

IOANNIS KYRIAKAKIS

TRADITIONAL AFRICAN RELIGION, COSMOLOGY AND CHRISTIANITY

Ioannis Kyriakakis

Independent Researcher, Anthropologist, Athens, Greece.

Email: ioannis_kyriakakis@yahoo.co.uk

Abstract: In this article I am applying the anthropological term of “cosmology” to the study of Christianity in order to place plural Christian settings under a wider methodological perspective. I am drawing on the findings of my fieldwork in Southwestern Ghana, where I met twelve different Christian denominations and five traditional healers operating in one village. I am sketching a concise image of the local Nzema cosmology and then I am launching an attempt to present its Christian equivalent. Informed by the situation in the field, by general history of Christianity, as well as by my personal understanding of it, my cosmological investigation yields three different Christian cosmologies, which all coincide side by side in African contexts. I see, thus, pluralism as inherent to Christianity itself, rather than as an outcome of cultural encounter between Christianity and local pre-Christian religion.

Key Words: Anthropology, Study of Religion, Cosmology, African Traditional Religion, Christianity, Christian cosmologies.

The predicament of the study of Christianity

Most of our ideas about Christianity within social science have been shaped either from the perspective of an atheist-agnostic intellectual, or from the perspective of a western Christian. This is rather a natural consequence of the fact that most if not all of the non-agnostic historians of religion and theologians have been mainstream Christians, while most if not all sociologists of religion have been atheist and agnostics¹. Both those groups of scholars tend to take Christianity for granted, to accept its Euro-American historical version, unquestionably, as orthodoxy, and then explore second or third world Christianities as cultural or socio-economic deviation, survivals of the past, syncretism and the like. For this strand of social science, however, which explores the possibilities of researching knowledge beyond the Euro-American orthodoxies, the only safe and less prejudiced standpoint from which one can study Christianity is neither the one of the non-believer (for whom the truth about faith always comes from politics and economy) nor the one of the denominational believer (for whom the truth about faith always follows his or her own church tradition). In few words both the perspectives of the atheist and the denominational Christian are culturally prejudiced. Social science can under specific conditions foster a third, less culturally-prejudiced direction. In my view this third direction, can provide the safest and less culturally prejudiced space from which one can see and study Christianity. This third direction, I am suggesting, should be based on Christianity itself as a tradition, that is the doctrine and the teachings of Jesus Christ, as much as possible disconnected from any particular church dogma, as if Christianity was not our own –western- religious tradition.

What the researcher who follows this direction is called to do is to shape his or her own understanding of Christianity together with the subjects of his or her study and this is what anthropologists, ethnographers, historians, sociologists of religion, folklorists and religious scholars have always done in the past with the so-called “local”, “primitive” or “third world” religions and cosmologies. The famous believer-non-believer question posed by Evans-Pritchard² seems not to have a place here. Anyone is allowed to have an understanding of what Christianity is and what it is not, without being obliged either to believe in it or reject it. Various understandings will then be compared and discussed. Joel Robbins in his article in ‘Current Anthropology’³ claims that anthropology of Christianity has failed to create a common ground constituted by widely accepted themes and questions, no matter whether we give different answers to these questions. He blames the “continuity paradigm” as he calls it, which anthropology allegedly follows, that is, the tendency to regard “our research subjects” as the remaining links to pre-Christian cultural origins endangered and threatened by modernity and

Christianity. Although this claim holds some amount of validity, I reckon that the ever-growing number of contemporary studies of Christian movements in the US and Europe⁴ disqualifies the argument as partial. In Europe and the US the question of continuity or discontinuity with a pagan past is irrelevant. Even in the ex-colonies such a question is highly relevant only in specific, usually and heavily Protestant-orientated religious contexts⁵.

In my view, a common ground on Christianity studies seems impossible because we are all culturally prejudiced toward Christianity and we all have our own cultural understandings of it which we do not recognize as such. In few words the overwhelming majority of researchers have been born in Christian-dominated environments and they 'know' Christianity as their native culture. Ethnography alone does not always save us from cultural prejudices without putting us into new ones. Therefore a scholar coming from a Protestant tradition regardless of whether she is a Christian or not tends to perceive as Christian what she has been taught by her tradition that is Christian, one from a Catholic background the same, an eastern orthodox the same, and lately a Pentecostal/Evangelical the same. On the other hand a real study of Christianity beyond ethnography requires extended historical and comparative work, which current tendency to reduce anthropology and sociology to merely good fieldwork does not allow. What we need then is a wider perspective.

The real issue for a Christianity-researcher is to highlight the crucial points and themes around which different stances are produced, and this does not mean that the researcher her or himself does not possess a stance of her/his own. It means that she or he has a specific stance, probably but not necessarily, deriving from her or his cultural upbringing but at the same time he or she does not regard her or his stance as superior or as "the truth". The only reason for which we would regard this attitude unattainable would be our reluctance to abandon the atheist-denominational conspiracy or, as Bruno Latour⁶ would say, the "Modern Constitution". According to the modern ideology there is only one truth which is the scientific one, superior than all other truths, whereas lesser truths are culturally relative and subservient to the former⁷. What is extremely interesting with Christianity is that it can be seen simultaneously under two different perspectives: either as historically participating in and fundamentally constructing the modern constitution, that is, the "only one truth-principle", in its mainstream version, or as subverting and undermining it, in its subservient cultural, popular or third world version (see below). Within this article I am trying to suggest a perspective which can lead to a way out of this dilemma. The main idea of this article is to see how Christianity contributed to a set of cosmological principles not necessarily related to modernity or anti-, or post-

modernity, that is, to treat Christianity in the same way as any other religion.

