

# African Traditional Religion, Western Religious Shifts and Contemporary Education

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## **Samevatting**

Swart Afrikane en Westerlinge voer tans 'n stryd om die herlewing van Afrika se tradisionele godsdienste. In dié verband word daar in hierdie artikel gekyk na drie grondopvattinge in die tradisionele godsdienste van Afrika, naamlik die geloof in 'n Hoogste Wese, die geloof dat die geestelike en fisiese werklikhede 'n onskeibare eenheid vorm en die belangrikheid van 'n verenigde, gelykdenkende gemeenskap. Daar word ook gekyk na die historiese dinamika wat onderliggend is aan die religieuse verskuiwings in die Weste. Die Weste was tradisioneel Christelik, maar het na die Verligting grootliks in ateïsme verval. Sedert die laaste drie dekades van die twintigste eeu is daar egter weer geestelike oplewing in die Weste, maar dit is grotendeels tot nie-christelike, insluitend tradisionele Afrika-opvattinge gerig.

Die Bybel vermaan ons om alles in die lig van die Skrif te toets want slegs dan kan ons en ons kinders vashou aan slegs dit wat goed is (1 Tessalonisense 5: 21). Derhalwe word hierdie artikel afgesluit met 'n blik op die wyse waarop tradisionele Afrika-opvattinge wat ook in kontemporêre Westerse denke te bespeur is, in die onderwys van vandag te vore kom en wat die betekenis daarvan in 'n Bybelse perspektief is.

## **1. Introduction**

In African traditional thought religion penetrates fully into all departments of life (Gehman, 1990:18, 50; Mbiti, 1990: 1). A study of the African traditional worldview is therefore a study of African traditional religion (ATR). Gehman (1990: 30) points out that though individual expressions may differ, common basic beliefs – a common worldview – prevail throughout Africa so that one may speak of African traditional religion in the singular. Traditional Africa believes the world is definitively spiritual;

that “[n]ature, man and the spirit world constitute one fluid coherent unit” (Turaki, 1999: 98). This view that the spiritual and natural realms constitute one undivided universe and that nature is therefore fully permeated with spiritual beings and power is not unique to Africa but is the characteristic view of animism. As Sibiso (2001: 1) points out: “The seeds of ATR are found in many other ‘primal religions’ worldwide. ATR is a nature religion.”

Contemporary Africa is seeking to revive and reinstate its traditional primal worldview. This is understandable. It is a response to the alienation that black Africans experienced during the years of colonial and apartheid rule. It is, however, not only Africans that are increasingly interested in traditional primal beliefs. Among Westerners, interest in nature religions has in recent years grown at a tremendous rate. Such interest links up with the Green movement, feminism and alternative health therapy (Albanese, 1990: 154 - 155) and is spawned by the postmodern mindset that understands religion not in terms of truth but in terms of choice.

Traditional primal beliefs are growing in force among both Africans and Westerners. The purpose of this article is therefore to outline the foundational premises of the African traditional worldview, to discuss the historical causal dynamics which led Westerners to progressively abandon Christianity and to now embrace primal beliefs and, finally, to assess in Christian perspective the educational significance of traditional primal premises. Scripture exhorts us to ‘examine everything carefully’ for only then can ‘we hold fast to that which is good’ (1 Thessalonians 5: 21). As Christians we need to evaluate what children are taught in the light of the Bible so as to know what is good before the Lord.

## **2. The African traditional worldview**

Sibiso (2001: 2) identifies the following as the basic premises of ATR:

- \* belief in a Supreme Being;
- \* belief in a spirit realm that permeates the whole of nature and all of life; and
- \* belief in the sanctity of a unified society.

### **2.1 *The Supreme Being in ATR***

Traditional Africa believes the world is definitively spiritual, but not definitively divine. Traditional Africa does not believe God is all and all is God (Mbiti, 1990: 33). African mythology posits the existence of a Creator, a Supreme Being who created everything – nature, humanity and spirit beings.

