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**Caleb Oladipo's Pneumatology of the Yoruba Aladura Churches: An appraisal**  
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Introduction

According to Caleb Oladipo, the number one problem that confronts the indigenous/independent African Churches from their inception is the doctrine of the Holy Trinity with particular emphasis placed on the question of the person of the Holy Spirit within the Trinity. This particular problem among other problems of dogma, culture, sociology and African traditional religions coming in direct conflict with the missionaries' enterprise are issues been attended to both by African theologians and their contemporaries in the West. Until recently, the question of pneumatology as a doctrine has been ignored by African theologians while theologians from the West are accused of consistently absolutizing the idea of God, Trinity and the Holy Spirit. Oladipo, therefore, queries if anyone has the right to challenge the reality of the image of God of another, and if so, on what basis and with what criteria?<sup>1</sup> Elochukwu Uzukwu also queries along the same line of thinking that the Church in Africa while remaining faithful to its inherited Hebrew texts and New Testament texts, confesses and understands the Trinity in ways that evoke the world view, contextual concerns and anthropological-philosophical assumptions of Africa, a world view suffused with 'spirits'. Uzukwu, therefore challenge African theologians to account for the emergence of 'African' Christianities and its theologies of the Trinity which is spirit focused and spirit driven.<sup>2</sup>

In this paper, I intend to look at the development of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit in the Yoruba Aladura Christian Church as a way of trying to understand adaptations and appropriations of

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<sup>1</sup> Caleb Oluremi Oladipo. *The Development of the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit in Yoruba (African) Indigenous Christian Movement*. New York: Peter Lang, 1996 p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Elochukwu E. Uzukwu . *God, Spirit, and Human Wholeness: Appropriating Faith and Culture in West African style*. Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, (2011).

traditional Western Christian religious categories into the traditional Yoruba religious world view.

The Emergence of the Indigenous Aladura Yoruba Churches:

Akintunde Akinade locates four broad categories that accounts for the phenomenal rise of new religious movements in Nigeria, particularly in post-independence Yoruba land. He pays particular attention to the Aladura Yoruba Churches of the South Western part of Nigeria. The Aladura Churches consist mainly of the Cherubim and Seraphim Church, the Church of the Lord Aladura, the Celestial Church of Christ and the Christ Apostolic Church. According to Akinade, these Churches are an integral part of African Independent Churches and are a dominant variant of the new religious movements in Nigeria and the rest of sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>3</sup> For a timeline, Akinade traces the establishment of the Aladura Churches in the following order; The Christ Apostolic Church (1923), The Cherubim and Seraphim Church was founded in Lagos (1925). He does not however date the founding of the Celestial Church of Christ but states that it was founded in Porto Novo, Benin Republic from where it quickly spread to Nigeria.<sup>4</sup> For the specific purposes of this paper, I will adopt Akinade's classification of the aforementioned groups generally in reference to the Yoruba Aladura Independent Churches within the [AICs]. As to their emergence, Akinade posits that from about the 1800 to 1917 marked the beginnings of these indigenous impulses. According to Akinade; "The most important reason for the rise of Aladura churches is the need to liberate the church from foreign domination: ecclesiastical,

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<sup>3</sup> Akintunde E. Akinade. "New Religious Movements in Contemporary Nigeria: Aladura Churches as a Case Study." African Journal of Theology. Aatpm.com/Aladura%2010-2\_316pdf.

<sup>4</sup> Rosalind I.J. Hackett in her article titled "Thirty Years of Growth and Change in a West African Independent Church: A Sociological Perspective", dates the founding of the Celestial Church to 1947 agreeing that it was founded in Porto Novo before it was introduced into Nigeria at a later date. (*Journal of Religion in Africa*, Vol. 11, Fasc. 3 (1980) p. 214.

colonial, social, cultural and administrative. They rose in reaction to what they felt to be spiritual emptiness associated with the historical churches.”<sup>5</sup> Notable scholars<sup>6</sup> like J.D.Y. Peel, agree with Akinade on this account.<sup>7</sup> The second plausible reason generally alluded to by historians and theologians, was the influenza epidemic of 1918-19. Akinade calls this, “the second wave of secession.”<sup>8</sup> Other significant reasons for the phenomenal rise of the AICs include the timing of the translation of the bible into Yoruba language by Samuel Ajayi-Crowther, coupled with the ability to ‘independently’ make use of Yoruba (African) language, culture and religious sensibilities which endeared them to the hearts and minds of especially the lower class people with little or no western education at the time. More importantly they were able to evolve ways of worship (in the spirit) akin to and satisfying of local spiritualities and the sense of the holy among the traditional Yoruba people. The Yoruba-ICs continue to grow till date for various reasons which most sociologists, historians, and theologian contributors all seem to agree on.

First on the list is the confrontation of the Holy Spirit with other negative spirits which suffuse the Yoruba religious worldview. The excitable, vibrant and joyful mode of worship comprising

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p. 318.

<sup>6</sup> See also, H.W.Turner who states, “Aladura Churches are different from traditional or mission-oriented churches. They started as indigenous churches, founded by indigenous people and are under indigenous leadership...founded by Africans for Africans.” In “A Typology for African Religious Movements,” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 1, 1967 p. 17

<sup>7</sup> J.D.Y. Peel. “*Syncretism and Religious Change*” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 10, 2, 1968 Pp. 128-29 (See also: Birgit Meyer. “Christianity in African Independent to Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches.” *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 33 (2004) p. 449

J.F. Ade Ajayi also argue that as far back as 1867, there was a beginning of the arousal of nationalism outside of the Church. While within the Church people like Crowther fought against the mantle of leadership being passed on to Europeans. (See J.F. Ade Ajayi in *Christian Missions in Nigeria 1841-1891: The Making of a New Elite*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1965 p. 266 Lastly, something must be said for the use of the term ‘Independent’ alternatively for ‘Indigenous’ by many writers. I am not sure that the coinage and adaptation of ‘Independent’ was merely a separation that has nothing to do with a local reaction against colonialism. I pursue this line of thinking because eventually it is relevant to my conclusion on the notion of the Holy Spirit in the Yoruba Aladura Churches.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

of the local language, drums, clapping and dancing-which eventually leads to spirit possessions, (a religious experience well sort after by adherents) and the use of the bible, especially the psalms in prayers, the use of dreams, visions and prophecies as a means of achieving crucial spiritual wholeness and spiritual fulfilment among adherents of Yoruba -ICs.

The word “Aladura” literarily means, “one who prays”, therefore praying is a major doctrine of the Aladura church. The AICs have enjoyed high rate of membership because they emphasize an African and Christian way of approaching “community, fellowship (*koinonia*) and assembly (*ecclesial*).”<sup>9</sup> J. Akin Omoyajowo perhaps summarizes the *numero uno* reason for the large scale reception of the Aladura Churches within the AICs when he stated, “Africans generally fear the power of witches and evil spirits, who beset them in their dreams; they worry about their future and want to know what is in store for them. (Missionary) Christianity repudiates this practice and substituted abstract faith for it. The Aladuras take the problems as genuine and offer solutions in the messages of the Holy Spirit given through the prophets and visionaries.”<sup>10</sup>

The prayers, rituals of candles, incense and holy water, coupled with fasting, attending prayer vigils on the hallowed grounds of the Church is convincing enough for a convert to see that there is protection for his/her life and existential problems against the numerous hostile evil and spiritual beings. Benjamin C. Ray comments that, “much of the Aladura ritual is therefore devoted, somewhat aggressively, to spiritual diagnosis and treatment of personal problems related to the conceiving of children, economic affairs, and health matters.”<sup>11</sup> Akinade draws attention to the fact that through this indigenization of the Church in Africa, it has brought about

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<sup>9</sup> Akintunde E. Akinade. *Ibid.* p. 321.

<sup>10</sup> J. Akin Omoyajowo. “The Cherubim and Seraphim Movement: A Study in Interaction,” *Orita: Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies* 4, No.2, 1970, p. 134.

<sup>11</sup> Benjamin C. Ray. “Aladura Christianity: A Yoruba Religion.” *Journal of Religion in Africa*, Vol. 23, Aug. 1993 p. 268-9.

self-affirmation and determination among the indigenous people. The AICs are making tremendous contributions to African theology while retrieving Africa's almost forgotten religious and cultural worldview. Deji Ayegboyin sums up the entire situation thus,

One remarkable trait of the Aladura is its insistence on giving Christianity an African "coloration". These Churches are pragmatic in contextualizing Christianity in African culture....part of their spirituality was informed by their African worldview. They are practical and down to earth in their belief, doctrine and response to the problems of their African congregations. The Aladuras preach a brand of Christianity which is deeply rooted in African traditional cultures and flexible enough to respond to their demand. The worldview of the members is taken into consideration in their beliefs, such as the forces of evil, malevolent spirits, witches and wizards.<sup>12</sup>

The foregoing are some of the salient points that sets up the basis on which the thesis of this paper will be pursued; that within the missionary bequeathed doctrines, especially of the Holy Spirit and in agreement that the AICs have given the Christian faith a new lease of life especially due to its exposure to the cultural experiences of the African, it is pertinent to ask if a legitimate appropriation of the Holy Spirit can be made? This brings me to look at Caleb Oladipo's understanding of the notion of the Holy Spirit within the Aladura Church movements.

#### Oladipo and the Development of the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit in the Aladura Churches

According to Oladipo, the doctrine of the Holy Spirit in Christian Western thought especially in our present context boils down to seeing "the Holy Spirit as the very essence or being of God."<sup>13</sup> In his effort to locate the Holy Spirit within Yoruba belief system, he acquired a form of characterization where God the father is seen as "*the great ancestor*," God the son as "*the proto-*

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<sup>12</sup> Deji Adegboyin. Spirituality in the African Independent Churches.

<http://www.edinburgh2010.org/spirituality.Doc>. Accessed on the web on March 20th, 2011.

<sup>13</sup> Caleb Oladipo. Ibid. p. 93.

ancestor” and God the Holy Spirit as “*the grand ancestor.*”<sup>14</sup> This characterization helps the Yoruba to situate the concept of the trinity which is absent within the pantheon of Yoruba gods. God the father is the great ancestor ‘*Olodumare*’ because he created the world, God the son is proto ancestor who is related to ‘*Ela*’ a mythical Yoruba figure who is sacrificed to save his people. And God the Holy Spirit is the grand ancestor because of his role as a sustainer of the people.<sup>15</sup> With particular reference to the Holy Spirit, Oladipo asserts that since the Holy Spirit is modelled after the ancestors and the ancestors are mainly guarantors of solidarity, stability and growth of the community, it follows therefore, that the Holy Spirit’s role is to help the Yoruba people achieve their spiritual destiny of a peaceful and stable community and personal wholeness. Re-translated into the Western context, “the Holy Spirit is the source of new life, and the fountainhead of Christian living...The Holy Spirit assumes the legitimate aspiration of African ancestors by his authentic relationship with divine reality. Thus, the ‘mystery of the Holy Spirit’ is that he is the unique ancestor.”<sup>16</sup>

Oladipo argues further that since the spiritual destiny that the ancestors stand for with their earthly descendants is achievable through the Holy Spirit in the new Christian dispensation, the ancestors therefore remain efficacious only in the Holy Spirit through Jesus Christ. Oladipo surmises that “This conception of the Holy Spirit as the “grand ancestor” has the theological advantage of being more meaningful and relevant to the Yoruba people than the alien idea of the *logos* or *kyrios* that has been forced upon Yoruba Christians. This also makes it possible for an anthropocentric spirituality (human centered spirituality) as the source and fountainhead of the African Christian experience and practice –“a kind of pneumatology from below based on

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<sup>14</sup> Caleb Oladipo. Ibid. p. 104.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. p. 107.



religious existentialism.”<sup>17</sup> Oladipo posits that the role of the ancestors is the point of reference for cross fertilization between Christianity and the Yoruba religious world of the Aladura Churches.