I will return to this issue as well as to some contemporary problems within the anthropological-sociological study of Christianity at the end of this article. I now turn to show exactly what I am trying to say in my methodological suggestion through my ethnographic experience. Crucial in my presentation is the concept of cosmology and my ethnographic example serves as a means of clarification of this concept. After that I attempt to apply the concept of cosmology to Christianity and I try to show how the conflict between historically situated social constellations on the one hand and the efforts to remain strictly faithful to the gospel on the other generates not one but three distinctive Christian cosmologies along history. All three of those cosmologies can be regarded as equally orthodox and equally Christian. In sum, my suggestion in this article is twofold: first I suggest that it is fruitful to think cosmologically, that is to distinguish the different cosmologies operating in a complex social reality and second, I suggest that everyone is a subject of a certain cosmology, and there is not an area beyond cosmology from where one could conduct “objective” observations. The former suggestion is useful for any social science, the latter is fundamental for the disciplines which involve participant observation.

Christianity and the concept of cosmology

At this point, I have to make clear what I mean by the term cosmology. I use the term “cosmology” in a similar but not identical way as that used by Paul Feyerabend.⁸ Feyerabend wished to prove the historical relativity of modern science and he used the term ‘cosmology’ alternatively with the terms ‘tradition’ and ‘religion’ more or less as a worldview, meant to mark western science and rationality as one tradition among others instead of as “the truth”. What I mean by cosmology comes closer to the word’s etymology deriving from the Greek origin of the term, that is the ‘logos’ (=word, discussion, discourse) about the ‘cosmos’ (=world, universe). In that sense, cosmology does not mean an identity or a belief system, but a set of principles including cosmogony (how did the world begin), ontology (what does the world consist of), and an exegesis or a tendency for reproduction of life events through a universal pattern (how the world works). I see cosmology as the system of ideas, actions and dispositions that include or take into account all these three components at once.⁹

Cosmology can thus be defined as a set of principles and mechanisms that regulate the world, both natural and social; these principles and mechanisms being constantly present and operative in everyday life. Taking as an example the Nzema spiritual universe described below, we can see that the Nzema cosmology does not merely include the lesser

gods, spirits and ancestors but the entire range of interactions between these entities and humans, plants, animals, objects and each other, as well as the principles and the rules which govern these interactions. In simple terms cosmology is a constitution, a contract between humans, non humans and gods, a constitution which governs simultaneously the cosmos in the long term, the life span of individuals and collectives in the memorable-historical term and everyday affairs in the short term. In even simpler terms cosmology is a set of stories and predictions of how the world works at any given period of time. However, all these stories are not cast in random. They all revolve around a structure which makes them a coherent and operative system of interpretations, actions and predictions. If one takes a closer look at the Nzema cosmology as I describe it below, one can see that it is structured upon a hierarchy of spiritual forces. What makes everybody understand this cosmology is the basic knowledge of this hierarchy, while the experts know also the details of the various interactions among its ontological components. Assuming that this description of cosmology is valid and operative for comparison, which is then the Christian cosmology, or more accurately which is exactly Christianity's basic structural principle which every Christian knows, regardless of theological expertise?

From a biblical point of view the basic cosmological principle of Christianity revolves around the original sin (from which Jesus Christ has liberated the world-the 'cosmos') and the battle between good and evil this sin generated. If we accept as a general Christian structural principle the conflict between good and evil,¹⁰ I suggest that the crucial issue concerning Christian cosmologies lies in where exactly the border between good and evil is positioned. A closer look at the Christian debates as I experienced them in the field (presented in the next sessions) reveals that they are all concerned about the domains of good and evil. The entire discussion is preoccupied with the question of how deep into local cosmology is evil embedded, and on this discussion depends the labeling of various religious agents, local healers and, or other Christian Churches as sinful. In comparison, however to the pre-existent Nzema cosmology, we can see that the Christian cosmological structure is rather territorial than hierarchical. This means that a change in the location of this crucial line between good and evil affects the ontology and the operational principles of the cosmology without changing its basic character (which always remains the battle between good and evil). I will attempt to explain what I mean in the concise analysis of the historical shift of the 'Christian territory' which follows in the last part of this article. In this analysis, I attempt to distinguish historical Christian currents according to the criterion of inclusiveness of 'good' as opposed to 'evil' with regard to the human collectives that fall into the one or the other domain. As already mentioned this analysis does not claim the protective shield of 'objectivity', since objectivity is very often a disguise of an ethnocentric

view upon Christianity. It also pertains to a heuristic instead of an interpretive or deductive method. What follows, then, is my personal understanding of Christianity as it was shaped by my cultural Greek orthodox experience (and prejudice), my anthropological-bibliographical study and fieldwork, and by my reading of the Bible.

The ethnography

My ethnography was based on a 13 month fieldwork which I conducted in 2004 and 2005 in the Nzema village of Teleku Bokazo in South-western Ghana. Nzema is the name of a sub-region and an ethnic group of about 200.000 people (less than 1 % of the total population in Ghana) who live in the coastal strip at the boarder with Ivory Coast. My initial intention was to study local, that is 'traditional' religion, and the Nzemas were renowned for their 'witchcraft' all over Ghana. This was the reason why I picked this area, and it seems that my choice was affected more or less by the Ghanaian, elite-inspired, discourse of the civilised centre against the backward periphery.

When I found my way to the Nzemaland from the capital city of Accra and settled in the village, I discovered that the alleged traditionalism of the Nzemas was a myth. The village was inhabited by some 1,600 to 1,700 people, a relatively big village, as it was lying on a crossroad between the coast and the interior. Two roads passed by it, one heading to a gold-mining area and the other to the timber and cocoa cultivation area. Twelve Christian churches and one denominational prayer centre were operating in the village, an impressive number of institutions which immediately discarded as invalid the rumours about the area as a traditionalists' stronghold.

