

**The Influence of African Tribal Religion on  
American Culture and the American Church  
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**Personal Ministry:**

I spent 37 years in ministry as a pastor here in the US. In 2010 my wife Pat and I moved to Liberia, West Africa where we served for five years with SIM, Serving in Missions (formerly Sudan Interior Missions). I have spent countless hours interacting with Africans and learning about their culture and their traditional beliefs. As we returned to the US in June of 2015 I was surprised to see many of the aspects of African Tribal Religion (ATR) finding their way into the American culture and in the American church.

**Illustrations of ATR Influence on our Culture:**

We can see the influence of African Tribalism in much of the American culture. Fashion, hair styles, body piercing and scarring, tattoos, ear plugs, and music. This is the invasion of an eastern world view on our western culture.

**World Views:**

**There are:**

Two Ways of Thinking

Two World Views

Our World View Influences our Culture

Our World View Influences our Thinking

Our World view Influences how we think about God

**Our understanding** of these opposing world views will help us in dealing with:

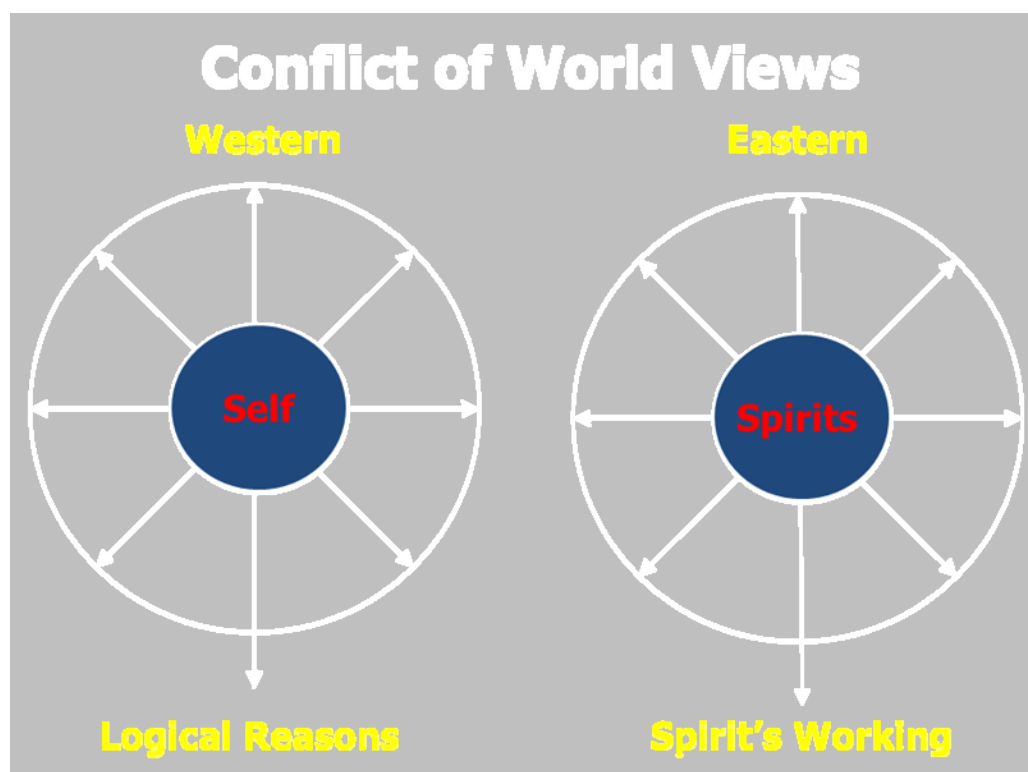
- Missiology
- Cross-Cultural Mission
- Immigrants

- Refugees
- Influences in your Church
- Non-Grace thinking, programs, actions
- Millennials

**Western World View**, about 1/3 of mankind (**Judeo-Christian principles**)

**Eastern World View**, about 2/3 of mankind (**not just Africa**)

**Conflict of World Views:**



How this affects thinking even by what is said:

Africans would say, "Knife cut me, spirit made me ill, spirit made me get a bad grade. Motorbike broke down because it has an evil spirit." BUT we have taught them the Word of God. We have taught them and in the five years we were there we saw progress in grace and truth.

Perhaps because they are so accepting of the spirit world and the supernatural, they are more open to accepting the truths of God than many of the people we encounter in the West.