Having enumerated all these, the one thing that is incontrovertible and self-evident is that the Trinity and the Holy Spirit are concepts that cannot be appropriated in the sense of assimilation into any other receiving cultures. These concepts exist within a unilateral-individual and specific space which makes it impossible to assimilate them, either into the cult of ancestors or the African traditional world of ‘spirits.’ The best I see African theologians doing is to pin-point the ‘functions’ of the Holy Spirit and from that point try to work out means of correlating it with ‘*something-other*’ within African religious beliefs. Oladipo comments on the situation thus:

From the functional identity and dissimilarity, one can define the relationship between ancestrology and pneumatology as a religious relation by which an archetype of supernatural status has regular sacred communications with the living individuals so that the spiritual destiny of the living person is more appropriately directed. This tentative definition is important for the Yoruba people in their indigenous definition of the Christian faith.<sup>18</sup>

With comments like this, one no doubt recognizes that there is a subtle struggle and an over stretching of an idea which seems nice in praxis but does not work well intellectually and theoretically.

The Functions of the Holy Spirit in Yoruba Aladura Churches:

For the Aladura man or woman, the Holy Spirit is experiential and encountered every single time they pray. The Aladura man or woman probably will be filled with incredulity if asked what he or she understands by a ‘doctrine’ of the Holy Spirit. Many of the contributors to this discourse agree broadly that the Aladura approach the Holy Spirit from a spiritual and functional stand

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid. p. 108.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. P. 112.

point. Borrowing from Caleb Oladipo again, he proposes two functional ways in which the Aladura faithful approaches the Holy Spirit. The first, he calls a development of the notion of “incarnational pneumatology”<sup>19</sup>, which lays emphasis on the Holy Spirit as continuing the work of Christ. The second, he refers to as perceiving the Holy Spirit as “the divine essence, a metaphysical principle which communicates.”<sup>20</sup> In this sense, communication is through dreams, visions and ecstasy- a common feature of the AICs. “The Holy Spirit comes from a supernatural order and he is always mighty and mysterious. Like the ancestors, he gives life and imparts knowledge. It is only in this way that the Holy Spirit is regarded as a divine person.”<sup>21</sup> Oladipo’s functional application is not at any time disconnected with the Yoruba/Aladura understanding of ancestrology.

The function and role of the Holy Spirit within the AICs is mainly protective and providential. These two main functions are linked with culture and economics. While the Yoruba world view is filled with spirits, malevolent spirits abound, devising various ways to harm or bring disaster on people. Also, due to a common struggle for daily sustenance an after effect of the economic situation of most African nation-states, reliance on a providential God is consoling and uplifting. Therefore, prayers through the power of the Holy Spirit bring cures for natural sicknesses and ‘spiritual attacks.’ It also protects the adherent from one’s enemies and their machinations. Dependence on the Holy Spirit within commerce and industry is an assurance of material success and accumulation of profit/wealth. In the religious practices of the Aladuras, “human problems are confronted with the power of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>22</sup> Akinade explains:

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. p. 113.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Akintunde E. Akinade. Ibid. p. 320.

Aladura Churches are concerned with this-worldly immediate salvation and are involved with matters germane to the total wellbeing of human beings. The Yorubas have traditionally worshipped God to obtain concrete, material benefits-more children, avoidance of calamities, success in trade and a big harvest. The intention of Aladura churches is to provide religious structures that can ensure such things.<sup>23</sup>

There is a great attraction to possession, visions and prophecy. It is a usual practice that during worship physical manifestation of possession takes place “by spiritual power flowing from the Holy Spirit to the congregation.”<sup>24</sup> Akinade claims that unlike the older missionary established Churches where there is an established clergy, in most of the Aladura Churches, through possession, any member could be influenced through the Holy Spirit to lead worship and speak prophetically to the assembly. Akinade says “the division between the clergy and the laity is very tenuous in Aladura churches.”<sup>25</sup> The Aladura man or woman looks up at the Holy Spirit with the desire and openness to be used as a vehicle of communication, a means of prophesying to the community. Closely linked to this kind of religious practice is the desire to ‘speak in tongues’ at prayer meetings.

However, there is a distinctive problem associated with AICs; the suspicion of syncretism in their mode of worship. Because of their synthesis of Christian and Yoruba religious practices, “the established Churches look at the AICs as either an incomplete version of Western Christianity or an (unsuccessful) attempt at adaptation of traditional Yoruba religious beliefs.”<sup>26</sup> At the level of the World Council of Churches, (WCC) “prejudices still abound and Aladura Churches are labelled as the back-door through which “paganism” has re-entered African Christendom.”<sup>27</sup> In

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid. p. 322.

<sup>24</sup> Benjamin C. Ray. Ibid. p. 275.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. p. 327.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Akintunde E. Akinade. Ibid. p. 329 In most modern Yoruba urban cities and villages, the presence of the Aladura ‘prophets/prophetesses’ are commonly felt as they go from door to door to ‘deliver’ spiritual messages which often times is a warning against an impending

this sense Brigit Meyer points out that the accusation of traditional missionary Churches can at best be seen as a political and pejorative use of the term ‘syncretic’ to make the AICs impure and deviant. Meyer claims also that in some instances, anthropologists “tended to celebrate syncretism as an achieved synthesis of foreign and indigenous elements”<sup>28</sup> in their actions of worship. H.W. Turner suggests that syncretism in the AICs are often exaggerated. He argues that there are elements which can easily be linked to Yoruba indigenous cults, like the spontaneous sacred dance, spontaneity in vocalization of prayers and responses, also the kind of spirit possession which induces spasmodic convulsions and trances. The instances sighted by Turner do not accrue to syncretism but shows clearly that the Aladura Churches do integrate traditional religious and liturgical expressions into their worship.

Brigit Meyer argues that the AICs have since the 1990s especially in mostly British colonies in West Africa evolved into Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches (PCC). While not shying away from pin-pointing the ‘prosperity gospel’ preached by the PCCs, she is quick to recognize the sociological importance of this evolution.<sup>29</sup> The PCCs are now a haven and place of consolation for many disillusioned by the politics, economies and daily struggles of life in their countries. Meyer states,

....if in the 1980s independent churches were found to be attractive, by African Christians as well as researchers, above all because they seemed to offer a more “authentic”,

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mishap, attack or fatal accident. Some other Aladura members go out as early as 4.30-5am with a bell, ringing, and calling people back to repentance. They celebrate an annual ‘Taborrah’ which is special event on top of a designated Hill. Here they pray and fast for days in the sense of going up to Mount Horeb to meet God as Moses did. It is not particularly clear if this is the only reason why they do not wear shoes when donning their ‘Soutanas’ (liturgical and religious garb) for worship. What is known as a fact is that they adapt Moses at the burning bush. At the approach of their place of worship, they are invited to take off their shoes as they stand on Holy ground.

<sup>28</sup> Brigit Meyer. “Christianity in Africa: From African Independent to Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches.” *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol. 33 (2004) p. 445.

<sup>29</sup> Brigit Meyer. *Ibid.* Pp. 447-474.

Africanized version of Christianity than do the presumably Western oriented mainline Churches, current Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches (PCC) appear to drive their mass appeal at least partly from propagating a “complete break with the past.” Disassociating themselves from both mainline churches and African Independent, or as they call them, “Spiritual” Churches, the new PCCs promise to link up their born-again believers with global circuits.<sup>30</sup>

And in certain ways, through their efforts, indigenous peoples are experiencing the desired human wholeness in the life of the Spirit.

The Impact of cross fertilization and adaptation of traditional Western Christian religious categories on African theology.

It is clear that African theology is coming of age with vast contributions in literature, theology and intellectual convictions. It also shows great efforts to overturn and overcome the missionary’s mistaken ideology of diabolization, accusation of paganism and ‘heathenism’ aimed at uprooting Africans from their supposed cultural and religious background of barbarity, savagery and ignorance. In the reception of western styled Christianity, “European culture and civilization was hitherto imposed on the different cultures of Africa as a humanitarian effort to give the Africans a new identity, constructed on the basis of the new, total package of Christianity and European civilization...the best way of life conceivable.”<sup>31</sup>

Bolaji Idowu is highly recognized as a major voice and contributor to the African theological enterprise, and he is regarded as an advocate for “a theology which bears the stamp of original thinking and meditation of Africans”,<sup>32</sup> he is often times criticized for not pursuing modern systematic theological methods. According to Bediako, “Idowu’s work contains scant speculation on Christ, the Holy Spirit, the Church, the Sacraments, the last things, as items of doctrine in

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Kwame Bediako. Ibid. p. 251.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid p. 266.

themselves.”<sup>33</sup> On the other hand, we find John Mbiti, who decries indigenization of Christianity and theology. It is interesting that while not necessarily agreeing with the proliferation of indigenous and independent Churches, he sees in them an effort to “remain authentically African while at the same time being ecclesiastically universal.”<sup>34</sup> Bediako states that in a sense this position applies to Mbiti’s own theological outlook and his chosen theological agenda. Mbiti is criticized by others like Benjamin C. Ray and Joshua Kudadjie. They question his method (*praeparatio evangelica*) which they claim blurs the distinctiveness of African spirituality. They query who has the legitimate authority to decide on “what in the African heritage of religion and culture belongs or does not belong to the African Christian consciousness.”<sup>35</sup>

I understand the necessity and perhaps even the need for African theology. It is along the same lines of thinking that I realize a need to sound a note of caution against arbitrary creations of “*African Theologies*”, which seems to be in discontinuity with the general theology of the Christian Church. African theologians must be weary of an attitude that Mbiti warns against; “when African Christians take the microphone on the Church platform, they exhaust themselves with harping on the ills and mistakes caused by missionaries or Western Churches”<sup>36</sup> An underlying and re-occurring theme is a general attitude where it looks like African theology is needed simply as a reaction against Eurocentric Christian ideals introduced by the missionaries into Africa. I personally argue and insist that the good news of and about Jesus Christ is not Greek, Roman, European nor African *per se*. It is simply the good news about the son of God

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid. p. 290.

<sup>34</sup> Kwame Bediako. Ibid. p. 306.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. p. 334.

<sup>36</sup> John Mbiti. “Faith, Hope and Love in the African Independent Church Movement” in Study Encounter, 63, vol. 10, no 3, 1974, p. 19 in Gerald K. Tanye. *The Church-As-Family and Ethnocentrism in Sub-Saharan Africa*. [www.http://books.google.com/books](http://books.google.com/books). Accessed on April 23, 2011.

who by his incarnation invites the entire world into the redemptive work he achieved by dying on the cross. The other extreme position can be found in Ali Mazrui's<sup>37</sup> critique of African theology, which I disagree with. He questioned,

Why should there be a constant search to fit African conceptions of God into notions like omnipotence, omnipresence and omniscience? Why should there be a constant exploration for one super-god in African societies, as if one was trying to discover an inner monotheism in traditional African belief systems? Why should African students of religion be so keen to demonstrate that the Christian God had already been understood and apprehended by Africans before the missionaries came?<sup>38</sup>

I will question his motives for making this assertion against African theology since Islam itself, Mazrui's religious faith, is not only monotheistic but also patterned after the Arab culture which they insist on in their mode of praying, dressing, religious and cultural habits. There is nowhere else that I know of around the West African coast where the Islamic culture has so penetrated the local culture and subdued it as much as the Hausa North and some parts of the South West of the Yorubas of Nigeria. Although I argue that there are certain unchanging and irreplaceable ideas in the Christian faith, like the idea of the trinity and the Holy Spirit. However, I am convinced there is always enough room to manoeuvre in finding the local voice if the faith will continue to survive and grow in Africa. I am of the opinion that all cultures exist but not above religious faith. Our faith can be influenced by our culture but not determined by it. This position is diplomatically stated by Niebuhr when at the end of his ground breaking work, *Christ and Culture* he wrote, "no single man or group or historical time is the Church: but that there is a Church of faith in which we do our partial relative work and on which we can count.... It is to

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<sup>37</sup> Ali Mazrui is a well acclaimed Muslim historian and professor of Political Science at Makerere University in Uganda.