During the first month of my presence in the village I was able to map the most important religious institutions and individuals. Apart from the 13 Christian institutions, however, there have been also 4 local healers, servants of local lesser gods in the village. They were all women and were called 'fetish priestesses' (*komenle*) by the locals. There was also a woman possessed by a spirit (and not a god), a male herbalist involved with spiritual and *juju* (sorcery) healing and several other minor herbalists involved in natural healing. From my first month I decided to abandon my plan to study 'traditional' religion since the overwhelming majority of the village inhabitants were Christians. Even 5 out of the 6 major traditional healers were also Christians. The presence of Christianity in the village was overwhelming not only in terms of significance or intensity of conduct, but even in numbers; as I had the opportunity to find out through a survey which I conducted during the 5th month of my fieldwork from 1,043 inhabitants over 16 years of age who participated in the survey, 876 belonged to the Christian churches, while the majority of around 100 who did not attend any church were in fact Christians who had left their

church without joining a new one. Fifty of the participants belonged to the Muslim community of the village, mainly migrants from Mali and the Muslim north. Only fifteen individuals out of the 1,043 participants in my survey stated that they followed traditional religion (Table 1). This number represented the traditional healers their assistants and their spouses (in most cases one and the same person) plus some of their close dependants and relatives.

Christians	Muslims	Traditional	No Affiliation	Total
876	51	15	101	1043
84%	5%	1.5%	9.5%	100%

Table 1: Religious Representation of adult population in Teleku Bokazo. April-May 2004.

Despite the high number of Christians and despite the prohibitions of all the Church-leaders against traditional healing practices, the clientele of fetish priestesses was equally large. In my survey 30% of the Christians said that had visited a fetish priestess at least once in their life. The suspicion that this number might be even higher in reality, can be supported by another finding: In a question about positive or negative evaluation of the work of fetish priestesses 70% of the respondents were positive, 21% neutral or undecided and only 9% overtly negative. This simply meant that, despite the rhetoric of the churches, people were still positive towards local healers. An alleged continuity of belief in traditional supernatural agencies and ritual practice related to them, contradicted the high numbers of active Christians. What was happening then? I was supposed to sort out this contradiction and I set this as my main target.

Local Nzema cosmology

From my first visits in church services and discussions with the leaders I realised that the main enemies of Christian churches were the local deities. Churches who had come recently to the village accused older Churches that they fostered or tolerated local deities. The entire debate about 'true Christians' seemed to revolve around attitudes towards traditional local gods and spirits. This, however, was a very complex issue, since a large part of the village families still retained the lineage organisation and inheritance; many of them were polygamous and based their unity in ancestral spirits, an integral part of traditional religion. The chief and the heads of the clans were far than insignificant political and economic figures and when the council of the elders gathered in the chief palace, they first poured libations to the local gods before they start any of their sessions. At the same time the village chief was a member of the 'Church of Pentecost' a strongly anti-traditional church.

I decided to go first to local healers and receive first hand information about local faith so that I could check the Christian accusations against them afterwards. I visited all four fetish priestesses and the woman who was possessed by a spirit. At a later stage I had also extended conversations with the village's herbalist who was also the head of one of the oldest clans. All information that I received converged to a hierarchy of active spiritual forces on the top of which were lesser gods. Lesser gods were the most important spiritual agencies of local religion. The 'fetish priestesses' recognised the existence of a higher god who dwelled in heaven and had created the universe, the lesser gods included, but he did not interfere in human affairs. On the contrary lesser gods who dwelled on earth, in trees, stones, rivers, streams and in the sea were like humans and constantly interfered in human lives. They regulated natural affairs and safeguarded natural laws. When a human violated these laws the lesser gods punished him or her with sickness and death.

Lesser gods seemed to possess the qualities of the elements in which they lived but at the same time they were also like humans. To my question of why lesser gods were inclined to harm people, the oldest of the fetish priestesses replied that they are 'like us'; they get angry, and they become jealous like us. To my question why lesser gods killed, as Christian preachers claimed, the answer was that if you asked a lesser god to kill your enemy, and he or she did not do it, he or she would be proven weak. Therefore killing was a matter of power on the part of lesser gods and not so much a matter of hatred, which seemed to be the motivation of their servants and not of themselves. If one offended a lesser god the lesser god would attack the person and the person would fall sick and die. Examples of offending a lesser god were to go to the bush during the menstruation period (for a woman), to have sex in the bush, to defecate in the bush, to forget to fulfil a promise to the gods, and to forget to thank them for good fortune or appease them for bad behaviour. Obligations to lesser gods as well as repentance to them were usually if not exclusively fulfilled through sacrifices of fowls, sheep and cattle.

In order to escape a lesser god's wrath, whether it came directly from the god (due to an offence) or from a fellow villager (due to hatred and jealousy) one should go to a fetish priestess, who in turn diagnosed the affliction through possession. The common word used for all these occasions was 'curse' (*amowa*), and this was what people feared most in the village, because of the lesser gods' potency. The lesser god usually requested offerings, speaking through the fetish priest, in order to appease its wrath or remove the curse. Offerings were usually sheep, fowls (sacrifices), schnapps (alcoholic drinks) or money, or a combination of all those according to the strength of the curse. In the past every lineage had its own lesser god and a respective shrine; however with the gradual domination of Christianity, this practice was abandoned.