**A Quick View of ATR** [this belief system is common throughout the two-thirds of the world who hold an Eastern World View (African, Asian, Middle Eastern - Islam, South and Central American, American Indian, Aborigine)].

Even as modern education and commerce increases in Africa and other third-world countries, ATR is solidly entrenched in the lives of millions of people. Even those who are Christians, Muslims, or even the urban non-religious people in third-world countries, will still hold onto some these traditional beliefs.

1. A belief system passed down from **generation to generation**. ATR varies greatly from tribe to tribe even within a country but does commonly share certain beliefs and practices. Even when holy books are present, traditions are more important.
2. Since there is **no conversion** or proselytizing in ATR, it is generally tolerant and hospitable to people and other ideas.
3. **The God of ATR is distant** and not actively involved in all that happens in the world.

ATR recognizes the existence of the Supreme God, but man **cannot reach out to him**. Man must deal instead with the spirits that rule in the world.

4. The God of ATR created the world, but now allows **spirits, nature gods, ancestor spirits, and tribal intercessors** to be his surrogates with whom man deals instead of dealing with God directly.
5. There are **spirits of both good and evil** nature.
6. In ATR, **spirits are everywhere** - in persons, trees, rivers, animals, rocks, mountains, and even in automobiles and other personal effects. Nature spirits are not only in rivers, rocks, and trees, but also in natural forces such as wind and lightning.
7. **Idolatry** in the form of spirit and ancestor worship is encouraged.
8. **Priests**, sheikhs, rainmakers, chiefs, kings, zoes and medicine men (ATR holy men or women) all pray to their god or the spirits when people seek their assistance. Zoes, Priests and medicine men can also bestow power and wealth or a hex (curse) on others.

9. **Sacrifices** are performed for various purposes, such as; warding off evil, securing ancestors' support, appeasing nature gods, expressing gratitude for plentiful harvest, deliverance from accident, or life experiences.

Sacrifice involves the slaughter of an animal. Life is sacrificed to appease the spirits to free a person from a curse. Some offerings involve crops and drink. In some places in Africa human sacrifice still exists.

10. **ATR holy men** are believed to be able to foretell the future.
11. **Traditional healers** are found in every African society and village. They may be men or women.
12. **Prohibitions**, called taboos, are moral violations which can cause harm, illness, adversity and the disruption of human relationship.
13. **A holy man** can bring a curse upon others. This vexing can cause illness, misfortune, loss of material possessions, and even death.
14. **Talisman represent** ancestors, animals, and other powers. There are Ceremonies in which masked figures and talisman represent the dead or the spirits who are believed to give messages and warnings to the living.

While I can speak from firsthand knowledge and experience on ATR, these principles are found in the thinking of two-thirds of the people in the world (African, Asian, Middle Eastern (Islam), South and Central American, American Indian, Aborigine). As America is an immigrant nation, many people coming to our shores bring this thinking into our culture and, more critically, into our churches. We can see this in wholesale in Europe where the long time held Western World View is quickly being abandoned.

**Romans 12:2** *And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.*

### **Is it Real?**

It would be wrong to say that all the mystical and supernatural power of ATF is not true and only a myth. We know that this is the Devil's world and that Satan is alive and powerful on planet earth. He tries to rule people using his army of demons. It is these demons that are the spirits of ATR.

There are things that Satan and his demons can do to harm unbelieving people. There are things the spirits can do to tribes and nations. The spirit world is real but it has no power, again *no power*, over the one who has

received Jesus Christ as their Savior and therefore has the Holy Spirit indwelling them.

**I John 4:4** clearly teaches us that: . . . *greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world.*

The One who is in us is the Holy Spirit. On my weekly radio program that I had on ELWA radio Liberia, I often challenged the zoes to curse, hex, do whatever they think they can do to me. To come face to face with me and I will tell them that my God has given me a promise, a truth (I John 4:4) *greater is He who is in me than he who in the world.* I do not do this to promote myself but to teach the Christians of Liberia that they need not live in a spirit of fear.

I have been told curses, incantations, hexes, even chickens have been sacrificed to bring evil against me by the zoes, but I have not experienced any of their evil.

### **How this Influences us:**

Four things to look at:

- Tribalism
- Animism
- Fatalism
- Syncretism

**Tribalism:** Just to look at this quickly, whenever a church turns inward and begins to see itself as an exclusive, unique, one of a kind, the only ones who are right group it is expressing tribalism.