The Supreme Being of ATR is not the loving Father of the Bible. Traditional Africa conceives of the Supreme Being as a remote being who

created and still sustains the world but does not form personal relationships with humans, except as they are mediated through spirits (Gehman, 1990: 198; Sibiso, 2001: 2; Turaki, 1999: 162 - 163). In ATR it is not the Supreme Being but intermediate spirit beings that are actively involved in human life. Thus, although traditional Africa assigns personal attributes to the Supreme Being (Gehman, 1990: 189 - 191; Mbiti, 1990: 29ff), he can also be conceived of as an impersonal Supreme Power (Turaki, 1999:154 - 155) – an impersonal creative force and the source of the mystical, spiritual power that supposedly permeates nature.

ATR is not God-centred. Religious rituals revolve around intermediate spirit beings and not around the Supreme Being (Turaki, 1999: 86). Life's purpose is not the biblical purpose to respond to God in trust, submission and service. ATR is anthropocentric: 'man is at the very centre of existence' (Mbiti, 1990: 90). In ATR the "whole emphasis is upon man gaining the power needed to live a good life. Life revolves around man and his interests and needs" (Gehman, 1990: 50). Life's purpose is to achieve success, happiness and security, and to achieve these, humans must impress and manipulate the intermediate spiritual powers and beings that interpenetrate nature and affect all of life (Steyne quoted in Turaki, 1999: 87). Religious rituals revolve therefore around intermediate spirit beings and not around the Supreme Being (Turaki, 1999: 86). These spirit beings are discussed in the next section.

## **2.2 Nature, spirit beings and magic in ATR**

ATR is animistic. Traditional African peoples believe the spirit world controls the natural world. They explain natural phenomena in terms of spiritual or divine activity (Mbiti, 1990: 52ff) and assign spiritual meaning to certain places – mountains, rivers, lakes and stones (Sibiso, 2001: 3). Sacredness is also assigned to certain plants and animals and "[c]lans are normally totemic" (Mbiti, 1990: 103). Totemism is the belief that a clan has descended from an object in nature, either an animal, a plant, a stone or mineral, which is then worshipped as the protector of the clan and the symbol of unity with nature (Gitt, 1995: 31; Mbiti, 1990:103) .

In ATR the spirit beings that are thought to inhabit nature are the following:

- \* Divinities, that is, beings created as spirits whose status is just below the Supreme Being. They are nature spirits, anthropomorphically conceived (Gehman, 1990:124) and in charge of and the personification of major natural forces and objects (Mbiti, 1990: 36, 75). Belief in divinities is especially predominant in West Africa (Gehman, 1990:124; Sibiso, 2001: 3).

- \* Created spirits that are lower in status than the divinities. They are found everywhere in nature (Gehman, 1990: 138) and are greatly feared because they are unpredictable and frequently dangerous (Gehman, 1990: 139; Mbiti, 1990: 80).
- \* Ancestral spirits, that is, spirits of dead humans. Mbiti (1990: 77ff) distinguishes between the living-dead (the dead of up to five generations ago) and the spirits (the dead of more than five generations ago). The living-dead are the spirits with which “African peoples are most concerned” (Mbiti, 1990: 82). The living-dead give guidance to the living and serve as intermediaries between humans and the Supreme Being (Gehman, 1990:141; Mbiti, 1990: 82). They are, however, believed to be beneficent only “as long as they receive attentions” (Beattie quoted in Gehman, 1990: 139). Such attentions include “libation, offerings of food and other items, prayers and the observation of proper rites” (Mbiti, 1990: 158). Omission of attention brings down their wrath (Gehman,1990: 143).

In ATR the spirits, especially the living-dead, are part of life: “They are praised and thanked when blessings flow, consulted in times of need and are appeased through sacrifices whenever they are displeased about some wrongdoing by the living” (Sibiso, 2001: 2). Communication with the spirits, in particular the living-dead, takes place via dreams, visions and spirit possession.

Spirit possession can be either unexpected or induced possession. Unexpected spirit possession can occur to anyone at any time and place (Gehman, 1990: 158). It is believed to be effected by evil spirits or by a living-dead who feels forgotten or neglected, and the possessed person may self be unaware that he/she is possessed. These spirits cause trouble among the living. Via a diviner (*isangoma* (singular), *izangoma* (plural)) (Sibiso, 2001:13)) the spirit and the possessed person are identified. The wishes of the neglected living-dead are then attended to whilst an evil spirit is exorcised which may require that the possessed person be killed (Gehman, 1990:159; Van Niekerk, 1996: 23 - 24).