Next in the spiritual hierarchy, after higher God and lesser gods, were ghosts (*nwomenle*) and ancestors. Ghosts have been a category of ancestors. If an ancestor, male or female, had an open case with a lesser god, that is a promise not fulfilled, a curse not removed or avenged or the like, after the ancestor's death, the case would pass on to a descendant. If one died in an accident or if one was murdered or cursed, one's ghost was very strong and haunted the living, usually by trying to carry out revenge. It must also be said that even if one cursed somebody else, one should offer something to a lesser god, because it is the lesser god who would execute the curse. If a person forgot to pay off the debt to the lesser god, one of the descendants should do it, otherwise the descendant would die. The soul (*εκελα*) of a person who had not paid off her or his debts to the gods would be in trouble and would not rest. Therefore the descendants should pay the debt. One could get rid of ghosts through the same process: diagnosis by a fetish priest, offerings and sacrifices. Ghosts and ancestors were part of the concept of the underworld, to which everyone would go after death. It was a world *like ours* and everybody's soul lived there as he or she did on earth. The worst thing that could happen to a person was that her or his soul was not placed properly either on earth or in the underworld, and this usually happened when the living did not fulfil their obligations to the dead. Obligations to the ancestors used to be a very important feature of social balance in the past, something that has changed with Christianity.

Next in the hierarchy of spiritual forces were the witches (*ayene*). Witches were normal human beings with extra-ordinary spiritual power and could be both male and female. Witchcraft was described as an evil spirit, not personified as the other spiritual forces, dwelling within the person rather than exercising its power from outside. Witchcraft seemed to be the most ambivalent spiritual force and it was difficult for an outsider to grasp. Witches were human, but they possessed some of the properties of spirits. Extraordinarily intense emotions such as greed, jealousy, hatred and vanity seemed to be the source of both their power and motivation. They killed by eating slowly the soul (*εκελα*) of a person, often in secret gatherings with other witches at nights. What was significant for witchcraft was that it could be transmitted from person to person, through birth or by "giving" it through food, clothes, drinks or objects. This meant that one could "have it" without knowing it. If one slept and dreamt that one ate human flesh, it meant that one had been given witchcraft. A "fetish priestess" could easily recognize who was a witch. Through possession the lesser god pointed at the witch. The witch should then confess and withdraw the witchcraft from the victim. If not, the witch would die.

After ghosts and witches were the spirits (*sunsume*) and dwarfs (*amotia*). Spirits were neither gods nor ancestors but entities of the bush flowing in the air. They corresponded to human emotions and when they possessed someone, they drove the person to commit specific acts, usually

fornication or adultery, stealing, excessive drinking, excessive sexual activity and the like. Spirits were capable of bad and good acts. People who were particularly gifted in music, dance and handicraft were believed to “have” a spirit. The properties of spirits explained the distinct concept of “spirit” (*sunsum*) in comparison to the soul (*ekela*). The spirit of a person included the person’s skills and capacities both mental and manual which were transmittable, whereas the soul was more corporeal and individualised. Spirits were like human beings except that they possessed a kind of behaviour in which they specialised. Everyone had a spirit which was the person’s spiritual mother, and this mother releases the person to be born. Most of the fetish priestesses in the village knew almost all the spirits by name; they said that they were like children needing to be tamed and specific herbs were used for this purpose. Dwarves dwelled in the forest; they were tricksters and deceivers and engaged in largely the same activities as the spirits did but, generally speaking, they were less powerful and caused less harm. The recognition and diagnosis of a spirit was relatively easy and could sometimes be made by the afflicted person him or herself. When one was driven to do things that one would normally not do, this was a strong indication that one was possessed by a spirit. The fetish priestess in this case communicated with the spirit and asked the spirit what exactly the spirit wanted in order to set the person free. It might be anything - a specific act, schnapps or money for instance. If the spirit did not cooperate, the fetish priestess employed the power of her protector lesser god to cast the spirit away.

This is only a brief presentation of the local spiritual hierarchy. One can see here a coherent and rationally built cosmological system. This system can be expressed in very simple terms despite the innumerable details of its practical implementation which are known only by the “fetish priestesses”. The terms are: God created the universe and then withdrew to heaven. Lesser gods safeguard the balance of the universe both natural and social. Ancestors safeguard the social balance within a lineage. Humans, witches and spirits may violate this balance and sickness and misfortune comes always from such a violation which can only be restored by lesser gods. Death does not mean automatic restoration because a bad behaviour against a god is passed on to the descendants until the proper restoration through a sacrifice takes place. This Nzema coherent system of explaining the world can be called a cosmology since it includes everything and explains everything under the sun, social, natural, collective and individual. What was then the Christian cosmological system which allegedly replaced it? Before answering this question I will present in brief the Christian scene in the village of my fieldwork.

Christian representation and theological conflict in the village of fieldwork

As I have already mentioned, there were 12 different churches and one prayer centre in the village. In table 2 one can see the number of each Church's adherents and the exact year when each Church arrived to the village, as well as the origin of each church. The most important issue, around which all Christian debates revolved, was the elimination of lesser gods, spirits and witches. The Roman Catholic elders alone believed that these creatures were merely superstitions. The Roman Catholic members, however, were the most frequent visitors of fetish priestesses and along with the Twelve Apostles' members believed that lesser gods, spirits, Jesus Christ and the Christian God belonged to the same cosmological order. They believed that the Christian God was the same as the high God of the old Nzema cosmology and Jesus Christ a special delegate between Him and the local gods. The Twelve Apostles Church was a very old prophetic African church and it was the only one in the village run by a pastor-prophet. All the other churches operated through elders and lay preachers, and pastors came occasionally to the services from the town or the city. Apart from the Roman Catholic laity, the prayer centre run also by a Roman Catholic, the Twelve Apostles Church and the 'Musama Disco Cristo' Church also an old African prophetic Church, which however was dissolved before my arrival to the village, all the other Churches held the local spiritual agencies as equally and indiscriminately evil and their main task was to eliminate them.