**Church tribalism** develops when people identify themselves more by their relationship to their tribe or their relationship to their customs and traditions than by their relationship to Christ and to the mission of the church.

Tribalism in the church results in turning inward, exclusivity, arrogance towards those outside, indifference towards outreach and missions, the thinking that they are right and everyone else is wrong, and an absence of grace thinking.

If you Google *Church Tribalism* or *Church as a Tribe* you can get a plethora of information on this subject.

### **Animism:**

**Defined:** Animisms is the belief that there is a spiritual world and a physical world. One can control or affect the physical world through the spiritual world. It is a mechanical system that believes if one says or does certain things (prayers, incantations, sacrifices, curses and charms), then the spirit world is impacted and this has direct effect on the physical world.

The Animistic Worldview recognizes good and evil spirits whose favor must be bought, earned or stolen through power or deceit. This spirit evil can be appeased or used for self and against others. Some people have the capacity or power to coerce the spirits to do their bidding (shamans, witch doctors, zoes).

### **Two Parts to Animism:**

1. One of the simplest ways Animism affects the church is the name-it-and-claim-it phenomena. Here is the idea that if we say a pray in a certain way it will *make* God do something for us.

**Kenneth Hagin** (Rhema Ministries Tulsa) **wrote:** *Then the Lord Jesus Himself appeared to me and said, if anybody, anywhere will take these steps, he will always receive whatever he wants from Me or from God the Father.*

He later added: *No matter what your relationship is with Christ, apply the law of faith and you will have the results. It is a formula into which everyone can put everything they want: health, a new job, a house, a car, everything you want!*

The thinking that a spoken formula or specifically worded prayer will *MAKE* God do your bidding.

This is also seen in talismans; wear a cross for good luck or keeping a Bible always open in your home to ward away demons. Having religious art for good luck, charms for luck and safety (Having a St. Christopher medal swinging from the rear view mirror of your car),

hex signs and the rabbit's foot, horse shoes, four leaf clovers, crossing fingers, pentagrams, Mezuzah (Jewish door plaque).

This can even extend to the quoting of a Bible verse as a talisman of good fortune or to ward off sin and evil. Some use I John 1:9 not as instruction but as a talisman. Quoting the verse rather than confessing sin.

Also the belief that inanimate objects have souls or spirits. Have you ever given your car a name? Do we ever wish upon a star? Did the dish really run away with the spoon?

The blessing of inanimate objects or animals, pets, or crops. This is beyond just praying that God gives you a good harvest or keeps your pet, or car or house safe. This is thinking these objects or animals can be given powers by prayers or a priest's blessing because they have a spirit.

This also includes performing rituals that will result in God blessing or granting certain favor. The thinking that if I go to church on Sunday I will have a good week. Even thinking that if your pastor prays for you it is more effective than just you praying for yourself. Saying a rote prayer for blessing.

**Of course in our technological age** we have found another way to get God to bless us. All we need to do now is CLICK or SHARE on some *inspired* post on Face Book.

We also have venerating and worshipping the dead: Praying to dead saints is obviously part of this. But also thinking that grandpa is watching over you. A belief that a dead relative is helping you in life. Have you ever had anyone tell you that they *feel* the presents of their dead mother or father?

**A note on Islam:** In Islam it is believed that if one does certain things, observes certain holy days, prays certain prayers, fulfills jihad, that Allah will bless them. This is nothing more than animism.

2. A more subtle aspect of animism is the belief regarding blessing or success.

ATR and other forms of animism believe that there is a limited amount of good and evil in the world. In their creation view, their god (or their gods) created the world and then stepped away. So what is created in every way is fixed and finite.

In finance we call this **Pie Economic**. If you have a big slice of the pie, then I will have less. Our world view has embraced a trickle down economic view that ultimate trickles down from God.

We believe that God is actively involved in the world and that He is unlimited in what He wants to do.

Our Western World View reflects this. We even write in our founding national documents that *all men are created equal* and that this means equal and unlimited opportunities.

So we celebrate the rise of a person from poverty believing that if he had some success we can all have that same or similar success. We believe as John Kennedy stated in 1963 *that a rising tide lifts all ships*. So we hear of someone like Dr. Ben Carson or other such Horatio Alger stories and we applaud.

We not only mourn with those who mourn but we rejoice with those who rejoice (Romans 12:15).