Induced possession is purposely sought. Medicine-men and -women (*inyanga* (singular), *izinyanga* (plural)) (Sibiso, 2001: 13)) and diviners induce their own particular spirits to possess them. In other mediums, music and communal dancing are used to induce spirit possession (Gehman, 1990: 160ff; Mbiti, 1990: 80, 169). Dancing is also used to induce a spirit in a sick person to reveal himself and to state his demands so that they can be met and the person be healed (Gehman, 1999:162).

Induced spirit possession is the essence of magic. Magic is not stage illusionism, but actions such as trances, spells and incantations directed

towards communicating with and/or controlling spiritual powers and beings (Hanegraaf, 1996: 82). The aim is to obtain information which is otherwise impossible to know and to obtain supernatural, magical powers to effect changes in reality and the course of events (Gehman, 1990: 160; Mbiti, 1990: 167ff). Such powers are ascribed to a mystical power that, according to primal belief, pervades the universe. This power is said to be from the Supreme Being (Mbiti, 1990: 194, 197) and to come to humans through both spirits and certain physical objects which are believed to be imbued with mystical, magical power (Mbiti, 1990: 197). This belief is called fetishism and undergirds the use of charms, amulets and talismans (Gitt, 1995: 30 - 31). It is found not only in Africa but throughout the world.

In Africa the practitioners of magic are the specialists. They are the medicine-men and -women, diviners, rainmakers and also sorceres and witches (*umthakathi* (singular), *abathakathi* (plural) (Sibiso, 2001:13)). The term used today for medicine-men and -women and diviners is traditional healers (Sibiso, 2001:13). Medicine-men and -women, diviners and rainmakers communicate with spirits in order to use their power for good purposes – so-called white magic (Gehman, 1990:69; Mbiti, 1990:193). Traditional Africans rely greatly on these specialists (Turaki, 1999:218). So-called black or evil magic is practised in order to bring harm to enemies, to their person or property (Mbiti, 1990:194). The practitioners of black, evil magic are sorcerers and witches, and they are greatly feared (Gehman, 1990: 69; Mbiti, 1990: 195).

The reasoning undergirding the distinction made between white and black magic is that of moral pragmatism. Traditional Africans are moral pragmatists. They believe moral rightness or wrongness is not determined by the method employed, that is by behaviour, but by the goal towards which the relevant behaviour is directed (Turaki,1999: 126). If the end is adjudged to be good, any behaviour and action to attain it is in principle adjudged to be good. Within a pragmatic moral frame the only relevant question is whether the method works. Thus, magic is ‘good’ if its fruits are judged to be ‘good’.

White magic forms part of Africa’s religious rituals. In ATR there is no clear way of separating religion and magic. Religious beliefs always beget corresponding religious practices (Turaki, 1999: 88). Therefore in traditional Africa, which is informed and motivated by its belief in the ubiquitous presence of unpredictable spirits, religious rituals necessarily include magic – the control of the spirits and thus control of life. Ritual magic serves thus a utilitarian purpose as the means to take control of life, but it also “sustains and generates the myth underlying the belief system” (Steyne quoted by Turaki, 1999: 189).

In traditional African life the relationship with the spirits is of paramount importance. Another relationship that is of paramount importance is the relationship with fellow human beings. In the next section African collectivism shall be outlined.

### **2.3 African collectivism**

A collective, communal view of life characterises the African traditional worldview. Community ties are dependent on ancestry, and genealogical ties stretch over the whole community and include the dead, the unborn as well as the totem animal or plant (Mbiti, 1990: 102 - 103). The highest value is harmony – harmonious relationships amongst the human members of the community and harmonious relationships with the spirits. Moral behaviour is therefore the maintenance of harmony, and it involves conformity to ancestral law and customs, the observance of taboos and the practice of kinship values – loyalty, affinity and obligation (Turaki, 1999: 127).

The kinship community is strictly exclusive. A person has to be born into a community to be a member of it (Mbiti, 1990: 101; Turaki, 1999: 125) and kinship values apply only within the community. Outsiders are excluded. They “can be subjected to differential treatment” if the self-interest of the community so requires (Turaki, 1999: 127).