There were, though, two distinctive tendencies among them. One was an aggressive "spiritual battle" tendency with exorcisms, intense ritual performances, speaking in tongues, and so on, performed by the Pentecostals, expressed by the Assemblies of Gods, the Christ Apostolic, the Sacred Action and the Methodist Churches, with the Methodists totally 'Pentecostalised' in the local level. The other was an anti-magical, puritan tendency expressed in the prohibition of singing, dancing, beating the drums, speaking in tongues and spiritual healing, represented by the Church of Christ, the New Apostolic Church, the Deeper Life Church and the Seventh Day Adventists. The anti-traditionalist new churches were all accusing the old churches of fostering and tolerating local deities and that in that way they blocked progress, prosperity and peace for the rest of the village. Due to their adversity to ritual healing they distanced themselves from any kind of exorcism. Who among them was then the true Christian? And moreover, which was exactly the Christian cosmology that replaced the old one, since almost everybody in the village was a Christian?

Church/Faith	Members	%	Origin	Arrival in Village
Roman Catholic	265	25.4%	Europe/SMA	around 1925
12 Apostles Church	80	7.7%	Local /Western R.	1945
Methodist	94	9.0%	Europe/UK	around 1970; renewal 1991
Church of Pentecost	100	9.6%	Cape Coast	1979
Sacred Action Church	89	8.5%	Local /Western R.	1983
Christ Apostolic Church	64	6.1%	Eastern Region	1991
Assemblies of God	52	5.0%	USA	1992
Church of Christ	35	3.4%	USA	1994
New Apostolic Church	21	2.0%	Germany	1995
Seventh Day Adventist	43	4.1%	USA	1996
Deeper Life Church	9	0.9%	Nigeria	1996
Other Christian churches not represented in the village (Anglican, Baptist, Jehovah Witnesses etc.)and Musama Disco Cristo Church previously in the village but now disbanded	24	2.3%		
Traditional	15	1.4%		
Muslims	51	4.9%		
No church	101	9.7%		
TOTAL	1,043	100%		
St George of Calvary Healing and Deliverance Prayer Centre	approx. 150-200 regular attendees			1997

Table 2: Religious affiliation in Teleku Bokazo according to survey conducted in April-May 2004

The numbers here, of course do not tell the whole truth, let alone that numbers lead to contradictive inferences. As said 84% of the villagers were Christians, but at the same time 70% of them were sympathetic to traditional healers. In fact, the majority of the village inhabitants had a

positive opinion on traditional healers and thus, to a large extent, they respected and retained the Nzema cosmology as presented above. They did not see much of a difference between the Christian God and the Nzema high-god of the past. Therefore, one can support the view that the leadership of the Churches which comprised elders and preachers who inculcated the doctrines and the right conduct in the members, struggled continuously to uproot the local cosmology from people's minds and demeanours. Although this is true, it is not at all clear which exactly Christian cosmology would replace the old Nzema one, and all those Churches seemed to fight against something rather than for something.

The three different Christian cosmologies

Jesus Christ was born a Jew and within Jewish cosmology. The particularity of ancient Jewish cosmology was the first commandment of the Old Testament. The first commandment defined as one of the greatest if not the greatest sins for Jewish people the worshiping of gods other than Jehovah the creator God and protector of the Jewish nation. In fact the foundation stone of Judaism was the covenant made by God and Moses. Many other prohibitions and taboos were included in the Old Testament from food to specific sacrifices to Jehovah according to specific occasions, as well as other commandments. However worshiping only one god seemed to be the constitutional principle of Jewish cosmology and breaching this principle meant death (Deuteronomy 13:7-12). The boundaries between good and evil here are set, and they are set for ever.

Since Jehovah forbade other gods to be worshiped the Jewish tribes were identified with one God only, a god who was responsible for good fortune, fertility, prosperity, and so on. Sickness and misfortune came when Jewish people strayed away from God's will and when they were tempted to worship other gods. The prohibitions and taboos of the Mosaic Law were so detailed and strict that in fact led specific groups of the population out of the Jewish community regardless of their own will. For example an illegitimate child could not be accepted in the community of God up to the 10th generation of its descendants (Deuteronomy 23:2). What was then Ancient Judaic cosmology in simple terms? God or else Jehovah created the universe from time immemorial. Last of all creations were human beings, who disobeyed God in original sin (therefore, disobedience is the original sin) and then he punished them by making them mortal. Human beings strayed away from God and worshiped idols, other gods, the devil and so forth. All of these creatures were creations of God but did not obey him. Jewish people who were enslaved and exiled came to an agreement with God, the so called 'covenant' that they would worship him alone and in return he would protect and save their nation. This is a coherent cosmology. It explains everything, from creation to everyday fortune and misfortune. The details are included in the Hebrew Holy

Scriptures, in prophetic tradition and so forth, but somebody does not need to know all the details in order to understand the cosmology.

In a way, Jewish cosmology is still hierarchical as it is the Nzema one, although the layers of its hierarchy are fewer and less spiritual: God, the elders, the prophets and the people. It is not a surprise that Jesus was considered as a heretic within this cosmology, since he was considered a prophet and therefore he was not allowed to surpass the elders. The strict Jewish laws however after hundreds of years of implementation and under the Roman occupation, had started to generate insoluble tensions within the Jewish nation which was expressed first between different social groups and second between hereditary priesthood and lay prophets. Lay prophets for more than three centuries prophesied that God's response to the crisis was imminent and it would be revealed by a Messiah who would save the Jewish nation.

