faced on the physical plane.

In the final analysis the witchcraft mentality provides a spiritual milieu in which the individual can manage the threat of evil forces and misfortune. In this sense the witchcraft mentality provides the individual with what might be called an existential therapy of a spiritual kind that saves him or her from the angst of having to deal with insoluble and enigmatic problems in life especially those that deal with pain, suffering and misfortune.

On the deficit side, the witchcraft mentality creates a sense of fear because it operates on a conception of the world in which human existence is construed as permanently invaded by evil forces at all points. (Gifford 1991: 22). Such a conception of life limits the freedom and scope of human operation and activity. The culture of fear it produces stifles initiative and creativity, and risk taking in life. Furthermore this culture of fear that comes with the witchcraft mentality creates a dependency mindset based on the belief that every human endeavour must be protected against evil forces and witches by an external spiritual power because evil forces especially witches make life precarious and dangerous. In real terms this means that at all levels of life one must seek spiritual advice and protection before one acts.

The witchcraft mentality develops an in-built dependency syndrome, which gradually becomes a way of life. Since this mentality is sustained by fear it creates the type of dependency that can easily turn into exploitation of those who believe that they are victims of witchcraft. The logic of witchcraft mentality requires one out of necessity to be dependent on spiritual specialists

to help one to navigate through life. This type of spiritual dependency creates a mentality which leads to passivity, the surrender of personal responsibility for one's life and an unhealthy dependence on others and loss of identity.

Finally, the most troubling aspect of this witchcraft mentality is that it promotes very dangerous and naïve assumptions about human life and existence, which lead to an almost infantile view of life. If every misfortune must be the work of evil agents then the assumption is that life is created perfect and must come to fruition without any disturbance. This must also entail the idea that human existence and the world are perfect; that there are no natural deformities inherent in nature that we can experience as inimical to our well-being. Everything that happens to us must happen according to our wishes as if our wishes ruled the world.

The simplistic world of the witchcraft mentality makes life precarious, insecure and fragile, demanding spiritual effort and support in all aspects of life. This in the final analysis makes life a burden rather than a joy; a constant struggle rather than opportunity for self-fulfillment within the confines and the limitations of nature and human existence. One can observe that the witchcraft mentality in its attempt to save human existence from insoluble problems and existential puzzles ends up creating a precarious form of life under constant siege and attack by evil forces and witches.

### **Witchcraft Mentality in the Charismatic Movement**

The Charismatic Movement is an aspect of African Christianity and represents what might be called an Africanized version of Christianity despite its overt rejection of African culture as demonic. The Charismatic movement more than any of the other paradigms of Christian expression in Africa roots the Christian message in the very philosophy of religion and spirituality of the African worldview that it demonizes. And for this reason it is able to address or speak to the deep needs and aspirations of the ordinary African, who is caught up in a dynamic past which rules his life and an attractive modern world, which is not yet his or her own. In this sense it presents itself as a popular form of Christianity, which can answer all human questions and address problems without exception (Gifford 1992: 21). While the message of the Charismatic movement is deeply rooted in the African worldview and ethos it sometimes presents itself as an avowed modern movement, which is against traditional culture (Myers 1998). The movement's promise to offer spiritual assistance for all conceivable problems and its ambiguous relationship with traditional culture and modernity accounts for its popularity, appeal and attraction to all classes especially the youth (Gifford 1998).

To the extent that the message of the charismatic movement is rooted in a genuine African paradigm it is continuous with the protest movement of the indigenous African Churches, whose protest movement was able to defend Africanity and rescue Christianity from the cultural imperialism of missionary Christianity (Akrong 1998).

The Charismatic movement also shares the mainstream Christian doctrines with the mainline churches and in this sense stands in the Christian tradition as a paradigm for the appropriation of Christianity in the African Context. Historically and theologically, the Charismatic movement is closer and indeed akin to, and in some cases historically related to the Pentecostal tradition in Ghana. For this reason the movement has sometimes been described as neo-Pentecostal (Larbi 1995: 265). However, its unique blend of the African philosophy of religion and aspects of Pentecostalism with influences from the recent "faith ministries" in America qualifies to treat it as an emerging African Christian paradigm both continuous and discontinuous with its Pentecostal antecedents.