<sup>38</sup> Bediako. Ibid. p. 9.

make them in view of the fact that the world of culture-man's achievement-exists within the world of grace-God's kingdom."<sup>39</sup>

In John Paul II's post synodal apostolic exhortation titled *Ecclesia in Africa*, in which the pontiff addressed the indigenous Catholic Churches of Africa. He acknowledged that these local Churches, in communion with the universal Church, are entitled to preserve and develop their own traditions. He focused on the era of a third wave of systematic evangelization of Africa which began in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and how the faith has not only grown but it is also inculturated, that these Churches must take to heart "a serious concern for a true and balanced inculturation....in order to avoid cultural confusion and alienation in a fast evolving society."<sup>40</sup>

Referencing the synod fathers, *Ecclesia in Africa* avers that, inculturation is the processes by which catechesis 'takes flesh', the intimate transformation of authentic cultural values through their integration in Christianity and the insertion of Christianity in various human cultures, this the document insists is an urgent priority in the life of particular Churches.<sup>41</sup> As important as inculturation might be, the Church warns that it must be done with compatibility to the Christian message and in communion with the universal Church, and in all cases, care must be taken to avoid syncretism.<sup>42</sup>

*Ecclesial in Africa*, perhaps is the most modern and contemporary document of the Church directly pertaining to the evangelization and rooting of the gospel in Africa, for Africans and whose working documents were prepared by Africans. It presents the middle ground by which the task of evangelization and inculturation should and must be pursued. It forms also for me the

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<sup>39</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr. *Christ and Culture* New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001 p. 256.

<sup>40</sup> *Ecclesial In Africa* no. 48.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.* no. 59.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* no. 62 (Here lies the crux of the matter when adaptations are attempted across cultures with traditional Christian doctrine that is essential to the dogmatic life of the Church, for instance the question of the Holy Spirit as discussed in this essay).



foundation upon which I argue against the impossibility and impracticability of the attempts by some African theologians at adaptations of universal Christian dogmas in to the various cultures of Africa.

And with those who might go all out for “Indigenous-Independence” from the universal doctrines of the Christian Church, the words of Benedict XVI at the Regensburg lecture sounds a note of warning which ought to be heeded,

The thesis that the critically purified Greek heritage forms an integral part of Christian faith has been countered by the call for a dehellenization of Christianity - a call which has more and more dominated theological discussions since the beginning of the modern age. Viewed more closely, three stages can be observed in the programme of dehellenization: although interconnected, they are clearly distinct from one another in their motivations and objectives....In the light of our experience with cultural pluralism, it is often said nowadays that the synthesis with Hellenism achieved in the early Church was an initial inculturation which ought not to be binding on other cultures. The latter are said to have the right to return to the simple message of the New Testament prior to that inculturation, in order to inculturate it anew in their own particular milieu. This thesis is not simply false, but it is coarse and lacking in precision. The New Testament was written in Greek and bears the imprint of the Greek spirit, which had already come to maturity as the Old Testament developed. True, there are elements in the evolution of the early Church which do not have to be integrated into all cultures. Nonetheless, the fundamental decisions made about the relationship between faith and the use of human reason, are part of the faith itself; they are developments consonant with the nature of faith itself.<sup>43</sup>

### **Summary and Conclusion:**

The overall intention of this paper is to explore the ways in which traditional African peoples receive the Christian faith and the effort they make to re-translate this faith; inter marrying the faith with traditional religious beliefs, efforts to inculturate the faith, seen especially, among many other examples, the attempt to appropriate the role and person of the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>43</sup> Benedict XVI

[http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father//speeches/2006/september/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_university-regensburg\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father//speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_university-regensburg_en.html)

There are some examples that show clearly that efforts at adaptations or appropriation of ideas across African traditional-religious beliefs and Christianity can be problematic. For instance, Oladipo looks at the Holy Spirit as ‘proto-ancestor’ within the religious practices of the Yoruba Aladuras and points out irreconcilable appropriations that attempt to link the ancestor(s) with the Holy Spirit. First and fundamentally is the fact that ancestors were progenitors to those who are still alive and acquire this benevolent status only after death. But the Holy Spirit exists with the Father and the Son in the same essence in a hypostatic union. Second, the Holy Spirit is not merely an external moral guide as it is often alluded to by the Yorubas as the role of the ancestors within the Yoruba world view. The Holy Spirit is an inner source and principle of the Christian life by which anyone cannot live a life of grace or act in a morally upright manner. Third, and lastly, the Holy Spirit relates to all across ethnic, tribal or geographical barriers while the ancestors are limited in their scope of action by filial limitations and familiar boundaries and ethnic locations.

By using the example of the Yoruba Aladura Churches of Nigeria in West Africa, we see a genuine and commendable effort at indigenization of the Christian gospel. As beneficial as this might be for indigenous Churches and African theology, I find a necessity to caution against the tendency to “throw out the baby with the bathing water.” While not advocating for a slavish and unreflective adherence to keeping intact a European handed on version of Christianity, the indigenization process must sieve through carefully what is “European” and what is “Christian” heritage. As Akinade says, “Christianity is culturally neutral. It cannot be tied to the apron-strings of anyone race or culture.”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Akintunde E. Akinade. *Ibid.* p. 332.

The Christian Church remains a Church; the body of Christ as long as it can ameliorate its true nature and character while assimilating different cultural values from around the world to enrich itself and give herself a more catholic-universal outlook.

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## Witchcraft and the Law in Zimbabwe

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### Abstract

I argue that the judicial system should not be used to eliminate witchcraft beliefs and practices in Zimbabwe. This is because no competent court of law will receive tangible incriminating evidence to render a conviction of witchcraft. I also contend that the magic culture which still dominates in Zimbabwe should be displaced by a scientific and technological culture which is accompanied by economic growth, job creation and material abundance in order to eliminate witchcraft. Education alone, if not applied to creation of employment and economic growth, will never eliminate witchcraft beliefs and practices. The research findings are that the 1899 Witchcraft Suppression Act (WSA) and Act CLA23/2004 failed to eliminate witchcraft beliefs and practices in Zimbabwe. The conclusion is that the government must not try to eliminate witchcraft by legal means for that had proved to be a futile exercise but buy using science, technology and the elimination of corruption and poverty.

### Introduction

The basic issue I raise is one that has parallels in the history of early modern European and North American witch-hunting. In that setting, as in Zimbabwe, I contend that the end of witch-hunting can be ascribed largely to modernization outside the judicial sphere. The results of this research are that legislation does not eliminate witchcraft beliefs and practices for both the Witchcraft Suppression Act (WSA) of 1899 and Act 23/2004 failed to eliminate witchcraft beliefs and practices in Zimbabwe. The research also found that scientific, technological and economic development accompanied by job creation and material wealth in Zimbabwe eliminates

witchcraft beliefs and practices. My research findings do not agree with Gordon Chavhunduka (2001) and Michael Bourdillon (1998) who maintained that beliefs related to witchcraft continue to constitute an endearing and enduring aspect of social life in Zimbabwe in spite of modern education, science and technology. Chavhunduka's and Bourdillon's arguments go against what happened in some parts of the world like Europe and North America which held witchcraft beliefs and practices in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries where science, technology created jobs, eradicated witchcraft beliefs and practices and also where education was translated into material wealth. If science, technology, education, industrialization and job creation eradicated witchcraft beliefs and practices in other parts of the world the same could also happen in Zimbabwe. One cannot seriously regard Zimbabwe as a country which is scientifically and technologically developed when Zimbabwe has no technology to talk about for Zimbabwe imports almost all its machinery and medicines and when 95% of the people were unemployed in 2009 (Index Mundi 2009). The vast majority of Zimbabweans do not have computers and internet in their homes. The economy of Zimbabwe is not based on manufacturing and hence not technologically developed. The education of Zimbabweans has failed to be transformed into well-paying jobs and material success for the majority of Zimbabweans including college and university graduates who are failing to buy houses and vehicles of their own and are living below the poverty datum line.

In Zimbabwe, the belief in and practice of witchcraft (*uroyi*) is a common cause of social disharmony among families, neighbours and communities. In 1899 the British colonial government passed the WSA. In 2006 the Zimbabwe African National Union- Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) government of Robert Mugabe passed Act CLA23/2004 in order to eliminate witchcraft beliefs and practices in Zimbabwe but failed.

Firstly, I give a typology of the forms of witchcraft found in Zimbabwe because the nature and characteristics of each type of witchcraft put witchcraft outside the judicial sphere. Secondly, I then explore witchcraft beliefs and practices in Zimbabwean society because I want to show that witchcraft beliefs and practices are wide spread and had permeated every aspect of Zimbabwean society and culture. Thirdly, I examine the sociological causes of witchcraft in order to show that witchcraft is created to control human beings and keep social order. Fourthly, I investigate on the psychological causes of witchcraft with a view to demonstrate that witchcraft is myth and a psychiatric problem. Fifthly, I deliberate on witchcraft and the legal system so as to reveal that the legal system does not work when it comes to the eradication of witchcraft beliefs and practices. Sixthly, I focus on witchcraft not as the domain of police and the courts because when it comes to witchcraft it is legally very difficult-even impossible- to prove and convict somebody of witchcraft in any competent court of law for the reason that witchcraft and the law are an unlikely partnership for there are unexpected implications in the judiciary system. Lastly I proffer a conclusion that the government must not try to eliminate witchcraft by legal means for that had proved to be a futile exercise but Zimbabwe must rid itself of rampant corruption which has infested every aspect of its socio-economic and political life for corruption is the root cause of the poverty that leads into witchcraft beliefs and practices.

### **Problem**

Despite the passage of the above-referenced two pieces of legislation, both of which gave the law courts power to eradicate witchcraft and wizardry beliefs and practices through the legal system and despite the fact that Zimbabwe has the highest literacy rate in Africa, witchcraft beliefs and practices are on the increase. Neither the educational nor the legal system has been able to eradicate witchcraft beliefs and practices. Although Zimbabwe claims to have the best educated

people in Africa the majority of Zimbabweans still believe in witchcraft - that ritual murders will yield better crops, guarantee business success, help in passing examinations, help in winning elections, driving away evil spirits and facilitating financial success. Sadly, many Zimbabweans perform witchcraft rituals which were performed in many societies before the modern age of science and technology.

Quarrelling, fighting and ritual murders are on the upsurge in families and communities because of witchcraft beliefs and practices. Many Zimbabweans consult diviners (*n'anga*), Christian faith healers and prophets on a regular basis. They have fetishes, amulets, blessed water (*mvura yakanamatirwa*) and oil (*mafuta*) so as to protect themselves from witchcraft. Witchdoctors, chiefs and politicians use witchcraft beliefs and practices to manipulate the people to further their own agenda of financial and material wealth and political power. The current state of affairs in Zimbabwe as far as witchcraft is concerned is not acceptable and should be addressed through scientific, technological and economic means.