Without getting into much historical details, analysed by Weber in his 'Ancient Judaism',¹¹ let us assume that Jesus Christ was the Messiah indeed, He represented the oppressed and misrepresented groups, and rebelled against the hereditary aristocracy and their law. Jesus challenged the idea of God as a strict revengeful god, preached that God is love (based on Leviticus 19-18 and thus re-inventing an old Judaic principle- Abby Day, personal communication), challenged the ancient Judaic Law and he claimed that he himself was both God and the Law. Jesus made a new covenant, not with the traditional Judaic aristocracy but with the poor, the outcasts and the pariahs and even with the gentiles that is, the non-Jews. The covenant was not of the same nature with the old one. Jesus did not ask his followers to worship him alone as an exchange for his grace and protection. The covenant or the commandment was: *love each other as I have loved you*. One must admit that it is rather difficult to make a cosmology out of this commandment, but it is worth to try. The advantage of thinking cosmologically allows us to see a fundamental difference between Christianity and Judaism. A Jew is mainly accountable to God and his Law safeguarded and interpreted by his representatives on earth, the heads of the Jewish tribes, the priests, and generally speaking the guardians of the law.

What seems to follow from Jesus' commandment is that Christians are accountable to each other. The greatest sin for Christians is first *not to believe that Jesus is God* that is, that God is able to humiliate himself and this is the greatest of his powers. The second greatest sin is *not to love each other*, that is to contempt and neglect one's neighbour. The problem with Christian cosmology, however, is who exactly belongs to the category of "each other", a problem which was self-evidently solved for the Jews. The main difficulty with Christianity then, is the orientation of Jesus' sovereignty, since it does not seem to be a nation nor it is a specific territory and it does not seem to correspond to a specific set of living

conditions as it is with the people of the Judea (plus the Nzemas, plus numerous other ethnic groups, studied by anthropologists).

If Jesus when commanded *love each other* addressed himself to the Jewish people, then there was no break with Jewish religion and tradition, and Christianity was just a reformation of Jewish cosmology. If Jesus addressed himself to his disciples alone, then Christianity was a new cult-sect among thousand others within the cultural universe of Judea not necessarily bringing a new cosmology. If however, he addressed Himself to the human race, then there was a radical discontinuity with the Jewish Law and consequently with the Old Testament and definitely a wish to replace the old religion with a new one; because the old covenant spoke of the selected people, and not humanity, and in this case God was offering a new contract, totally different from the old one.

In the New Testament there is no mention about prohibitions and taboos regarding fetish believers, animists and other gods' followers, as well as no mention of exclusion from the kingdom of God for persons with ethnic, racial, physical or social impairments as it is in the Old Testament. No one is excluded provided that one follows Jesus commandment. There is, however, in the New Testament a selected social group, the poor in spirit who may in fact constitute the foundation stone of Christian cosmology, and this is the Weberian interpretation.¹² But this again depends on whom Jesus had in mind when He said, 'love each other'. Because, if, again, when Jesus said 'the poor in spirit' meant the poor in spirit within the Jewish nation, he might be just a social reformer, and not an initiator of a new cosmology.

The crucial point then within Christianity relates to the limits of Christian brotherhood. If Christian brotherhood is limited to a sect or church we have one cosmology, if it is limited to a nation we have another cosmology and if it is unlimited, a different cosmology. This results from the peculiarity of Christian doctrine, since a Christian is accountable to his or her brother and even God himself has descended to this level of brotherhood. Therefore *the limits of brotherhood determine the limits of the cosmos*, the cosmology, while the basic ontological character of the religion (God and devil, good and evil) one can say that may remain the same in all cases. The problem that arises for the anthropology of Christianity is that since Christianity was elevated to an official church and became the religion of the Roman empire all church resolutions for almost 1,800 years, took the Christian brotherhood as a nation against other nations, or as a race against other races. As a nation, however, Christianity was different than Judaism, since the Roman nation was highly heterogeneous. In many cases it tolerated other gods and deities provided that they would succumb to the nation's sovereignty and they will serve the nation and the ruler, king or emperor. Such were the Roman Catholic and Eastern orthodox churches which dominated and integrated pre-Christian deities in the form of Virgin Mary and the Saints.

The Protestant reformation challenged this already narrow Christianity (the Christianity of the Empire) by restricting it even further and defining it as the brotherhood of the church or sect, the true believers, the selected few withdrawing it from public space,¹³ although its initial aim was to strike the authoritarian excesses of the empire. It is essential to realise that the narrower the Christian brotherhood becomes the wider becomes the world of infidels, of the devil and so forth and thus more intensive introversion, conversion, aggression and 'evangelisation' follows. Protestant revolution then, did not reverse the special status of Christians against non Christians, rather than redefined it, restricted it and made it more exclusive, setting forth the notion of the 'true' and the 'untrue' Christian. From the other side the Christianity of the Empire struck back with the notion of the 'heretic' Christian, a label used for ages against the enemies of the clergy and their patrons.¹⁴

There is no space here to see all these developments within Christianity in detail but we can see how the racist, evolutionist and finally modernist theories made Christianity more and more aggressive to non Christians, and finally Christians aggressive to each other, restricting the brotherhood into the selected few and finally to the personal relationship of each individual with god, the abolition of the collective and the public character from religion, and thus the abolition of religion altogether.¹⁵

None of the two official Christianities the Catholic and the Protestant saw the fundamental difference between Old and New Testament as a cosmological break, and thus three cosmologies came out of one religion. The first is the one that we have been used to call with a rather diminishing label 'popular Christianity' which integrates local deities into a moral Christian universe and in a strict sense breaks the first commandment of the Old Testament. I guess we could call it "primitive", 3rd or 4th world, or inclusive Christianity but this is not the point. It would be enough to give to it an equal position with the other two. This Christianity is pacifist and non aggressive, professes unity of nature and society and it is essentially non-modern, but not necessarily anti-modern. Examples of this Christianity one can find in the collective volume edited by Fenella Canell, 'Anthropology of Christianity' (2005)¹⁶ as well as the volume edited by Matthew Engelke and Mat Tomlinson entitled 'The limits of Meaning' (2007),¹⁷ while numerous ethnographies already from the 60's and 70's represent southern hemisphere movements and churches inspired by its cosmology.