The Charismatic movement in Ghana was influenced by the faith ministry of people like Oral Roberts, Kenneth Higin, Morris Cerullo and Benny Hinne. (Larbi 1995: 266-7). This tradition of faith ministry was given an African interpretation by Benson Idahosa of Nigeria, who could be described as the doyen of the charismatic movement in West Africa. Though not all the Ghanaian Charismatic leaders have been trained by Idahosa, the early leaders of the Charismatic movement in this country like Duncan Williams had their training from Idahosa, who has also influenced many of the charismatic leaders in this country. The Charismatic Movement could be described as a popular Christian movement with a simple message that appeals to the needs and aspirations of the people because it addresses the people from the perspective of their culture and religions and therefore appeals to their deep yearnings and gives them hope that their aspirations are attainable. This message is articulated in very clear idioms, images and cultural frames of reference that are meaningful to the ordinary person in the street.

### **Theology of the Charismatic Movement**

The theology of the Charismatic movement is a complex blend of mainstream Christian doctrines with African motives within the framework of the African worldview and philosophy of religion. A very simple Christian message of salvation that promises to deal with all human predicaments, anxieties and misfortunes within the context of the African view of salvation.

Kingsley Larbi (1995: 264) writes:

The deliverance ministries of the Charismatic are the re-interpretation of the African traditional past in the context of their evangelical-Pentecostal faith which allow them to bring what is considered as salvation or abundant life to their clients. Their African understanding of the spirit world and the evangelistic-Pentecostal spirituality, particularly its demonology underpins the spirituality of the deliverance ministries of the charismatic movement.

The simple message of salvation of Charismatic theology seems to assume that human existence was meant by God to be free of problems. Therefore problems and diseases are foreign to life, and where they are present they must be intrusions from the devil and his agents.

Therefore the negative aspects of human existence should be accounted for in terms of the intervention of evil in life that can be addressed by spiritual means (Larbi 1995: 270). The aspect of their message that deals with prosperity as an aspect of salvation assumes that prosperity belongs to the believer by right and he or she can command it (Williams 1990:155). This prosperity Gospel is consistent with the world affirming theology of African traditional religion.

Paul Gifford (1990: 375) described the prosperity Gospel in Africa thus:

The essential point of this Gospel of Prosperity is that prosperity of all kinds is the right of every Christian. God wants a Christian to be wealthy. True Christianity necessarily means wealth, it inevitably brings wealth. Conversely, poverty indicates personal sin, or at least deficiency in faith or an inadequate understanding.

Consistent with the logic of this world affirming philosophy of African religions, misfortune or poverty means one is being robbed of his or her God given right by evil forces and witches. This dualistic interpretation can account for all misfortunes in life. Indeed there is no aspect of life where this dualistic interpretation of life breaks down. The dualistic interpretation of life makes it possible for misfortunes to be managed through the mediation of the spirit world. This is consistent with the logic of African religion where religion is supposed to provide spiritual experience by participating in the presence of the spirit through deliverances, miracles and other forms of ecstatic experiences. The emphasis on these visible manifestations of the Spirit leads to great dependence on the spiritual realm, which must be mediated, by prophets, apostles, pastors and men of God.

The dualistic ideology that supports the neo-witchcraft mentality in the Charismatic theology of salvation creates a total or absolute dependency on spiritual power, which may tempt the Charismatic Christians to seek spiritual power of all sorts because on the plane of the witchcraft mentality what is important is spiritual power regardless of its sources. The charismatic movement shares this indiscriminate use of power with traditional shrines.

The Charismatic movement shares with classical Pentecostalism the theology of the dispensation of the Holy Spirit, which teaches that the Pentecost event inaugurated the dispensation of the Holy Spirit, who becomes the focus of God's activities in the world especially those that have to deal with issues of personal salvation, miracles, and healing etc. In contrast to mainstream Protestant theology, which teaches that the dispensation of the Holy Spirit ended with the apostolic age (Amoah-Kuma 1999:26), the Pentecostals' dispensation theology leans towards a moralistic interpretation of the Christian doctrine of the trinity, which reduces the whole trinity into one mode of being at a time. This Pentecostal modalistic tendency is radicalized in the charismatic teaching where the Holy Spirit is treated as if it had inherited the status of Jesus Christ. The claim is that just as Jesus Christ took care of the spiritual needs of the people of his day so is the Holy Spirit taking care of the needs of the believers today. While the

Charismatic churches share common sources of doctrine of the Holy Spirit with the Pentecostals, their utilization of the concept of the Holy Spirit is patterned on the traditional notion of spirit beings, which is also found in the independent African Churches (AIC) (Akron 1998).