At all times the interest of the community takes precedence over outsiders as well as over any individual or sub-group interests within the community. Thus, though the sense of kinship and the practice of kinship values provide individuals with a deep sense of security, individualism is surrendered (Gehman, 1990: 51).

In traditional African life there is no individualism because there is no psychic separateness. The individual is not expected to function on his/her own. He/she functions intrapsychically through the community. The community, its laws, customs and taboos are the only context within which individuals may pursue personal security, happiness and success. Only by being “an integral part of the community of kinsfolk” can individuals find “life, protection and meaning, identity and status” (Turaki, 1999: 125). Each individual has therefore the moral duty to conform fully to the will of the community because “[b]reaches of ancestral law and custom expose the whole community to the wrath of the spirits” (Steine quoted by Turaki, 1999: 130).

Traditional African collectivism calls for obedience from community members, but at the same time its all-encompassing nature effectively does away with individual moral independence and therefore with the concept of responsibility for the self: “Man’s actions are not ultimately his

responsibility” (Turaki, 1999: 127). An individual does not take responsibility for his/her actions. His/her actions are always caused by others – other people or forces and powers beyond his/her control (Turaki, 1999: 127).

This does not mean that traditional Africans do not understand the principle of punishment for wrong acts and that there is no system of justice in traditional Africa. Its aim is, however, not justice for the sake of justice and a verdict based on insight into the facts; the verdict is based on divination and the aim is the restoration of harmony in the community and with the spirit world via punishment or appropriate rituals (Turaki, 1999: 127 - 128, 130; Van Niekerk, 1996: 23 - 26).

From the above brief discussion of the African traditional worldview, it appears that it has little in common with Western views, neither with its historical Christian worldview, nor with its modern secular worldview. Yet despite the differences, the primal worldview – its mysticism, its magic and its collectivism – is currently dispersing itself throughout Western culture. In the next section the historical dynamics that explain why Westerners are increasingly embracing primal beliefs shall be outlined.

### **3. Western religious shifts: from the Enlightenment to the twenty-first century**

During the early centuries after Christ’s resurrection, the West was christianised. However, mysticism and magic did continue in the West’s esoteric spiritual tradition and the medieval Church fell into superstition and error. Nevertheless, the West was deeply influenced by Christianity and its basic philosophical worldview premises were until recently rooted in the Bible, for example:

- \* The Bible teaches a non-spiritualised, non-sacred and orderly view of nature. This view of nature explains why modern empirical science originated in the Christian West and not in pagan cultures.
- \* The Bible teaches that God’s Law is socially transcendent with validity for all people. The belief in an absolute Law that is binding on all people at all times is the only moral stance which makes social criticism of one’s own and of other societies possible.

Many contemporary Westerners are rejecting the worldview that the Bible greatly influenced and shaped. The shift in Western philosophy away from biblical premises started with René Descartes (1596 - 1650) whose *Cogito ergo sum* (“I think, therefore I am”) set the trend for rationalism and ushered in the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century and the so-called era of modernism that lasted till the late twentieth century.

The Enlightenment philosophers (for example, Voltaire (1694 - 1778), David Hume (1711 - 1776) and Immanuel Kant (1724 - 1804)) preached a self-confident doctrine that true philosophical premises are self-evident and that reason alone is therefore sufficient to bring one to a right understanding of God, humanity and nature. The Enlightenment philosophers saw no need for the Bible's "mysterious and incomprehensible body of revelation" (Snyder, 1955: 36). God, they said, would not reveal anything that was not clear-cut and logical, and instead of accepting limitations on human powers of understanding, they rejected the supernatural issues in the Bible but accepted its moral and ethical teachings (Snyder, 1955: 36).

They also accepted the concept of a divine Creator of the natural world. Their concept of nature was biblical (non-spiritual and orderly), but the divine Creator that they posited was deist – a distant, impersonal god who created a cosmic machine that could run itself after creation. Their concept of humanity, too, differed radically from what the Bible teaches. Man, they said, was not inherently sinful. Moral rules were rooted in human nature and could be discovered and followed by using human reasoning and without subjecting one's reasoning to the difficulties that the supernaturalism of the Bible imposed on the human mind (Stromberg, 1966: 117). Thus, though they accepted the Bible's moral and ethical teachings as universally valid, they believed that human reason could by its own unaided efforts arrive at and follow these teachings.