The writer obtained data for the paper drawing on the considerable literature dealing with witchcraft in Zimbabwe from before the arrival of western modernity (Christianity, science and technology) to the present day. The author used a qualitative research method. This allowed the author to understand phenomena of witchcraft based on actions and documents on witchcraft, and how and why individual scholars and the interviewees interpret and ascribe meaning to what they say and do.

### **Definitions of Witchcraft**

I agree with Gordon Chavhunduka (1980: 132) who said: "A witch is defined in social anthropology as a person in whom dwells a distinctive and inherent evilness, whereby he harms



his fellows in mysteriously secret ways. Often it is thought that the witch need merely wish to harm his victim and his witchcraft then does this, or it may be enough for him merely to feel annoyance or jealousy against someone for the power to set itself in operation without his being aware of the fact that it has done so. Witches are thought able to do extraordinary things which are beyond the capabilities of ordinary human beings. They are thought capable of travelling great distances at night, or of having the ability to turn themselves into hyenas, or of going out in spirit and killing a victim while their bodies remain at home in bed". Michael Bourdillon (1997: 2), argued, "Witchcraft is a complex and multifarious phenomenon in its perceived nature, effect, and function. It covers a variety of practices, from gruesome rituals, through the secret use of physical or magical poisons, to "bizarre behaviour that goes against the social norms of society without necessarily doing harm to anyone."

I define the various types of witchcraft which are believed and practiced in Zimbabwe in order to demonstrate that the nature and characteristics of each type of witchcraft make it impossible for any competent court of law to prove that witchcraft is the cause of sickness or illness or misfortune or death. The views in the definitions are related to my argument that witchcraft is not the sphere of the judiciary. Witchcraft in African communities is arduous to define. The term fails to refer to a logical way of beliefs, as it contains both spiritual and moral elements. Evil spirits are believed to be at play, resulting in morals that are damaging to society. Some Zimbabweans believe that witchcraft has both negative and positive aspects while others believe that it has no positive aspects but evil intentions. Witches and wizards (*varoyi*) are a sign of personalized evil. This is the prevailing understanding of the term across Africa. Zimbabweans believe that everyone in the community must relate to the economic, political, social and religious aspects of their society; however, nothing permeates the entire culture as witchcraft

does. It is not easy to draw a clear distinction among magic, witchcraft and sorcery.

Zimbabweans believe that witchcraft is concerned with the production of effects by evil agencies that are beyond natural human powers. The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Sociology defines magic, witchcraft, and sorcery as follows: “The art of performing charms, spells, and rituals, to seek to control events or govern certain natural or supernatural forces. “ Magic can be good, as in love magic or the canoe magic of the Trobriand Islanders before a hazardous voyage. It can also be malevolent in the sense of witchcraft or sorcery.

Sorcery implies magic where powers are intentionally used for a harmful purpose, often involving artificial means. Witchcraft implies the possession of a supernatural power through a pact with evil spirits; this power may be exerted involuntarily. Magic, witchcraft, and sorcery generally function at the level of the individual, and often in opposition to organized religions. Magical beliefs deal with the individual crisis and acts of fate which religious morality cannot explain” (Marshall, 1994). The author agrees with Marshall as far as the definitions of magic, witchcraft and sorcery are concerned but Zimbabweans do not make the distinctions among magic, witchcraft and sorcery. They are all collectively referred to as witchcraft (*uroyi*).

*Chitsinga* is a type of witchcraft commonly used by sorcerers in Zimbabwe to cause diseases of the legs, hands, shoulders and back. *Chitsinga* is practised by males only. The practice of *Chitsinga* witchcraft has important social results in the society. A disease caused by *chitsinga* can only be cured when the ill person comes to confess his evil deeds to the person whom he has wronged. The victim must come to him politely and submissively, without accusing him in any way, and beg him to withdraw his *chitsinga* (Chavhunduka 144). The victim and the wronged person must be reconciled before a cure can be effected. After the reconciliation process, the

wronged person tells his patron witchdoctor to undo the wizardry. Sorcery, therefore, brings social tensions to the surface and enables people to settle their differences (Chavhunduka 144). The terms “witch” and “wizard” are loosely used in Zimbabwe to refer to anybody who does evil, for example one who defecates and urinates in a well from which the community fetches water or one who makes his livestock stray into a neighbour’s field. The [Webster's Online Dictionary](#) defines goblin (*chikwambo/thokoloshis*) as an “evil or mischievous spirit; a playful or malicious elf; a frightful phantom; a gnome, a small grotesque supernatural creature that makes trouble for human beings”. In Zimbabwe, a *chikwambo/thokoloshis* is not a generic name for witchcraft, but is only one facet of witchcraft which is commonly believed to be used by witches and wizards.

Goblin (*chikwambo/thokoloshis*) witchcraft is “manufactured” by specialist witchdoctors and sold to people who want to become wealthy quickly or who want to make other people ill, die and be miserable in life by making them poor through the loss of their jobs or wealth.

*Chikwambo/thokoloshis* is believed to make its owner very rich, famous and powerful in the community. Goblin is “manufactured” from human body parts mixed with herbs. People buy goblins for a large fee in order to quickly acquire riches or to kill their enemies. Witchdoctors "manufacture" goblins to feed the desires of the gullible. The "manufacture” involves more than just a cash fee. It involves rape, incest mutilation and even the ritual murder of any human - usually a very close relative (eg: child, spouse, parent) of the person who wants the goblin.

*Chikwambo/thokoloshis* witchcraft is now very common in Zimbabwe because people want to be very rich quickly and to kill their enemies.

“Fencing” or “locking” a wife or husband (*runyoka/rukawo*) is a witchcraft practice common among Zimbabweans. It is used to prevent a spouse from committing infidelity. An example of the “fencing” or “locking” type of witchcraft is a husband who buys a new knife. He takes the knife to a witchdoctor who sprinkles the knife with a concoction. The husband takes the knife home, opens its blade and asks his unsuspecting wife to close the blade. By doing so, it is believed that the wife “locks” (or fences) herself. The husband then hides the knife in a place where it is unlikely to be found. If the wife is involved with another man, the two will be caught naked in the act of sexual intercourse for they will fail to uncouple until the husband who “locked” his wife opens the knife after the relatives of the man caught in the act of adultery or fornication pay him a huge compensation. This can be in the form of many cattle or a large amount of money. Another means of “fencing” a wife is when the vagina and breasts of the wife disappear when she wants to have sexual intercourse with a man who is not her husband.

Likewise a husband who has been “fenced” by his wife will have his penis disappear in the same manner that a tortoise head retreats into its shell, or will fail to have an erection when he tries to have sexual intercourse with a woman who is not his wife.

Love potion (*mupfuhwira*) is a witchcraft practice common among some Zimbabwean women. It is used to tame husbands who may be involved in infidelity or who are abusive. *Mupfuhwira* takes various forms. In one form, the woman kills a lizard (*dzvinyu*) which she finds running around in her house. The woman dries the lizard, grinds it into powder, and mixes it with herbs and her menstrual blood and vaginal fluids. She mixes the concoction with her husband’s food or drink. The *mupfuhwira* is believed to make the husband to agree with anything his wife does or decides, and make him closer and affectionate to her.

*Divise* is a witchcraft practice common among certain Zimbabwe farmers. It is used to “thieve” the grain of other farmers before their crops are harvested. The *divise* “thieving” witchcraft is only effective while the crops are in the fields or on the threshing rock (*ruware*). A farmer with *divise* puts in minimal effort, uses little fertilizer and does little weed control in his agricultural work, but harvests more than the most hard-working farmer. The *divise* makes people in the community work unknowingly in the witch’s or wizard’s field at night. These people do the weeding, fertilizing and harvesting in the wizard’s field. Thus, during the day, these people are tired and cannot put maximum effort working in their own fields. The *divise* “steals” the grains of other farmers or makes some people to work unknowingly in his field. Hence he becomes the richest farmer in the community. The *divise* is also believed to cause some unexplained illnesses and deaths in the community.

*Mubobo* type of witchcraft is used mostly by witches and wizards to have sexual intercourse with any female or male of their choosing. The female victim will not be aware that she is having sexual intercourse with a man who is not her husband or boyfriend. The male victim will be unaware that he is having sexual intercourse with a woman who is not his wife or girlfriend. The victim usually feels very tired during the morning. It is also believed that *mubobo* witchcraft can be used during the day.

*Rukwa* witchcraft is used in Zimbabwe to capture thieves. If a thief steals some food and eats it, or shares it with his family members, he and his family will have bulging stomachs. If he steals some crops from the field, he will be stuck in the field, unable to walk and will be apprehended in the act of thieving. If he steals a bag of cement, the bag will be stuck on his shoulder. He will

not be able to remove it. *Rukwa* is treated when the thief confesses to the owner of the property and pays compensation and the owner approaches his patron witchdoctor to undo the *rukwa*.

Inherited witchcraft (*uroyi hwedzinza*) is believed to be inherited from a deceased relative. A witch or wizard is possessed by the witchcraft spirit of the dead relative. It is believed that witches who inherit witchcraft from their deceased relatives do their witchcraft activities at night. They work and move in groups. It is also believed that they move naked at night riding on “familiar”, for example snakes, owls, hyenas, baboons and winnowing baskets. A witch who inherited witchcraft has the power to open graves at night and eat the flesh of dead people. He/she can also open other people’s locked bedrooms and bewitch the sleeping people or transform them into transport familiars. For example, people can be transformed into hyenas at night and witches ride on them as if on horseback. When the witch has completed his/her mission, the person who was transformed into a hyena becomes a human being again but he/she feels very tired. Inherited witchcraft also causes one to bewitch his/her relatives and eat their flesh. One can also buy any type of witchcraft from a friend or relative.

### **Witchcraft Beliefs in Zimbabwean Society**

Witchcraft beliefs and practices have permeated every aspect of Zimbabwean society and culture. This was witnessed in the national general elections of 2008 when some prospective candidates for political office resorted to witchcraft - the chanting of incantations and the display of charms, fetishes and amulets to manipulate people so as to further their own agenda of enriching themselves and gaining political power.

The lyrics to Alick Macheso’s song entitled Father and Mother Goblin (*Baba naMai*

*Chikwambo*), the lyrics of a song by a popular African Initiated Church (AIC) the International

Apostolic Mission (IAM) titled *Where I am Standing is Difficult* because of my Relative's Goblins (*Pandimire Pakaoma- Chikwambo*), and speeches by Zimbabwean top political leaders, including President Robert Mugabe, Nelson Chamisa and Douglas Mwonzora give some indication of the breadth and depth of witchcraft beliefs and practices in Zimbabwe and how they have permeated every aspect of Zimbabwean society.

President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe was reported to have accused some of his relatives of being wizards and witches (*varoyi*) when he gave a eulogy at a funeral of his aunt Beatrice Matibiri. In reply, in a graveside speech, village headman, Matibiri, an uncle of both the deceased and Mugabe, lashed out at Mugabe for fanning divisions in the family by accusing other members of being wizards and witches (*Nyarota, December 27, 2008*). Mugabe believed that Beatrice's death was not a natural occurrence but was caused by relatives who are wizards and witches.

In 1998 Dzikamai Mavhaire, then the Governor of Masvingo Province and a Central Committee member of ZANU-PF argued in Parliament that Mugabe *must resign* because Zimbabwe was not a monarchy (Nkatanzo November 12, 2009). Responding to Mavhaire's argument, Mugabe told his ZANU-PF's Central Committee meeting, "there are wizards and witches among us (*mune varoi muno*).” (Chikukwa, 2004: 148). He meant that there were witches within ZANU-PF's Central Committee members and Mavhaire was one of them.