The Charismatic movement accepts the basic worldly orientation of African traditional religion as the organization principle of its interpretation of the Christian message of salvation. Salvation for the Charismatic movement is here and now. The underlying assumption of their soteriology is derived from the logic of the African traditional philosophy of religion in which the goal of religion is to bring about healing and protection from evil, emotional satisfaction, opportunity for spiritual experiences and prosperity here and now. In this sense, although the prosperity Gospel came into Charismatic theology through the influence of faith ministries in America, it has found a corresponding and ready resonance in African traditional philosophy of religion which underpins the Ghanaian Charismatic prosperity Gospel (Gifford 1990: 375).

The Charismatics affirm a traditional Christian Trinitarian monotheism, but they interpret the internal relationship of the Trinity in a modalistic way which in the end paints a picture of a God who is more a spiritual principle than the personal God revealed in Christ. Their Trinitarian modalism reduces or sublimates God into the mode of the Holy Spirit who takes the place of God as the spiritual principle of life and the power that can be invoked to intervene in human life through miracles. The emerging concept of God looks more like an ethnic deity of African traditional religion rather than the Christian concept of the Godhead. The Charismatic churches believe that this God inflicts sickness and curses on sinners, very much like the Old Testament idea of a God who operates in strict deuteronomic logic, however contextualised in the form of an African ethnic deity (Kekesi 1977: 50).

The Christology of the Charismatic movement can be described as an instrumental Christology in which Christ is also sublimated into the mode of the Holy Spirit within the theology of dispensation. The main value of Christ is the blood of Christ, which is used as a weapon that one could use to fight evil spirits. *Yesu mogya nka w'ani*, "May the blood of Christ blind you" – this is a common curse thrown by members of the Charismatic churches at evil spirits and witches and other enemies. In the final analysis we have a docetic Christ who is reduced to a power or spiritual principle for exorcism.

Within the modalism of the Charismatic dispensational theology, the Holy Spirit absorbs the position and power of both God and Jesus Christ and becomes a magic power whose presence is experienced in healing, deliverance and miracles of all sorts. The weakness of this dispensational modalism is that, as the other members of the Godhead are sublimated into the Holy Spirit, the whole Godhead loses its divinity, because the Holy Spirit is treated as just a power for healing and miracles that can be invoked at will to act, and not as a member of the Godhead who acts according to its own will.



As the Holy Spirit takes the place of God as the ultimate source of spiritual power it is treated more as the spirit of a local deity that can be commanded at will to intervene in human life to bring healing, deliverance or miracles, rather than a God, whose will and intentions are always different from ours. In the end, the Holy Spirit in this theology also becomes like a local deity who can be commanded at will to act in order to promote human well being, as if the Holy Spirit exists only to satisfy human wishes and needs.

All these modifications of mainstream Christian doctrines are at the service of sustaining a witchcraft mentality based on a kind of metaphysical dualism that provides a scheme of interpretation for life. This dualism leads to the construction of a very simplistic worldview in which everything can be explained in terms of the forces of good and evil, very much like a modified Christian version of Zoroastrianism.

### **Charismatic Demonology**

Charismatic theology has developed a demonology, which skillfully weaves a doctrine of evil by using the agentive causal principle of African philosophy together with aspects of Biblical apocalyptic dualism into a neo-witchcraft mentality. This neo-witchcraft mentality creates a radical dualism, which transcends both traditional African dualism and the limited Biblical apocalyptic dualism. Charismatic theology has a demonology with Satan at the head very much like a being equal to God, and who is in constant struggle with God over dominion over the world and over the lives of human beings.

The devil is the head of all evil forces especially witches and demons that pervade all aspects of human life or whom one encounters everywhere. The Charismatic demonology teaches that these messengers of Satan, found everywhere, are responsible for all illnesses, disease, misfortunes, immorality and anything that humans experience as inimical to their well-being. This demonology, which forms the bedrock of their metaphysic of evil, leads the charismatic to define salvation in terms of a struggle with evil forces for healing, deliverance and prosperity in the life of the believer. Salvation also includes the commanding of prosperity as an inherent right of the believer, which the Spirit gives to the believer.