By rejecting the idea of sin and upholding humans as naturally good, the Enlightenment philosophers ostensibly did away with humanity's need for God's grace in Christ Jesus. The enlightened person, they said, was morally autonomous (Raschke, Kirk & Taylor, 1977: 187) and could 'guide humanity along the road that leads to happiness and fulfillment' (Burkill, 1971: 328). Thus arose in the West "a hopeful belief in the steady improvement and ultimate [earthly] perfection of mankind" (Snyder, 1955: 14).

Christian theologians (for example, Bishop Joseph Butler (1692 - 1752)) criticised the deist idea of a universal, natural religion discoverable through reason. In defending Christianity, however, these theologians followed a course that completely denied reason a place in religion. Both Christianity and the Deists' natural religion, they claimed, were equally irrational. Though their irrational defense of the Christian religion became a part of Christian apologetics, it did not place the Christian religion on a firmer and more enduring foundation. (Randall, 1962: 702 - 703; Snyder, 1955: 40 - 41.) For the rational eighteenth century thinkers the choice was to "decide between abandoning religion or abandoning reason ... [and many] naturally chose rather to abandon religion" (Randall, 1962: 703).

The Enlightenment philosophers had created a climate of scepticism towards the objective truthfulness of the Bible. However, nominal allegiance to the idea of a divine First Cause behind the origin and design of the universe was still necessary, called for by the logic that a design requires a designer. This logic suffered, however, a practically total eclipse after Charles Darwin (1809 - 1882) published his theory of evolution in 1859.

Darwinism (and neo-Darwinism) is a theory of macro-evolution. Macro-evolution goes beyond micro-evolution, that is, beyond observable and demonstrable evolutionary changes such as variations, mutations and speciation. Micro-evolution is a fact and occurs both in nature and in the laboratory when a new breed of plant or animal species is bred, for example, a new rose or a new variety of dog (Hoover, 1988:16).

Macro-evolution is a hypothetical extrapolation from micro-evolution. From the factual evidence of variation within a species Darwin drew the conclusion that radical changes in phylic form can occur. Thus, although all breeding experimentation has failed to produce phylic deviation (White, 1978: 117 - 118), macro-evolution is assumed to have occurred in the past and to have led to the variety and complexity of life forms as they are known today (Wilder-Smith, 1970: 24).

In the form of macro-evolution, evolution is a theory of origins that renders the idea of an exogenous Mind behind nature's complex biological design and order superfluous (Wilder-Smith, 1975:17 - 18). As the atheist biologist Sir Julian Huxley (quoted in Gitt, 1995: 35) writes: "Darwinism removed the idea of a Creator-God from the sphere of rational statements." After Darwin, science as a rational activity pertaining to knowledge of the natural world proceeded on purely natural and material principles.

Strictly speaking, however, Darwinism is not science. It lies beyond science, in the arena of metaphysical speculation. The scientific method of direct observation and experimentation limits science to things which are physically observable and/or measurable. Macro-evolution is not a matter of observation, which only reveals micro-evolution, but an inference, and a genuinely metaphysical one. Creation as a model of origins is in fact also supported by empirical data (see, for example, Moreland, 1994).

After Darwin, creation as a model of origins was viewed as unscientific and outdated. This view was cultivated, firstly, by the climate of scepticism towards the Bible that the Enlightenment had created and, secondly, by liberal theologians who propounded theistic evolution which sees macro-evolution "as a development which has taken place under the guiding hand of God" (Wilder-Smith, 1974:167). Theistic evolution

conveyed and sanctioned the same message as the Enlightenment: that the events recorded in the Bible are mythical imagery and that human reasoning, not the Bible, is the real source of true knowledge. Theistic evolution was a compromise, and as such failed to check the wave of atheism and materialism that swept through the West after Darwin. The liberal churches “plummeted in membership” (Veith, 1994: 192).