The Zimbabwean Minister of Information Communications Technology and MDC National Organizing Secretary Nelson Chamisa maintained in an interview about sanctions on radio station Studio 7 of the Voice of America that ZANU-PF sought for the *chikwambo* that is now causing havoc among them. ZANU-PF must know what to do in order to rid themselves of that *chikwambo* (Manzvanzvike January 4, 2010). Douglas Mwonzora a Member of Parliament,

Chairman of the Committee of Parliament on the New Constitution (COPAC) and MDC National Spokesperson told an MDC political rally during the 2008 general elections campaign that Mugabe was a wizard who has *chikwambo* (Ncube January 25, 2010).

### **Sociological Causes of Witchcraft**

Witchcraft is created to control human beings and keep social order. Human beings are constantly searching of support and refuge. For some, that is found in witchcraft. Societal witchcraft is manufactured as the existence of witches and is assured only when a community is oriented towards them. There is no witchcraft apart from the community's response.

Witchcraft cannot be considered apart from the people who practice it and who are bewitched by it. For witchdoctors and their clients, witchcraft adds meaning to life. However, witchcraft beliefs and practices often arise within a context of hostile, envious and competitive family and community relationships where there is perceived inequality (Ivey & Myers 2008: 62). There have always been huge economic and social inequalities in Zimbabwean families and society. Increasing poverty fosters witchcraft beliefs and practices in Zimbabwe. Social tension is thus one of the main reasons for the emergence of witchcraft accusations in a community. Zimbabwe is increasingly referred to as a "factory of poverty". Many children are going without education. Approximately 75 percent of state schools are not functioning properly. The majority of state teachers are not working as they are not paid enough to survive and have to look for other paid employment or work for food (Nsingo 2009). Many poor families are being forced to send their children out to find work or wild fruits because they can no longer afford to send them to school (Nsingo 2009). Persistent **poverty** is strongly associated with the structural **poverty** of



**Zimbabwe.** Inflation levels in Zimbabwe are running at 13.2 billion per cent a month (Berger, 2008).

Zimbabwe is currently characterized by: high unemployment, poverty, scarcity of resources, and competition for those resources. These lead to envious and hostile relationships, which provide fertile ground for witchcraft beliefs and practices to flourish. Witchcraft exploits peoples' insecurities and supports their propensity for greed and self-worship with false promises and deception. Belief in witchcraft is like organized religion and a mouthwash multinational corporation which play on people's fears. Organized religion like Christianity aims at converting people to be Christians by inducing fear of damnation, judgment and hell (Matthew 25:46, Revelation 20:10). An organized religion is no different than Colgate or any other multinational corporation. Colgate markets mouthwash based on people's fears of bad breath or decaying teeth. This is exactly the same procedure as, for example, some religions try to make a profit by marketing heaven and other spiritual claims with few or no expenses. The same tactics are used by Zimbabwean witchdoctors, chiefs and politicians in marketing witchcraft beliefs and practices among Zimbabweans.

Zimbabwean witchdoctors, chiefs and politicians are making money and gaining political power by marketing witchcraft beliefs and practices. The witchdoctors, chiefs and politicians are telling unsuspecting Zimbabweans that all their social, economic and political problems are caused by witches and wizards. Zimbabweans need the services of witchdoctors for their economic, social and political problems to be solved; failing that they will become ill, live in perpetual poverty or die. Witchdoctors and politicians use people's fears of witchcraft to their own selfish political and economic advantage.

Witchcraft beliefs and practices make profits for witchdoctors and chiefs through witch hunting (*tsikamutanda*). Witches and wizards are asked to pay huge sums of money or to pay the witchdoctors and chiefs in kind. The profits work in such a way that they could be social as well as monetary.

Since time immemorial, superstition and the need for security have traditionally been prime factors in the success of witchcraft in Zimbabwe. Greed and selfishness are equal motivators. Witchcraft is practiced to make both witchdoctors and their clients wealthy. Witchcraft is practiced in the belief that it preserves and protects ostentatious lifestyles, and social and economic positions against rivals. Some Zimbabweans believe witchcraft is the shortest route to an affluent lifestyle. *Zvikwambo/thokoloshis* and *divisi* types of witchcraft are specifically geared towards achieving material and financial gain, without working for them. The belief is that monetary and material riches should come without effort. Witchcraft is motivated by increased greediness and stinginess. Most Zimbabweans are very poor. In order to accumulate wealth and the resultant possessions, they resort to witchcraft as a means to quickly and easily acquire wealth. This evolution to materialism mirrors what is happening elsewhere in the world. Africans have also joined in the pursuit. Africans, irrespective of their level of education, believe that witchcraft will help them accumulate everything money can buy: vehicles, computers, houses, and above all, a life of leisure.

### **Psychological Causes of Witchcraft**

Witchcraft is myth and a psychiatric problem. People who believe in witches and wizards are deluded. Witchcraft fosters wishful thinking on the part of weak, intellectually immature human beings. The root of witchcraft is a disease of the mind. Wishful thinking creates witchcraft out of nothing. Ivey and Myers argued that there is a relationship between bewitchment beliefs and

psychopathology (Ivey and Myers 2008: 91). Kato contends that functional psychosis of a delusional and hallucinatory nature is not in any way different from fear caused by witchcraft; hence belief in witchcraft is a mental disease (Kato, 1970). The belief that someone is a witch/wizard is hallucinatory. People who confess to be witches/wizards are mentally unbalanced. They may have a psychological problem, or they may have been forced to make such confessions, as in the case of witch hunts in Zimbabwe. A highly neurotic person often names others as accomplices in witchcraft.

The psychological explanations for why a person claims to be a witch include: delusion brought about by a “suppressed power impulse;” resulting in a need for “an outlet for general aggressive feelings;” or for “a relatively mild form of protest and appeal for recognition and respect by people in subordinate social positions” (Gray 2001: 361-362). *Max Gluckman argued that witchcraft is logical because it works on cause and effect as science does. It uses human psychology to control people; hence it is used keep social order (Gluckman1944).*

### **Witchcraft and the Legal System**

The legal system does not work when it comes to the eradication of witchcraft beliefs and practices. The Zimbabwean law court officials are unnecessarily burdened with matters which are psychological in nature and are very far removed from their professional expertise. If witchcraft is a mental disease, it then follows that witches should not be brought to court but should be treated for their disease.

Both the WSA and CLA23/2004 allowed the Zimbabwean legal system to take witchcraft beliefs and practices into consideration but failed.

The author does not support these Acts. He regards them as having failed to eradicate witchcraft beliefs and practices in Zimbabwe because witchcraft beliefs and practices are still rife among

some Zimbabweans. This agrees with Chireshe *et al* (2012: 163) who asserted that magic, witchcraft and sorcery are important features of the everyday life of many Zimbabweans. The author agrees with Custom Kachambwa, a Zimbabwean judge who argued that when it comes to witchcraft it is legally very difficult-even impossible- to prove and convict somebody of witchcraft in any competent court of law, because witnesses will often be witchdoctors, who are also accused of practicing witchcraft (Walker July 17, 2006).

What is the use of bringing witches to court and sending them to prison? Is it to fight beliefs and practices in witchcraft or to fight the witches themselves? (Harnischfeger 2000: 106). The state is only able to punish witches, not cure them of the practice of witchcraft. Courts are unable to neutralize occult powers by locking witches in prison. The Zimbabwean judiciary system has co-opted witchdoctors into the legal machinery established by the state for fighting witchcraft.

Witchdoctors are the ones who tell the magistrates and judges that an accused is or is not a witch after they have done some divination rituals. Imprisonment cannot and does not neutralize the perceived powers of a witch.

In the case of inherited witchcraft, who is to be prosecuted, tried and convicted? Is it the actual witch or the alien spirit of witchcraft (*shave reuroyi*) which possesses the witch? Is the spirit of witchcraft or the supposed witchcraft genes, shared with or inherited from a deceased or living relative going to die simply because the witch/wizard is imprisoned? What about babies who are believed to have inherited witchcraft while still in their mother's womb? Is the witchcraft spirit not going to possess the witch after his/her incarceration? Even while in prison, the spirit of witchcraft possesses a witch/wizard and the belief that she/he can bewitch other inmates.

Imprisonment does not eradicate witchcraft. Legal attempts to terminate witchcraft beliefs and

practices in Ghana failed (Kallinen 2006: 59).

**Witchcraft is not a domain of the police and the courts.**

Witchcraft and the law are an unlikely partnership. There are unexpected implications in the judiciary system. In Zimbabwe it is common for witch-hunters (*tsikamutanda*) and diviners to force somebody to confess that he/she is a wizard/witch. What if a university-trained psychiatrist refutes the confession of witchcraft as a psychiatric problem, or hallucinations on the part of the confessor? Whether it is the voluntary or forced confession before a witchdoctor, it is usually done out of a well-founded fear.

Does imprisonment guarantee that, on release, the person is no longer a witch? Do prisons cleanse and cure witchcraft? The answer to both these questions is “No”. There is no reliable means of establishing the guilt or innocence of a witch. This is because witchcraft happens in obscurity with the help of supernatural powers. How can one ascertain that witchcraft is the cause of a lightning strike that kills people and cattle and destroys houses? How can a plaintiff prove that a witch sent a fatal disease or caused a grave accident? Zimbabwean husbands who have medical problems and fail to have an erection often accuse their wives of having “locked” them with *runyoka/rukawo*. Lazy women and men often claim that they are always tired because *mubobo* witchcraft which is used on them by their relatives or neighbours. Farmers who are lazy or do not use modern agricultural methods often accuse their relatives and neighbours of having *divisi* witchcraft. Poor and lazy Zimbabweans often accuse their relatives of having *zvikwambo/thikiloshi*. A husband who loves his wife is accused of having been bewitched with *mupfuwhira* witchcraft. People who suffer from cirrhosis of the liver often claim that they have been bewitched by their relatives with *rukwa* witchcraft. Can anyone who is not delusional put forward these examples of witchcraft as tangible evidence in court?

The Ralushai Commission in South Africa concluded that it is impossible to prove witchcraft (Harnischfeger 2000: 102). The activities of witches cannot be witnessed with the naked eye. Circumstantial evidence is insubstantial in witchcraft cases. This agrees with Chireshe *et al* (2012:171) who argued that since witchcraft is an occult practice, it is by nature secretive and difficult to substantiate empirically in most cases and for this reason, witchcraft beliefs are usually expressed in rumours and allusions. Chavhunduka is not certain whether witches use snakes, baboons, owls, hyenas, vultures, or bats as familiars (Harnischfeger 2000: 102). He thinks this is myth. If people like Chavhunduka, who claim to be experts, cannot reach conclusive evidence in matters of witchcraft, how can Zimbabwean magistrates and judges? Shall they believe a plaintiff who argues that the accused reached the scene in the guise of a snake or a hyena or has a *mubobo* because he/she is tired every morning?

Is it admissible evidence in court to accuse someone of being a witch simply because some fetishes in the form of a lion's teeth or a human skull, a live hyena or an elephant's head, etc., have been removed from a house, or compound? How does one prove that these items are the accused's "property?" *zvikwambo/thokoloshis* and have been sent to cause harm? What do these objects prove? Is it admissible that a bunch of herbs placed under the pillows of a married couple is responsible for restoring their love and affection after the husband has been unfaithful? How can judges determine what powers the fetishes possess? Is a court case going to be opened because of this type of flimsy evidence, or because of forced confessions of witchcraft? Witch trials encourage arbitrary judgments, for they can be used to solve personal vendettas.