But in the Eastern World View success or blessing is finite and limited so if someone else is blessed that means you will not be blessed.

This gives us a bit of understanding as to why God tells us that jealousy and envy are sins.

There is a significant worldview shift in America. In the past when we saw someone who was successful, the thought was not *How can I get what they have?* but was *How can I learn what they know and create that for myself?* The basic worldview was found in a Creator who created us in His own image, which included knowledge and creativity, and the ability to create new stuff, wealth, energy, and a better life.



A prime example of this was seen a few years ago in the ***Occupy Movement***. The ones who occupied Wall Street and other places of commerce believed in order to have the stuff they want or deserve; they must take it from others who have that stuff. They believed that there is a fixed amount of stuff and energy, so to be happy and healthy they must take what they want or need from others by any means available. In that world view those who have stuff have it because they took it from others, so it is legitimate to get stuff by taking it from them.

Any form of socialism or progressivism is an animistic governing system that takes the flow of material and energy from those who have it and gives to those who do not. These systems promote a worldview that says it's okay to take what you want from others if you have the power to do so.

### **Fatalism:**

Since the eastern world view believes that spirits are in everything and behind everything. What happens to you in life, good or bad, is a result of the spirits working for or against you.

So when holding this belief a person sees all things that happen to him as a result of someone else's decisions or actions. This results not only in a victim mentality but an unwillingness to take responsibility for one's own actions or decisions.

Like a child who says it is always someone else's fault but not theirs.

How many times have we heard in our churches that *what we sow, so shall we also reap*? This is a very common sermon topic. But this is taking the passage in **Galatians 6:7 without reading on to Galatians 6:8**.

Now in life, in our families, school, jobs we do see this principle of sowing and reaping working. But then we try to bring this principle into our grace relationship with God and it doesn't work because of a greater principle called GRACE.

I am very glad that I DO NOT reap what I have sown but rather reap what Christ has sown.

Galatians 6:8 teaches that if we sow to the Spirit we will not reap from out sin, lack of faith, ignorance, or indifference but rather reap from what the Spirit sows or provides for our eternal life.

But even in that as Christians we accept the responsibility for and the outcome of our decisions and actions.

In fatalism all that happens was just meat to be so you are more a pawn than a perpetrator.

In tribal cultures if you get sick it was not because of a lack of hygiene or improper diet, it is a spirit that has made you sick.

If your motorbike breaks down it is an evil spirit that caused it, perhaps even brought on by a hex someone has put against you, not because you never changed the oil.

This belief results in not taking responsibility which is one of the biggest problems of the millennial generation. It is easy to blame parents, teachers, politicians anyone and everyone else if you do not earn or deserve what you think you should have.

In eastern religions this is often expressed as Karma.

Paul David Hewson had presented one of the best definitions of Karma that I have ever read and he contrasts it with grace. Oh, you do not know who Paul David Hewson is? We know him as **BONO**:

*It's a mind-blowing concept that the God who created the Universe might be looking for company, a real relationship with people, but the thing that keeps me on my knees is the difference between Grace and Karma...*

***You see, at the centre** of all religions is the idea of Karma . . . And yet, along comes this idea called Grace . . . Grace defies reason and logic. Love interrupt the consequences of your actions, which in my case is very good news indeed, because I've done a lot of stupid stuff.*

*But I'd be in big trouble if Karma was going to finally be my judge. I'd be in deep s\*\*t. It doesn't excuse my mistakes, but I'm holding out for Grace. I'm holding out that Jesus took my sins onto the Cross because I know who I am, and I hope I don't have to depend on my own religiosity.*

**He went on to say:** *The point of the death of Christ is that Christ took on the sins of the world so that what we put out did not come back to us, and that our sinful nature does not reap the obvious death. That's the point. It should keep us humbled. It's not our own good works that get through the gates of heaven...*

**Question:** How come an Irish rock star with a humanitarian heart gets it and so many of our pastors do not?

### **Syncretism:**

**Defined:** Syncretism is the combining together of two belief systems to create a new system that is supposedly more acceptable than either of the previous systems alone.

In very clear examples of this we see hoodoo, voodoo, Santeria, Mariolatry, Queen of Heaven ministries, and even some of the Messianic Christian ministries.

In Africa it is very common for people to put one foot in ATR and the other foot into the church.