After Darwin, the reigning worldview in the West was evolutionary naturalism: a closed mechanistic universe without an extra-cosmic God and with no place for the human spirit. Humans were reduced to mere parts of the cosmic machinery. (Schaeffer, 1982: 167 - 168.) In this worldview life is objectively meaningless, nothing more than physical survival. God’s love, care and compassion were removed as the prime movers behind life and replaced with cold, feelingless, blind chance. “Frankly then,” asks Wilder-Smith (1975: 10), “can we wonder that when these views had taken root in the general culture of the population ... they bred the cold feelinglessness which characterises the revolutionary temper of today?”

Refusing to acknowledge that there is a God who created humanity for His honour and to whom humans are accountable, the atheists believed that humanity had its destiny in its own hands, and that science in an evolutionist, materialist paradigm could “assure a future in which suffering and disaster are overcome” (Holmes, 1983: 207). This future never realised itself. Instead, destructive forces of cold, selfish individualism and material competitiveness manifested themselves. The denial of the human spirit was ultimately intolerable. By the late twentieth century there was renewed interest in religion; not in religion as a body of truth but in religion as myth, upheld to satisfy a psychological need and to further self-development and self-fulfilment (Anderson 1990: 257 - 258). Rationalism was replaced with intuitionism and experientialism, and Western humanity, still adrift from its biblical roots, moved from the modern era to the postmodern era.

Leaders of this trend (for instance, Capra, 1990) do not reject the Enlightenment’s declaration of human autonomy, nor do they reject Darwin’s sterile theory that brings humanity down to the level of mere animal, but seek purpose and meaning in the spiritual immanence of esoteric spiritual systems – eastern religions, primal nature religions and western occultism. Since the 1990s such spiritual interest has focused especially on primal religions (Lewis & Melton, 1992: xii). Many Westerners, like many black Africans, are seeking to revitalise primal beliefs. The internet, television, films, books and games are primary vehicles for promoting primal beliefs and practices.

Legitimacy is lent to the promotion of primal, and other non-Christian, beliefs and practices by the intuitive and experiential approach to religion that denies religious truth and, instead, understands religion only in terms of choice. This view of religion is founded on the assumption that the content of all religions is myth and therefore in religion, like in matters of taste, there can be no disputing, no means of engaging in meaningful debate with others of differing beliefs.

This supposedly neutral approach to religion – ‘neutral’ because the question of religious truth is ignored – is reflected in contemporary South African education (cf. Ministry of Education, 2001: 43 - 45).

#### **4. ATR in contemporary South African education: a Christian perspective**

##### ***4.1 Integrating religion into education***

Spiritual openness is a contemporary value. In South Africa it is, on the one hand, a heritage from the African traditional worldview and, on the other hand, part of the contemporary denial of truth. Spiritual openness is clearly reflected in the path mapped out for South African education. No religion is to be regarded as true. Instead, religion is seen as “the consequence of spiritual journeying” (Ministry of Education, 2001: 43) and the incorporation of religion into schooling - called *religion education* - is to ‘teach students about a world of religious diversity, and, at the same time, encourage them to think in terms of a new national unity in South Africa’ (Ministry of Education, 2001: 45). *Religion education* rules the question of religious truth out of the classroom: “There is no place in the classroom, then, for an education that promotes any one creed or belief over any other” (Ministry of Education, 2001: 43).

This approach to religion is embedded in relativism. In a relativist framework, religious beliefs are not only to be treated as “equal before the law but as equal before the barrister of truth” (Gaede, 1993: 45). In a free and just society, persons must certainly have the legal right to hold different beliefs and to express their beliefs, and children must learn to respect this right. One also agrees with the Ministry of Education (2001: 43 - 45) that in a multireligious society it is important that children learn about the various religions adhered to in the society. The biblical aim is, however, not “affirming and celebrating unity in diversity” (Ministry of Education, 2001: 45) nor is it to “contribute to their [the students’] own emerging worldviews (Department of Education, 2001: 47); the biblical aim is to equip young people with accurate factual knowledge in order to cultivate discernment. Equipping the young with accurate factual knowledge is also educationally justified since the world’s religions are not the same – they hold radically different and irreconcilable views of

God and other spirits and offer different and irreconcilable explanations and solutions to human problems (Muck, 1992: 55ff).