The elite use the Witchdoctors are the disciplinarians in their communities, a situation which they exploit in a court of law. Local Zimbabwean beliefs and circumstantial evidence are used to

pass judgment. The witchdoctor gives evidence based on findings at the witch hunt ceremony in the village, and then displays the physical material proof of witchcraft. For example, if a live owl or hare is found in one's granary (*dura*), the so-called witch is convicted by the magistrate or judge. The issue with the courts is whether people are cheated by witchdoctors who claim to protect their clients against the malevolence of witches. Are the courts able to contend with witchcraft for what it is? Accusing someone of being a witch and dragging them to court is the best way to intimidate one's political foes. For example Mugabe accused Mavhaire of being a witch; Mwonzora was brought before the law courts for calling Mugabe a witch but was acquitted.

Mob justice does prevail in such cases as shown by a judge in Cameroon who concluded in a case that, even if the law in the strict sense did not allow action against such a witch, the court should take account of the wishes of the local community, which evidently wanted to get rid of someone unanimously suspected of witchcraft (Geschiere and Fisiy 1994: 335). Such reasoning shows that the courts are not able to solve the problems of witchcraft. Witchcraft cases are always psychological, sociological and political in nature. Diwan's study of judicial reasoning in Africa demonstrates that "while African judges generally tend to give preference to state legal norms over norms underlying popular beliefs on witchcraft when the two conflict, judges do not give absolute superiority to such state legal norms" (Diwan 2004). Occasionally, judges consider witchcraft to be a mitigating factor, but most judges tend to go with the general belief in the global village – modernization based on science and technology.

The legal system which Zimbabwe is using to sniff out the so-called witches was used in Europe and North America without any success (Watson 2006). What makes Zimbabweans believe that the legal system which failed to stamp out witchcraft beliefs and practices in Europe and North

America, in fact all over the world, will succeed in Zimbabwe? The legal route will fail in Zimbabwe as it has failed everywhere.

### **Modernization as a Way of Eradicating Witchcraft Beliefs and Practices**

In order to end witchcraft practices and beliefs Zimbabweans must embrace science and technology, which can help their economy by creating employment and financial security and stability. Zimbabweans should have jobs which pay them well and fairly. With financial stability Zimbabweans will have the ability to take care of their economic and social needs and they will be less inclined to believe and rely on witchcraft. There will be less economic disparity. People will be less inclined to believe in witchcraft accusations and counter-accusations of witchcraft will die.

Zimbabweans should emulate people in Europe and North America who once believed in witchcraft but now believe in science and technology, have better paying jobs and are wealthier than they were two centuries ago. These societies have accepted the scientific and technological ways of explaining the world. The development and use of science and technology have made the material lives of Europeans and North Americans more comfortable. Most have better food, better housing, and access to health care and education than they did on the past. The material wealth gained through the practical application of science and technology is visible in those societies.

Adult Zimbabweans are some of the most educated people in Africa, but do not have a broad and deep scientific and technological world view. Does it then mean that their academic training was lacking? No, what it reflects is that their education has failed to be transformed into well-paying jobs and material success. When education fails to lead to material success people try other methods. For Zimbabweans witchcraft is that method. Belief in witchcraft in its multifarious



forms is also a valid manifestation of Zimbabwe's scientific and technological backwardness. Zimbabwe has a magic culture, not a culture which embraces science and technology although scientific rationalism is universal and true. Just as the psychotherapist uses psychoanalysis to treat those schizophrenics who are treatable (Kato 1970: 387), so must Zimbabweans embrace industrialization, science and technology over witchcraft.

What Zimbabweans need is a deeper and broader scientific and technological world view, and a culture that eschews witchcraft beliefs and practices. Zimbabweans use witchcraft in the hope of living a life of affluence. Flamboyant lifestyles are found all over the world. In other continents such as Europe, America and Australia which are deeply involved in consumerism there are strong scientific and technological cultures. Education in those fields leads to employment and material success; there is no need for the belief in, and practice of witchcraft beliefs and practices.

The unscientific minds of some Zimbabweans do not understand natural phenomena. For example, why do some people harvest more grain than others in the same geographical area and climatic conditions? Why some people are pilots, computer engineers and others not? They do not understand that some people use modern techniques of farming such as the use of fertilizers and irrigation; that some went to school and became professionals. The unscientific and non-technological mind does not use fertilizers and irrigation, instead it goes to witchdoctors to buy witchcraft (*divise*) so that they will harvest more than others. The explanation for the failure to transform the education acquired into material wealth and an unscientific and non-technological mind—as is the case with most Zimbabweans—lies in magic. People who believe in witchcraft are of the opinion that in order to be successful in all aspects of life, they should not work hard, not embrace science and technology, but use magic. This belief does not bear fruit as shown by

the fact that most African soccer teams use magic and witchcraft but none of them has ever won the World Soccer Cup.

Supernatural beliefs, of course, are not confined to African cultures, they are found all over the world including the very developed countries for example the Europe and North America which have very deep Christian (supernatural) beliefs. Unlike Europe and North America, which do not have witchcraft as their dominant cultural supernatural belief, Africa does. The Europeans and North Americans have attained material wealth and economic prosperity through education. This is not the case in Africa. The cultures of Europe and North America, in which science and technology are flourishing, and in which witchcraft beliefs and practices have been eradicated are essentially secular in their approach to and understanding of the world. That view of the world is naturalistic, or scientific and technological in direction. Westerners look at the world objectively. All things are believed to be in a certain, unchanging order and with an autonomous life to the world and the things in the world. The world is seen as rational and normal. The belief is that it is possible to comprehend what is going on in the world if it is investigated. The scientific perception of the world tends to exclude the belief in the spiritual realm. (Jenkins, 2002). It is the source of increasing western secularism. The world is viewed as mechanical, changeless, ordered and normal. Reality is believed to follow a set order, with anticipated examples. Logic is also believed to be linear.

I suggest that Zimbabweans should adopt a form of modernization that is compatible with a Zimbabwean worldview, which is relational and believes in spirits in nature, and preternatural entities that ‘conspire to turn the course of one’s fate’. This worldview is widely diffused among Zimbabweans as was seen the lyrics to Macheso, a song of the (IAM) and speeches by Zimbabwean top political leaders, including Mugabe, Chamisa and Mwonozora. This worldview

could be integrated with a commitment to modern technology by eliminating corruption, poverty, unemployment and increase education which can be utilized to produce material wealth. Zimbabwean spirituality and religiosity could be integrated with science and technology. Witchcraft beliefs and practices could be eliminated from Zimbabwean spirituality and religiosity. The author is not arguing that Zimbabweans need to totally follow colonial and western morality and abandon Zimbabwean world views for western ones. Zimbabweans should adopt a scientific and technological culture which respects their cultural and spiritual values. The Zimbabwean worldview in which modernity (science and technology) should be used is considered to be essentially spiritual and religious. All that exists is spiritual, a portion of one undivided whole (Jenkins, 2002). All of reality is one; humans share the world with spiritual realities. All things are seen to be related or connected; everything is united in existence (Jenkins, 2002). Zimbabwean philosophy is that one cannot be objective in a spiritual and religious world for one is part of it. There is the belief that everything that is done and happens involves one as well as everything else. The Zimbabwean world view is relational. Events and relationships are seen as the principal components of reality. Zimbabweans have a dynamic and an active view of the world. All things in the world are believed to be alive; moving and ever-changing. They are not static and mechanical. Inanimate objects such as rocks, rivers and trees are believed to have spirits and to be dynamic. They are also believed to speak, to react, and to relate with all other things in the universe. Zimbabweans are not interested in controlling reality but with adapting, adjusting, and relating to it.

The world is not anthropocentric- human centred and must be interpreted in reference to the whole of creation. Cosmic forces are neither exclusively animate nor inanimate. The universe is personal for it responds to signs, symbols, gestures, rituals and gifts. The universe is intelligent

for it discerns good and bad social relationships. Zimbabwean culture should be a cultural foundation on which Zimbabwe should become scientifically, technologically and economically developed in order to educate her citizens and give them access to economic security. That, and that alone, will put an end witchcraft beliefs and practices in their culture and society.

The majority of educated Zimbabweans are not employed; some are under-employed and receive wages and salaries significantly below the poverty line. Bewitching a relative or a neighbor because he/she is rich is their means of gaining wealth the question to be asked is: “Will increased educational, scientific, technological and economic advancements among Zimbabweans encourage them to abandon witchcraft?” Modernity as an alternative shows that this it is the way to foster economic growth and gain. How do we give Zimbabweans access to educational, scientific, technological and economic power? How do we convince them that this will work? This can be done in practical terms given the socio-economic environment in Zimbabwe. How can witchcraft be eradicated in cultural terms? Having education, science, technology and material wealth alone will not make Zimbabweans move away from witchcraft. Education, science and technology alone will not empower Zimbabweans. They will cling to witchcraft. Witchcraft and its practice are symptoms of and fostered by socio-economic injustice, inequality and corruption. Scientific technology and education are a start, but will not eradicate witchcraft beliefs and practices until there is economic growth and stability. Zimbabwe has economically collapsed because of unprecedented corruption in all facets of Zimbabwean society (Doig, 2006). Corruption has taken an ugly face primarily because it is being fuelled by the current macro-economic environment which is characterized by scarcity of most basic commodities as well as the temporary suspension of the rule of law by a corrupt ZANU- PF government (Doig, 2006). For witchcraft to be eradicated, corruption and socio-economic

injustices must be eliminated. This will empower Zimbabweans. Education, science and technology and the elimination of socio-economic injustices and corruption are needed by the people to empower themselves. Zimbabweans need equality to grow and develop using education, science and technology as tools.

### **Conclusion**

I have argued that the judicial system should not be used to eliminate witchcraft beliefs and practices in Zimbabwe. That has proven to be a futile exercise. Zimbabwe must rid itself of rampant corruption which has infested every aspect of its socio-economic and political life for corruption is the root cause of the poverty that leads into witchcraft beliefs and practices. The elimination of corruption, improved education and access to employment, housing and health care will eliminate the practice of witchcraft. Legislation and the courts cannot. But whatever the problems, introducing a witchcraft law, Act CLA23/2004 in 2006 is another sign that Zimbabwe's government is continuing to move away from modernization and placing more emphasis on the country's own archaic and destructive traditions. In every culture there are regressive and dangerous practices. There is no doubt that witchcraft is a dark patch on Zimbabwean culture. It is advisable for the government to retrace its steps to avoid plunging the nation into a chaotic abyss.

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**“To expiate the sins of his people”  
A Proposed Reading of ἰλάσκεσθαι in Hebrews 2:17**

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**Abstract:** The ἰλάσκομαι word-group in the NT has been disputed for some time. Differing theological interpretations have yet to agree on the intended meaning of ἰλάσκεσθαι in Hebrews 2:17. In this regard syntax and grammar will have to be considered. This article argues that different theological positions are insufficient in explaining the distinctiveness of this articular infinitive ἰλάσκεσθαι in the NT. Instead a syntactic analysis of the context will provide better implications for interpreting ἰλάσκεσθαι in Hebrews 2:17.

**Keywords:** ἰλάσκεσθαι, articular infinitive, expiation, propitiation, purpose clause, sacrifice of atonement, and voice in Hebrews 2:17.