On the whole, this view of salvation is very consistent with the worldly philosophy of African traditional religion in which salvation is limited to this world alone with no reference to future salvation, because, for the African mind, salvation means the fulfillment of life here which includes prosperity, well being and liberation from disease and all misfortunes. The quest for salvation or abundant life manifests continuity with the African concept of salvation as health, prosperity, fertility, security, vitality and equilibrium within the cosmos.

One perplexing aspect of this movement is that although it operates on the basis of the principles of African traditional religion and metaphysical assumptions it is avowedly opposed to traditional culture. Indeed, the movement sees traditional culture as infested with evil, which

must be removed for the believer to be free. In its theology, the misfortunes in one's life could be attributed to ancestral curses, some traditional names, rituals and customs of one's past. This rejection of traditional culture leads to the demonization of traditional religion in all its aspects. Divinities and ancestors are described as agents of the devil from whom one should be delivered. In this way Charismatic theology helps widen the scope and influence of the activities of evil spirits and witches in human existence. By this, however Charismatic theology reinforces a witchcraft mentality that makes it possible for one to see the presence of evil in all aspects of life.

Unfortunately this neo-witchcraft mentality of the charismatic churches is sustained by a culture of fear that makes human life and existence a very difficult task. Since the world of witchcraft mentality is ruled and dominated by the presence of evil forces everywhere, every aspect of life must of necessity involve a struggle to overcome evil in order to survive. In this sense the whole human project of existence is portrayed as war with evil forces at every turn. This makes life a burden rather than a joyful celebration of God as enabling grace.

The witchcraft mentality strives on fear and is maintained by it. The fear, generated and sustained by this neo-witchcraft mentality, freezes individual initiative and moral responsibility. It encourages a culture of passivity that leads to the development of a dependency mentality. Dependency and lack of creativity and initiative are the necessary by-products of this neo-witchcraft mentality. In a way, this neo-witchcraft mentality is what continues to make the salvation message of the charismatic churches relevant because their message simultaneously reinforces the witchcraft mentality as a scheme of interpretation and at the same time offers solutions to problems created by the witchcraft mind.

In commercial parlance one could say that the Charismatic churches created the need for their message by teaching doctrines that help sustain the witchcraft mentality. And the main attraction of their message is that they re-package traditional witchcraft mentality as a new powerful Christian perspective that makes it possible to explain all evil in terms of the operation of witches. Once one accepts the logic of the witchcraft mentality there will be no more puzzles and enigmatic situations in life.

In the end, the neo-witchcraft mentality in the charismatic movement gives one good reason why one must belong to a Charismatic Church, where a person will have access to spiritual power to fight witches. This means that without the threat of the devil, God or church will be irrelevant as if God needed the presence of the devil in order to be God. This is a very troubling idea for God's omnipotence and sovereignty. This neo-witchcraft mentality, to the extent that it presents a picture of a world in which all aspects of life are infested with evil forces, makes the devil more important than he should be in a monotheistic religion like Christianity. Today the minds of many Christians are dominated by concerns about the devil rather than the victory and new life possibilities in Christ. The challenge to Christian ministry today is how to win more people from the culture of fear into freedom in Christ where they can grow as children of God.

## Conclusion

This essay describes the nature and structure of what I call the neo-witchcraft mentality in popular Christianity expressed in the charismatic movement. For many people, this phenomenon is a new discovery about life that makes it meaningful. But in real term what is peddled in popular Christianity as discovery is nothing but the repackaging of traditional witchcraft mentality in Christian categories. I have drawn up the theological implication of the development of the witchcraft mentality for both theology and the life of the individual. But by far the most serious challenge this mentality poses to our society is the enthronement of the magical worldview with its dualistic subtleties that lures us to passivity, dependence, surrender of the power to make choices and accept responsibilities. Painfully these are the very ingredients that destroy identity and personal initiative in the highly competitive world where we have to make important choices every day. Tragically the magical worldview, which this mentality reinforces, is hardly the kind of mentality that will help us as a society to participate fully in the modern world where the operating paradigm is rationality and scientific thinking – the basic requirement for proper functioning in the global village.

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