*Religion education* is not optional but is integrated in the whole curriculum, especially in life orientation, social studies (Ministry of Education, 2001: 44) and necessarily also in arts and culture since religion permeates every aspect of African traditional culture (Gehman, 1990: 18,50; Mbiti, 1990: 1). Christians can understand the strivings of black Africans to reinstate their traditional culture, and there “are jewels in African culture and tradition (respect, hospitality, good neighbourliness and holding virginity in high esteem, to mention but a few” (Sibiso, 2001: 9). The elements of spirit contact and magic are, however, disturbing. Another disturbing element is Africa’s communalism which subsumes the individual into the group. Spirit contact and magic will be dealt with first.

#### **4.2 Spirit contact and magic**

With regard to spirit contact and magic, Sibiso (2001: 9) says that here “God draws a clear line and puts up a STOP sign.” In *religion education* children will not merely learn that such elements are present in ATR. The OBE-approach favours experience and active participation. It is therefore quite conceivable that children will, for example, participate in dances that induce spirit possession. It is also conceivable that the idea of ‘good’ magic will ‘contribute to their own emerging worldviews’ (see above) and evoke in them the desire to cultivate magical power. God, however, does not distinguish between magical practices. All are condemned and forbidden (see, for example, Leviticus 19: 26; Deuteronomy 18: 10 - 12; 2 Chronicles 33: 6; 2 Kings 17:17; Acts 16:16; Ephesians 5: 20), which indicates that all magic has the same evil source. ‘White’ magic is Satan masquerading as an angel of light. Contact with the living-dead, too, is a lie from Satan. The Bible (Luke 16: 19 - 31; 2 Corinthians 5: 8; Philippians 1: 21 - 23) tells us that the dead are either with Christ or in a place of suffering and cannot be contacted (Montenegro, 2000: 10).

Christians condemn magical practices, but they may nevertheless accept the magical, spiritualised view of nature. Christians know that the spirit realm really exists and that the Bible refers to magical phenomena as real, not illusory, for example, Pharaoh’s magicians during the times of Moses. Nevertheless, according to the Bible, a magical, spiritualised worldview is false. An unchanging God who demands law and order would not create a natural world of caprice. Furthermore, in a world inhabited by capricious, unpredictable spirits, technological devices would not work consistently, which they do except in cases of mechanical failure.

There are no spirits in nature, no good spirits and no bad spirits. Satan is the prince of this world, but he and his demons do not inhabit natural

objects. Magic is, however, real and, as indicated above, it always has Satan as its source. Magical power is never an inherent human ability; it is demonic power that comes into the natural world in and through the human mind's deliberate acquiescence or enslavement to demonic spiritual possession (cf. Thorson, 1978: 227).

It is not only *religion education*, integrated in various learning areas, that exposes children to a spiritualised, animistic view of nature. Contemporary education is grounded in postmodernism, and postmodernism denies the possibility of truth in all areas of human inquiry, including the natural sciences. According to postmodern thought the claim that scientific theories are true, must be surrendered; they are "just another set of narratives" (Eagleton quoted in Veith, 1994: 49). It is, however, ironic that the 'truth' of the metaphysical theory of macro-evolution is never questioned. Instead, doubt is cast on the truth of scientific explanations of natural phenomena.

There are, however, only two foundational types of explanations of natural phenomena: first, scientific explanations that explain natural phenomena in terms of laws and, second, animistic explanations that explain natural phenomena in terms of the activities of spirit beings and powers. In effect, postmodernists, consciously or unconsciously, reduce scientific explanations of natural phenomena to the same level as animistic explanations. In this way, children are implicitly encouraged to devalue scientific explanations and the image of the natural world as a consistent, orderly reality – the great treasure and driving force of the natural scientific enterprise.

The elevation of animism to the level of science normalises animism, presents magic as a form of science that deals with the supposed spiritual dimension of nature and sanctifies nature. But Paul gives the grave warning in Romans 1: 18 - 32 that God removes His common grace – His restraining and mitigating influence – and gives humans up to the dreadful abominations of their sinful nature if they honour and serve any created object.