## 1. Introduction

The ἰλάσκομαι word-group appears eight times in the NT (Matt 16:22; Luke 18:13; Rom 3:25; 1 John 2:2; 4:10; Heb 2:17; 8:12; 9:5). Only four, however, arguably imply either expiation (of human sins) or propitiation (of God’s wrath), namely, 1 John 2:2; 4:10, Rom 3:25, and Heb 2:17. As with the cognates ἰλασμός (1 John 2:2; 4:10) and ἰλαστήριον (Rom 3:25), the ἰλάσκεσθαι in Hebrews 2:17 has been under-discussed in recent decades.<sup>45</sup> A perusal of recent commentaries

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<sup>45</sup> Studies make little mention of ἰλάσκεσθαι in Hebrews 2:17. Cf. Adolf Deissmann, “Hilasterios und hilasterion: Eine lexikalische Studie,” *ZNW* 4 (1903): 193-212; Charles H. Dodd, “Hilaskesthai, Its Cognates, Derivatives and Synonyms in the Septuagint,” *JTS* 32 (1931): 352-60; F. Büchsel and J. Herrmann, “Hileos, hilaskomai, hilasmos, hilasterion,” *TWNT* 3 (1938): 300-24; T. W. Manson, “Hilasterion,” *JTS* 46 (1945): 1-10; L. Moraldi, “Sensus vocis hilasterion in Rom 3:25,” *VD* 26 (1948): 257-76; Leon Morris, “The Meaning of hilasterion in Romans 3:25,” *NTS* 2 (1955-56): 33-43; Norman H. Young, “C. H. Dodd, ‘Hilaskesthai’ and His Critics,” *EvQ* 48 (1976): 67-78; Norman H. Young, “‘Hilaskesthai’ and Related Words in the New Testament,” *EvQ* 55 (1983): 169-76; Jürgen Roloff, “Hilasterion, hilasmos,” *EDNT* 2 (1981): 455-57; Daniel A. Bailey, “Jesus as the Mercy Seat: The Semantics and Theology of Paul’s Use of *Hilasterion* in Romans 3:25,” *TynBul* 51 (2000):

indicates that this issue is uncontroversial outside of theological circles where substitutionary or exemplary atonement is defended.<sup>46</sup> Three theological positions are often held: (a) a mixed bag of elements with propitiatory-expiatory overtones for the atoning effect of Jesus' death; (b) the propitiatory-sense of the verb; and (c) the predominant expiatory connotation. Different readings of the ἱλάσκομαι group in the NT infer that such language as "sacrifice of atonement" represents an evasive way to construe 2:17. The purpose of this study is to show that different theological interpretations of Hebrews' use of the term ἱλάσκεσθαι in 2:17 are insufficient in explaining its distinctiveness in the NT, given its profuse image of sacrificial metaphors throughout the book. Instead a syntactic analysis of the context will provide other implications for interpreting ἱλάσκεσθαι in Hebrews 2:17.

### The Language of the "Sacrifice of Atonement" in Recent Years

As a mimetic theorist<sup>47</sup> of biblical studies and theology, René Girard describes the sacrificial theology of Hebrews as a halfway between OT practice of sacrifices and Jesus' death as a model for Christian practices of martyrdom. "The Epistle to the Hebrews re-enacts what is re-enacted

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155-58; Stefan Schreiber, "Das Weihegeschenk Gottes: Eine Deutung des Todes Jesu in Röm 3,25," *ZNW* 97 (2006): 88-110; Toan Do, "Jesus' Death as *Hilasmus* According to 1 John," in *The Death of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel* (ed. Gilbert Van Belle; Leuven: University Press, 2007), 537-53; Toan Do, "The LXX Background of ἱλαστήριον in Rom 3:25," in *Paul's Letter to the Romans* (ed. Udo Schnelle; Leuven: University Press, 2009), 641-57; Stephen Finlan and Daniel P. Bailey, "Atonement," in *The Eerdmans Dictionary of Early Judaism*, ed. Collins, John J., and Daniel C. Harlow (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 403-5; and Dirk Büchner, "Ἐξιλιάσασθαι: Appeasing God in the Septuagint Pentateuch," *JBL* 129 (2010): 237-260.

<sup>46</sup> E.g., Jeffrey S. Siker, "Yom Kippuring Passover: Recombinant Sacrifice in Early Christianity," in *Ritual and Metaphor: Sacrifice in the Bible*, ed. Christian A. Eberhart (Atlanta: SBL, 2011), 65-82, here 65, defends "how early Christians blended language from Yom Kippur and Passover that both blurred and redefined the meaning of these central ritual observances, so that Jesus came to be understood as sacrificial lamb and scapegoat at the same time."

<sup>47</sup> See this self-description by René Girard, "Violence Renounced: Response by René Girard," *Violence Renounced: René Girard, Biblical Studies, and Peacemaking*, ed. Willard M. Swartley (Telford: Pandora, 2000), 308-320, here 308.

in all earlier formulations of sacrifices.”<sup>48</sup> According to his reviewers,<sup>49</sup> Girard’s theory attempts to prove that the Bible retells its violent stories in order to bring forth the role of violence in structuring both religion and culture. His theory quickly prompts a recent collection of essays, theming around the “violence renounced.”<sup>50</sup>

One essay in this volume stands out as directly related to the “sacrifice of atonement” as an intrusive way to interpret the ἰλάσκεσθαι in Hebrews 2:17. Reappraising Girard’s theory, for example, Michael Hardin argues that “Hebrews subverts the sacrificial process, albeit under cover of sacrificial language.”<sup>51</sup> Granting the descriptive violent stories in the Bible, Hardin observes that “the epistle to the Hebrews does indeed demystify violence but through personalist categories.”<sup>52</sup> In this way, the author of Hebrews shows that “Jesus does not repay humanity with the violence it dealt him. By not participating in violence, Jesus breaks the mechanism of violence and opens the way for a new obedience.”<sup>53</sup> Hardin believes that “this letter, while using the language of sacrifice, rejects all connections between violence and the sacred. Instead Hebrews offers a new paradigm of what real self-giving (human and divine) is all about.”<sup>54</sup> In his response, Loren L. Johns reiterates specific approval of Hardin’s overall argument, noting

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<sup>48</sup> René Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (Stanford: University Press, 1987), 227-31.

<sup>49</sup> Robert North, “Violence and the Bible: The Girard Connection,” *CBQ* 47 (1985), 1-27; Garland Knott, “The God of Victims: René Girard and the Future of Religious Education,” *Religious Education* 86 (1991):399-412; J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 2 ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 72-82, esp. 77.

<sup>50</sup> Willard M. Swartley, ed., *Violence Renounced: René Girard, Biblical Studies, and Peacemaking* (Telford: Pandora, 2000).

<sup>51</sup> Michael Hardin, “Sacrificial Language in Hebrews: Reappraising René Girard,” in *Violence Renounced: René Girard, Biblical Studies, and Peacemaking*, ed. Willard M. Swartley (Telford: Pandora, 2000), 103-119, here 103.

<sup>52</sup> Hardin, “Sacrificial Language,” 105.

<sup>53</sup> Hardin, “Sacrificial Language,” 111.

<sup>54</sup> Hardin, “Sacrificial Language,” 116.

that “it [Hebrews] emphasizes Jesus’ death as a *self*-offering – a self-offering that attenuates or repudiates the scapegoat mechanism.”<sup>55</sup>

It seems that theological language employed by modern scholars to explain the death of Jesus in the letter to the Hebrews has become a conundrum in an attempt to understand the use of ἰλάσκεσθαι in Hebrews 2:17. The central question in this pervasive use of “sacrifice of atonement” is whether the author employs ἰλάσκεσθαι in Hebrews 2:17 to reify its sacrifice theology.

### 3. The Verb ἰλάσκεσθαι in Hebrews 2:17

In recent years the Septuagint Pentateuch of the ἰλάσκομαι word-group has been revisited. Focus often falls on the collective findings of the contextual uses of the verb. Dirk Büchner has traced various uses of the ἰλάσκομαι word-group in the pre-NT times.<sup>56</sup> For the verb and its compound,<sup>57</sup> Büchner observes that “The meaning of ‘expiate’ is not clear enough to be demonstrable”<sup>58</sup> in either extrabiblical or LXX uses. To provide implications for lexicography regarding the ἰλάσκομαι word-group, Büchner proposes the following:

The meaning of the word [group ἰλάσκομαι] for the cultic portions of the Pentateuch is, as one expects from Egyptian *koinē* and standard Greek, “appease,” or “propitiate” (German *gnädig stimmen*). It cannot be said that in the LXX a secular and sacred use are to be distinguished, or that a dual meaning of appease as well as cleanse occurs. In fact, I have argued that no shift or development in meaning is required. Greek speakers would in all likelihood have recognized an abbreviated formula with a deity understood.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Loren L. Johns, “A Better Sacrifice’ or ‘Better Than Sacrifice’? Response to Michael Hardin’s ‘Sacrificial Language in Hebrews,’” in *Violence Renounced: René Girard, Biblical Studies, and Peacemaking*, ed. Willard M. Swartley (Telford: Pandora, 2000), 120-31, here 123.

<sup>56</sup> Büchner, “Ἐξιλάσασθαι: Appeasing God,” 237-260.

<sup>57</sup> For a list of this compound verb, see Do, “Jesus’ Death as *Hilasmōs* According to 1 John,” 539-40.

<sup>58</sup> Büchner, “Ἐξιλάσασθαι: Appeasing God,” 244.

<sup>59</sup> Büchner, “Ἐξιλάσασθαι: Appeasing God,” 254.

Yet scholars have long acknowledged the ambiguity that both the Hebrew and Greek roots of this word-group offer.<sup>60</sup> In examining the origin and context of the Hebrew roots of this word-group, Yitzhaq Feder arrives at a different conclusion than that of Büchner's.<sup>61</sup> "Whereas the earliest inscriptional evidence of this verb reflects the sense 'propitiate,'" Feder observes, "its use in the Septuagint indicates a transition to 'expiate.'"<sup>62</sup> In addition, when this word-group is employed in the NT, its usage seems to have acquired a new shift in meaning and syntax. In what follows I shall present three oft-held positions for the verb the ἱλάσκεσθαι in Hebrews 2:17.

### 3.1. *The Mixed-Bag Elements of the Propitiatory-Expiatory Sense in ἱλάσκεσθαι*

This middle stance is relatively new. The decision to present its argument first is twofold. For one, it tends to ease debate between those strongly arguing for the propitiatory sense and those favoring the dominant meaning of expiation for ἱλάσκεσθαι. This gives the impression of a balanced approach to the topic. For another, when pressed to account for a definitive stance, one is less capable of precision and can refer to the indecisive, multi-meanings of this verb in Hebrews (or its word-group) based on its philological and lexical definitions.<sup>63</sup>

Craig R. Koester argues for the atoning effects of ἱλάσκεσθαι in Hebrews 2:17 based on the Levitical uses of ἐξιλάσκομαι (Lev 16:6, 11, 17, etc.) He defines ἱλάσκεσθαι as follows:

Hebrews says that Christ makes atonement (*hilaskomai*, Heb 2:17) in a manner that is comparable to the biblical rituals for the Day of Atonement. . . . Atonement has two aspects. First, expiation entails removal of the sin that caused the rift in the relationship

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<sup>60</sup> Finlan and Bailey, "Atonement," 403.

<sup>61</sup> Yitzhaq Feder, *Blood Expiation in Hittite and Biblical Ritual: Origins, Context, and Meaning* (WAWSS 2; Atlanta: SBL, 2011), 194-95, 254-55.

<sup>62</sup> Feder, *Blood Expiation in Hittite and Biblical Ritual*, 195.