The first Christian cosmology integrates local traditions to a universal brotherhood regulated by Jesus Christ, and the ultimate sin is unrighteousness against a fellow human being, but all the other sins, against ancestors and nature are still at work, if one takes the dead as well as natural elements and inanimate objects as members of the brotherhood. Crucial for this Christianity is prophetic, non professional

and non intellectual mediation. This cosmology positions evil in acts and behaviours rather than in traditions and social groups, it tends then to be hierarchical rather than territorial and it is compatible with non-Christian traditions. The second cosmology is the one which divides the world in the nation of Christians and all the rest, the barbarians, primitives and so forth. Crucial for this Christianity is the concept of conversion and domination, and it establishes a good relationship with what Weber calls patrimonial domination. The ultimate sin is to offend the nation and its sovereignty the church and the king who are the mediators between God and the faithful once and forever. This Christianity withdraws as cosmology from nature but not from society, on which tends to dominate by splitting it in good and evil domains.

The third cosmology sees Christianity as the law, the discipline and the order within or without the nation and not the nation as a whole, an individual or small scale communitarian Method of being in the cosmos, with the outside 'cosmos', however, regarded as essentially alien and evil. The ultimate sin is to offend the law, the order and the Method of being as it is recorded in the scriptures. All prophetic, healing and foretelling mediation is held as invalid and heretic, and each Christian communicates directly with God without the intervention of mediators and thus all hierarchy is abolished. As majorly Old Testament quotations are regularly used to justify the 'correctness' of this Christianity, one can claim that it is based on a projection of Judaism on a universal scale stripping it of its traditional context, its hierarchical structure and thus, altering it into an unrecognisable synthesis. The Weberian concept of legal domination fits well in the religiosity produced by this Christianity while social formations divided by class groups and interests establish particular affinities with it. This Christianity withdraws from both nature and society as cosmology, but not from the human being and establishes a very particular (and precious) conception of (charismatic) personhood.¹⁸ It withdraws from the world affairs altogether and restricts itself to the individual, the human being, the biological alter-ego of God. Personal achievement becomes the ultimate cosmological principle of this Christianity.

Conclusion: Cosmology, "African" Christianity and social ranking

It is evident that modernity and the third Christian cosmology I have described above have a lot in common. According to Bruno Latour¹⁹ modernity has split the cosmos into 'Nature' and 'Society' with science regulating the former and politics the latter. Both regulatory disciplines are commanded by humans, not gods. Therefore there is no public space remaining for religion, which then withdraws to the private domain -a claim raised by Asad as well.²⁰ The fact that the third Christian cosmology claims the space of the gods and the ancestors as it happens clearly in the

context of my fieldwork, indicates that modernity is a claim, not a reality (=the new Churches against the old ones, as well as against local cosmology). The intensity and the insistence by which this claim is addressed, betrays rather a social and cosmological asymmetry rather than a unified religious setting. What anthropology of Christianity can do to depict and explore this asymmetry on its own ground is not to reproduce an image of a unified modern and “global Christianity”.²¹ As I had the opportunity to discover in my field-research, despite the rhetoric of the Churches-leaders, the public space of lesser gods, witches and ancestors was not a remnant of the past but a lived every-day reality, an observation made also by many researchers across Ghana and Africa.²²

An essentially non modern cosmological space and a minority of claimants for changing it does not really lead to the conclusion that this change has, in effect, already taken place. In fact, as James Ferguson notes:

Anthropologists today are eager to say how modern, Africa is. Many ordinary Africans might scratch their heads at such claim. As they examine decaying infrastructure, non-functioning institutions, and horrific poverty that surround them, they may be more likely to find their situation deplorably *non-modern*...Modernity in this historically specific conjuncture appears not as a set of wonderfully diverse and creative cultural practices, but as a global status and an economic condition: the condition of being “first class”. Some people and places have it; others don’t. The key issues are of membership and rank. Such a conception directly opposes the anthropological urge to construct a plurality of cultural alternatives while refusing to rank them.²³

If my assumption of the crucial role of the limits of Christian brotherhood for ‘ranking’ Christian institutions cosmologically is valid, the relevance of such an assumption to contemporary sub-Saharan African contexts becomes obvious. In the same way that 19th century missionaries in Africa placed all non-western cultural and religious forms in the domain of evil (so that evangelisation could be justified), the ‘social otherness of evil’ stands nowadays as the criterion of church affiliation across many countries in Africa, certainly in Ghana. Layers of the “otherness of evil” are piled up one over the other. At first, evil was whatever ‘African’, then it was whatever Roman Catholic or Anglican or Methodist, then whatever old Pentecostal. It was not accidental that farmers in ‘my village’ followed in their majority the old Churches, whereas the educated and the entrepreneurs followed the new ones. In the eyes of the new Church-leaders social ranking resembled the Christian

one, and first class, second class and third class Christians seemed to correspond to the various Churches with the old ones being at the bottom of hierarchy. However this was only an ambition rather than a reality, and it is very important to note that it did not create a stable sociological base for analysis. The hierarchy did not directly correspond either to economic class or to ethnic superiority. It was defined rather by profession, education and prestige in the local level, all three connected to an aspired mimicry to western cultural patterns.

Given the peculiarity of social-ranking criteria, one finds difficulty to draw the lines of social differentiation and therefore the lines between good and evil. If we can easily define corruption, deceit and exploitation as traits of evil, it is rather difficult to distinguish good from evil when those traits are not ascribed to a distant ethnic, racial or social group but thrive in everyday reality, fused within and among social groups and categories, and when everyone must cope with them in one way or another almost every single moment of one's life. Such a situation, which blurs the lines between good and evil, and places everybody in the position of a potential 'evil other' (the relative, the neighbour, the husband the wife, the colleague etc.), results in the excess of Christian pluralism as a response to the excess of evil and the suspicion that even what appears as good (some pastors and churches) may be a disguise for evil.