Furthermore, a belief in animism leads to a life of fear. Fear is consistent with a human world that is subject to the capricious invasion of spirits, be they, for example, the tokoloshe (Sibiso, 2001: 13) or the living-dead. African traditional life is in fact characterised by fear (cf Mbiti, 1990: 193ff; Sibiso, 2001: 4), brought about by the belief in animism and the belief that the suffering and travail of life in this world are attributable either to the anger and punishment of ancestral spirits that actions of the living have invoked (cf Mbiti, 1990: 80) or to the harmful, bewitching use of spiritual power (cf Mbiti, 1990: 193ff; Sibiso, 2001: 4).

In the next section attention shall be given to collectivism as it shows up in contemporary South African education.

### **4.3 Collectivism**

Our contemporary postmodern era, like ATR, is collectivist. It, too, emphasises group identity and group thinking (Veith, 1994: 48). Both ATR and postmodernism regard humans as primarily social beings; beings who become persons only in community with other humans and who can therefore only know and understand themselves in terms of their social group. Such thinking regards children as belonging to, as the property of, the social group and the primary, overarching aim of education is therefore social moulding; moulding and forming citizens who conform fully to the values and attitudes that society, represented by the state, prescribes.

In the absence of God as a personal Being humans seek security and meaning in collectivism, in social belongingness, as ATR and Western thought's evolution to postmodern group-consciousness illustrates. Everybody needs to belong, and in the absence of a personal God to Whom the individual knows he/she belongs and with Whom he/she has a personal relationship, the state becomes the individual's true society and education is in terms of citizenship and service to the state (cf. Rushdoony, 1995: 318). In such societies "there is no right beyond the state (or the state's concept of its goal and the goal for humanity), [and] it follows that right is what the state requires and the normal or healthy man that which society requires him to be" (Rushdoony, 1995: 319).

The Bible teaches a different doctrine. Created in God's image, all humans derive their personhood from God and 'it is God alone who enables man truly to know himself' (Rushdoony, 1995: 328). Of course, Christian education has as aim participation in the Christian community and broader society, but the primary, overarching educational aim is conformity to Christ, to make every thought captive to Christ (2 Corinthians 10: 4 - 5). Biblical education aims not at conformity to society, but at cultivating true critical thinkers, that is, people who serve truth rather than group opinion, people who have the courage to go against popular, but unbiblical opinions. Truly Christian education was not realised during the apartheid era. The apartheid government's acknowledgement of God's authority was mainly lip-service (Le Cornu, 2001: 120), and consequently it brooked no criticism of state policies.

The new democratic South Africa is striving to promote a communal, collective unity. The primary aim of contemporary South African education is nation-building; cultivating a specific state-prescribed collective consciousness that comes down to a human rights culture defined in the humanist-relativist paradigm that each individual is entitled to his/her own view but with the corollary that equal significance be given to all views (cf Ministry of Education, 2001).

The humanist-relativist paradigm has no place for orthodoxy, where orthodoxy refers to the belief that a fixed body of truth exists and that believing falsely is a real and terrible possibility. Orthodoxy and relativism are two mutually incompatible systems of thought that function on contradictory assumptions. In a relativistic culture “orthodoxy always appears intolerant” (Gaede,1993: 47).

Prescribing a set of values and attitudes to be taught in schools ensures communality, a common mindset and a group conscience that spontaneously rejects incompatible ideas. Such prescription is, however, inimical to true liberty. The state should show complete tolerance towards all religious and social groups, no matter how antinomical to the common welfare they may be thought to be (Machen, 1995: 85). God – the absolute – endows humans with the freedom to accept or reject His will. He does not prescribe, He does not control and He does not enforce His will – His values – on humans. No state may therefore deprive its members of their God-given freedom to choose their own values. Humans “are creatures of God, and the authority of governments is limited, severely limited, by the Bible. The punishment of evil-doers, not the education of the young, is the function of government” (Robbins,1988: viii(n1)).

## 5. Conclusion

In the name of unity and nation-building, our young are being influenced to accept unbiblical ideas and practices, even those that are expressly forbidden in the Bible. In 1925 the Christian scholar J Gresham Machen (1995: 5) wrote words we especially need to heed today: “If there is one thing more than another which we believers in historic [biblical] Christianity ought to encourage in the youth of our day, it is independence of mind ... to arouse youth from ... uncritical repetition of current phrases into some genuine examination of the basis of life.”

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