In the church in Liberia I had to deal with elders who were also zoes, church leaders who had numerous wives or girl friends, mothers who would allow their young daughters to undergo female gentile mutilation (so called female circumcision) at the hands of the secret societies, tribal scaring and marking, animal sacrifice. And that was in the church.

I cannot number the many times I was told that I just do not understand the culture. But once I learned more about their culture and ATR they were not able to use that excuse. As a missionary we do not promote western culture, we promote God's culture.

Outside the church we learned of curses being put upon people, people murdered out of envy for their success and even child sacrifices for good luck during the national elections in 2012.

THE GOOD NEWS IS that missionaries who are teaching grace and truth are making a difference. The ECOL association of about 100 churches, to which I was the Spiritual advisor, put into place a regulation that banned any member from being in a secret society. With the help of Samaritans Purse we were also

able to get a law passed in Liberia that prohibited female genital mutilation of anyone less than 18 years of age.

In the American church we see syncretism whenever anyone brings some strange, non-biblical belief into the church. PUTTING ONE FOOT IN THE BIBLE AND THE OTHER IN THE WORLD.

**Chrislam and the Coexist movement**

**Psychology** rather than Bible Study in the church

**Social programs**, some that might be very good but become more important than the teaching of the Word of God.

**And then there is the Prosperity Gospel**

In addition to the animistic name it and claim it formulas of the prosperity gospel there is the idea of the pastor as the man of God, or the Christian shaman.

In ATR you really need to keep the shaman or zoe on your side. He has the power to curse you, put a hex on you, or get the spirits to curse you or bless you. So you give him gifts, make sure he has the best hut, the best goats, the best of everything. If someone in the village gets a motorbike, it has to be given to the zoe if he does not have one (never mind that he cannot drive one, he must have it).

**In the Prosperity Gospel movement the shaman has been replaced with the pastor**, another man of God. So he must have the biggest house, the nicest car, and the best clothes. And if he decides that God told him he needs a jet, you better figure out how to get him a jet.

More jets in Nigeria are registered to pastors or their non-profit organizations than are registered to the oil companies and remember, Nigeria is an OPEC state.

In Calabar Nigeria I witnessed a pastor calling people forward at the end of a worship service and selling them the amount of times he would pray for them in the following week. He formed three groups and depending on the amount of money given to him at that time (or to the elders who held out the offering plates) he would pray for some every day but if they only gave a few Nira, he would only pray for them once that week.

We may not have become that blatant in America but I have known of Prosperity preachers who accept so called *grace* gifts in exchange for their prayers.

Syncretism exists whenever we allow non or anti biblical beliefs to become a part of our worship of the One True God and His Son Jesus Christ. Too often we have allowed culture and tradition to become more important than the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We are to have one foot in grace and the other in truth, not one foot in the church and the other foot in the world.

### **The Bottom Line:**

Everything we have examined should bring you to one very sure conclusion. The eastern world view, ATR, animism, fatalism, syncretism, tribalism all have one thing in common: they have nothing to do with GRACE.

In understanding grace you understand that we do not deserve and cannot earn what God has for us. It can only be received by grace through faith.

### **The Solution:**

The solution to this, whether across the seas on the mission field, in third world countries, across the street in our own communities, or in the local church, is the same.

**Teach GRACE**, teach it, teach again, teach it again and again and again. If we understand the greatness of the grace of God and what grace truly is we will be able to detect the leaven of error before it begins to leaven the whole loaf.

I have seen this work in Africa, I have seen the teaching of the Word and the teaching of Grace change thinking, change evil traditions, change lives.

Jesus warned us about this in **Mark 7:8-9** *Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men. You are experts at setting aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition.*

And Paul wrote:

**I Corinthians 11:2** *Now I praise you because you remember me in everything and hold firmly to the traditions, just as I delivered them to you.*

**II Thessalonians 2:15** *So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught, whether by word of mouth or by letter from us*

This is not a new problem, in the Exodus God warned the people:

**Leviticus 18:1-5** *Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, Speak to the sons of Israel and say to them, I am the LORD your God. You shall not do what is done in the land of Egypt where you lived, nor are you to do what is done in the land of Canaan where I am bringing you; you shall not walk in their statutes. You are to perform My judgments and keep My statutes, to live in accord with them; I am the LORD your God. So you shall keep My statutes and My judgments, by which a man may live if he does them; I am the LORD.*

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