If we recognise the 'non-modernity' of social reality as our start-point, it is not a surprise that the loudest and most intensive party of current religiosity in Ghana aims at overthrowing this reality. The means for that is supposed to be social distinction, the recognition of the membership in an, at least, spiritual elite, and thus the symbolic ranking in the first class Christians by neglecting whatever traditional. These features pertain clearly to a Protestant cosmology. However, the fact that despite its noise and intensity, this current never really prevails, and the majority still follows traditional practice, indicates that religious innovation alone does not suffice for establishing modernity, even in contexts where religious agency is highly respected and followed.

Notes:

¹ E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), 117,121.

² E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 18, 245.

³ J. Robbins, "Continuity Thinking and the Problem of Christian Culture-Belief, Time, and the Anthropology of Christianity", *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 48, No.1, (2007): 5.

⁴ T. J. Csordas, *The Sacred Self: A Cultural Phenomenology of Charismatic Healing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); T. J. Csordas, *Language, Charisma and Creativity: The Ritual Life of a Religious Movement* (Berkeley: University of

California Press, 1997); S. Coleman, *The Globalisation of Pentecostal Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); S. F. Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell-Fundamentalist Language and Politics* Princeton (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001), to mention only the most famous.

⁵ W. Keane, "Sincerity, Modernity and the Protestants", *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol.17, No. 1, (2002): 65-92; W. Keane, *Christian Moderns-Freedom and Fetish in the Mission Encounter* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2007).

⁶ Bruno Latour, *We have never been modern* (New York, London, Sydney: Harvester-Wheatsheaf, 1993), 13-16.

⁷ M. Sahlins, "The Sadness of Sweetness: The Native Anthropology of Western Cosmology", *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (1996): 411-415.

⁸ Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method-An anarchist theory of Knowledge* (London: Verso, 1975), 1-3, 159-167; Paul Feyerabend, *Science in a Free Society* (London: New Left Books, 1978), 35, 64, 74; Paul Feyerabend, *Farewell to Reason* (London and New York: Verso, 1987), 37, 179-186.

⁹ G. Schrempff, *Magical Arrows. The Maori, the Greeks, and the Folklore of the Universe* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 40, 96; W. M. Scott, *The Severed Snake. Matrilineages, Making Place, and a Melanesian Christianity in Southwest Solomon Islands* (Durham, North Carolina: Carolina Academic Press, 2007), 12-15; Ioannis Kyriakakis, "What is then the Western Cosmology?", Paper Given at Cosmology-Research group, UCL (26th of February 2010): 7-12.

¹⁰ G. Schrempff, *Magical Arrows. The Maori, the Greeks, and the Folklore of the Universe* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 96; M. Sahlins, 'The Sadness of Sweetness: The Native Anthropology of Western Cosmology', *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 37, No 3 (1996): 395; Ioannis Kyriakakis, "What is then the Western Cosmology?", Paper Given at Cosmology-Research group, UCL (26th of February 2010): 7.

¹¹ R. Bendix, *Max Weber, An intellectual portrait* (London: Methuen, 1966), 200-233.

¹² Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963 [1922]), 272.

¹³ See T. Asad, *Genealogies of Religion-Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1993), 205, 207.

¹⁴ A. Hastings, *The Construction of Nationhood-Ethnicity, Religion and Nationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 96-122.

¹⁵ S. Johannesen, "Third Generation Pentecostal Language- Continuity and Change in Collective Perceptions", in Karla Poewe (ed.), *Charismatic Christianity as a global Culture* (Columbia-South Carolina: University of Carolina Press, 1994), 187.

¹⁶ Fenella Canell, "The Christianity of Anthropology", *The Journal of Royal Anthropological Institute*, Vol. 11, Issue 2, (2005): 335-356; Fenella Canell, Introduction to *Anthropology of Christianity*, 1-50, (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2007).

¹⁷ Matthew Engelke and Mat Tomlinson (eds.) *The Limits of Meaning. Case Studies in the Anthropology of Christianity* (New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2006).

¹⁸ J. S. Bielo, "The Mind of Christ: Financial Success, Born-Again Personhood and the Anthropology of Christianity", *Ethnos*, 72:3, (2007): 315, 332.

¹⁹ Bruno Latour, *We have never been modern* (New York, London, Sydney: Harvester-Wheatsheaf, 1993), 13-24, 32-35.

²⁰ T. Asad, *Genealogies of Religion-Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1993), 207.

²¹ A. Corten and R. Marshall-Fratani, Introduction to *Between Babel and Pentecost: Transnational Pentecostalism in Africa and Latin America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 1-19; André Droogers, "Globalisation and Pentecostal success", in André Corten and Ruth Marshall-Fratani (eds.), *Between Babel and Pentecost: Transnational Pentecostalism in Africa and Latin America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 42.

²² B. Meyer, "If you are a devil, you are a witch and if you are a witch, you are a devil": the integration of 'pagan' ideas in the conceptual universe of Ewe Christians", *Journal of Religion in Africa*, Vol. 22, Fasc. 2, (1992): 98; J. Kiernan, "Variations in a Christian theme-The healing synthesis of Zulu Zionism", in Charles Stewart and Rosalind Shaw (eds.), *Syncretism/Anti-syncretism: The politics of religious synthesis* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 69; P. Gifford, "Ghana's Charismatic Churches", *Journal of Religion in Africa*, Vol. 24, Fasc. 3, (1994): 241. D. Maxwell, "'Delivered from the Spirit of Poverty?': Pentecostalism, Prosperity and Modernity in Zimbabwe", *Journal of Religion in Africa*, Vol. 28, Fasc 3, (1998): 350.

²³ James Ferguson, *Global Shadows. Africa in the Neoliberal World Order* (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2006), 185.

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