<sup>63</sup> Interpreters and philologists have admitted the abstract notions of propitiation, expiation, and atonement for the ἱλάσκομαι word-group. Cf. Bailey, "Jesus as the Mercy Seat," 156; Johan Lust, Erik Eynikel, and Katrin Hauspie, *Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint*, rev. ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2003), 287; and BDAG, 473-74.

between a person and God. . . . The second dimension of atonement is propitiation, which has to do with averting the wrath of God.<sup>64</sup>

William R. G. Loader has a similar approach to this two-pronged position. For him, the force of the argument in Hebrews 2:5-18 must be viewed from the perspective of 2:18.<sup>65</sup>

For Loader, the argument in Hebrews 2:17-18 is based neither on propitiation or expiation, but on the author's intention to present Jesus as a faithful and merciful high priest.

The arguments held in this mixed-bag position point to two facts. As in Loader's, one can ignore the scholarly debate on the propitiation and expiation for the verb *ἰλάσκεσθαι* in Hebrews 2:17. Instead, focus is on the faithful and merciful dimensions of Jesus as the high priest. Similar to Koester, one should be pleased to accept the dual aspects of *ἰλάσκεσθαι* in Hebrews 2:17, namely, both propitiation and expiation. This open-ended viewpoint makes the matter in scholarly discussions easier and lighter. However, in facing challenging theological and exegetical issues commentators look for explanations that are more satisfactory.

### 3.2. *The Propitiatory-Sense of the Verb ἰλάσκεσθαι*

The argument held in this second position is older.<sup>66</sup> In his commentary on Hebrews, Philip E. Hughes renders *ἰλάσκεσθαι* in Hebrews 2:17 as follows:

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<sup>64</sup> Craig R. Koester, *Hebrews: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 36; New York: Doubleday, 2001), 121-22, and 241. While acknowledging the dual aspects of this verb, Koester also speaks of the dominant expiatory-sense of *ἰλάσκεσθαι* in Heb 2:17.

<sup>65</sup> William R. G. Loader, *Sohn und Hoherpriester: Eine traditionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung zur Christologie des Hebräerbriefes* (WMANT 53; Düsseldorf: Neukirchener Verlag, 1981), 136, states: "Nur bei Beachtung dieses Sachverhalts kann die "Intention" des Vf klar herausgestellt werden. Daß besonders 2:17 in dieser Hinsicht falsch eingeordnet worden ist, hat die Auslegung des Gesamtabschnittes erheblich erschwert. Aber gerade V 18 – die Inclusion, die 2:10 und 2:17f zusammenrückt – läßt die Intention des Vf deutlich erkennen. Nicht der Sühnegedanke steht im Vordergrund der Argumentation des Vf, sondern das Treusein und die Barmherzigkeit."

<sup>66</sup> See Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983 [1955]), 202-5; David Hill, *Greek Words and Hebrew Meanings: Studies in the Semantics of Soteriological Terms* (SNTSMS 5; Cambridge: University Press, 1967), 23-48. See a review

*How could it be otherwise* when the object of his coming was “to make propitiation for the sins of the people.” The Greek verb used here means to render propitious or well disposed, to conciliate, and when used intransitively, as in this verse, to make propitiation for (RV, ASV). *Misconceptions* of the doctrine of propitiation have been chiefly responsible for the modern and mistaken attempt to give the verb the sense of expiate (NEB) or make expiation for (RSV). Expiation is certainly an important aspect of the work of Christ and its effects, but it is the doctrine of propitiation with which our author confronts us at this point. . . . He [God] has, so to speak, propitiated himself in our place, thereby achieving the reconciliation to himself of mankind, who otherwise were hopelessly alienated and under the [sic] condemnation because of sin.<sup>67</sup>

Three points can be adduced negatively against Hughes’ argument. First, when using the phrase “How could it be otherwise,” Hughes practically leaves no room for scholarly discussions. At most one’s interpretation can only be based on the principle of probabilities. Second, Hughes’ charge against modern exegesis of its “misconceptions of the doctrine of propitiation” can easily be understood as a disregard of others’ scholarly opinions. Because of the precariousness in one’s attempt to grasp the meaning of a certain text, an interpretation of one exegete is at best characterized as “a” contribution to the scholarly community. Finally, in his claim that God has propitiated himself, Hughes makes no reference to any texts in Hebrews. In fact nowhere in Hebrews does the author make any implicit or explicit reference to God propitiating himself. Hughes bases himself not on Hebrews, but on other NT texts, i.e., 1 John 4:10; Rom 5:6, 8, 10; 2 Cor 5:18-21. In Rom 5:6-10 and 2 Cor 5:18-21, Paul uses *καταλάσσω* to speak of the sinners’ privilege to reconcile or make friendship with God. In both contexts the force of Paul’s argument is neither propitiation nor expiation, but rather God’s love in taking the initiative to forgive. The thrust of 1 John 4:10, in Hughes’ reference, must also be interpreted against the

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of the position held by Leon and Hill in Do, “Jesus’ Death as *Hilasmós* According to 1 John,” 539-43.

<sup>67</sup> Philip E. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 121-22. Italic added.

background of divine love (ἀγάπη), not the act of propitiating oneself (God). Evidently, Hughes' argument has not been accepted by scholars.<sup>68</sup>

### 3.3. *The Expiatory-Connotations of the Verb ἰλάσκεσθαι*

The argument held in this third position is probably the oldest. It goes back to 1931 when C. H. Dodd launches a study on the word-group related to ἰλάσκομαι.<sup>69</sup> Dodd's initial study of the linguistic distinction of this word-group related to ἰλάσκομαι eventually gains support. Stanislas Lyonnet is one of those who, while working with Dodd, first studies the related vocabulary of ἰλάσκομαι. In 1959 and 1960,<sup>70</sup> Lyonnet produces two comparative studies on the meaning of expiation and intercession based on the LXX understanding of the ancient practices of the ritual sacrifice and the Vulgate's total absorption with these practices.<sup>71</sup>

Two points can be drawn from Lyonnet's argument. First, the disappearance of the ancient temple service with a stress on propitiation had long been replaced by the semantic evolution with a preferred spiritual meaning of expiation. This evolution takes place in the expiatory act of Jesus' death. The author lays strong emphases on the marked differences between Jesus as the ἀρχιερεύς (2:17) and the ancient cultic practices (9:1-10). While the former priests and high priests are many (7:23), their cultic practices have to be repeated every year and limited to

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<sup>68</sup> See a review of Hughes' argument by Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1999), 96 n. 192.

<sup>69</sup> See Dodd, "Hilaskesthai, Its Cognates, Derivatives and Synonyms in the Septuagint," 352-60.

<sup>70</sup> Stanislas Lyonnet, "Expiation et intercession: A propos d'une traduction de saint Jérôme," *Bib* 40 (1959): 885-901; Stanislas Lyonnet, "Expiation et intercession. Note complémentaires: le témoignage des anciennes versions latines," *Bib* 41 (1960): 158-67.

<sup>71</sup> Lyonnet, "Expiation et intercession: A propos," 896-97, state: "Assurément, la cessation du service du Temple et, depuis bien plus longtemps; la disparition du 'propitiatoire' ont pu favoriser cette évolution sémantique, ou si l'on préfère cette 'spiritualisation' de la notion d'expiation, d'ailleurs conforme à ce qui s'est passé pour d'autres termes du vocabulaire sacrificiel. . . . [S]aint Jérôme témoignera plus tard en traduisant d'une façon si constante le terme technique du rite de l'expiation par un verbe désignant la prière d'intercession."



human conditions (5:3; 7:27a; 9:7, 25). Contrast to this view is Jesus' death as the high priest, who is without sin (4:15; 9:14), whose sacrificial effect is perfect (7:28; 9:11), and *once-and-for-all* (7:27b; 9:11-14:23-28; 10:1-22). On this point, A. N. Chester notes: "Hence we find in Hebrews nothing less than a radical rejection of the whole Jewish cult. . . . Yet at the same time he [the author] insists on the Jewish cultic conditions and means of atonement being met in full [9:22-23; cf. Lev 16:1-34]."<sup>72</sup> In Hebrews' abolishment of the old cult, the priesthood of Jesus is radically different from that of the Mosaic institution.<sup>73</sup>

According to Lyonnet, Jerome's preference of the expiatory connotations in the process of translating the OT text into his Vulgate version must be seen as part of the intercessory prayers. If Lyonnet is correct, we find that the death of Jesus has brought about several converging elements regarding the intercessory-expiatory overtone. The expiatory efficacy of Jesus' death is clearly spelled out in Hebrews 2:16, 18. As a human being, Jesus first came to help his brothers and sisters – the descendants of Abraham (2:16). As a glorified Son of God, Jesus, having tasted suffering and death, is seated at the right hand of God to intercede for his fellow human beings (2:18; cf. 6:20).<sup>74</sup> The intercessory aspect of the glorified Christ functions as the effect of the heavenly high priesthood of Jesus. The most effective result that the proclamation and designation of Jesus as the ἀρχιερεύς bring about is predominantly the expiatory efficacy of his death presented by the author's use of ἰλάσκεσθαι (Heb 2:17). Harold W. Attridge supports this interpretation. The verbs ἰλάσκομαι and ἐξιλάσκομαι in the LXX had come to be used for

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<sup>72</sup> A. N. Chester, "Hebrews: The Final Sacrifice," in *Sacrifice and Redemption: Durham Essays in Theology* (Cambridge: University Press, 1991), 57-72, here 64.

<sup>73</sup> Leopold Sabourin, *Priesthood: A Comparative Study* (SHR 25; Leiden: Brill, 1973), 179-229, esp. 180; Schaefer, "Relationship," 382.

<sup>74</sup> The thesis that Jesus' intercession is related to his high priesthood has been argued by Schaefer, "Relationship," 359-85. Schaefer argues that the intercessory aspect of Jesus as the ἀρχιερεύς in Hebrews has to be understood from the servant messianic perspective. Also Sabourin, *Priesthood*, 208-209.

“expiation” as well as “propitiation.” “In Hebrews,” he observes, “Christ’s sacrifice is always directed at removing sin and its effect, not at propitiating God.”<sup>75</sup>

The three positions presented above largely show the theological dilemmas in interpreting the ἰλάσκομαι word-group. Outside its theological circles this verb seems uncontroversial. It is therefore important to evaluate some grammatical features of ἰλάσκεσθαι in Hebrews 2:17, keeping in mind its theological implications.

#### 4. *The Voice of the Verb ἰλάσκεσθαι*

In the NT the verbal form of the ἰλάσκομαι word-group occurs only twice: one time in Luke 18:13; the other Hebrews 2:17. But Luke 18:13 does not speak of the salvific work of Christ.<sup>76</sup>

In Hebrew 2:17, ἰλάσκεσθαι contains different connotations due to its compound verbal forms in the LXX and its meanings. In what follows I will explore some grammatical features of ἰλάσκεσθαι in Hebrews 2:17, hoping to shed further insights in its distinctive use.

In Hebrews 2:17, the phrase τὸ ἰλάσκεσθαι τὰς ἁμαρτίας τοῦ λαοῦ is disputed. The accusative plural of τὰς ἁμαρτίας is not unanimously cited by all witnesses. James Moffatt indicates that several MSS cite the object of ἰλάσκεσθαι in its dative plural ταῖς ἁμαρτίαις (A Ψ 5 33 623 913 *rell*).<sup>77</sup> The variant between ἁμαρτίας and ἁμαρτίαις indicates that some scribes have doubted the choice of the two nouns. Possibly certain scribes did alter the accusative to the dative plural. Leon Morris argued that the dative case occurs more often in this connection.<sup>78</sup> This may be true in some cases in the LXX. However, two precautions must be taken. First, there is no guarantee

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<sup>75</sup> Attridge, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 96 n. 192.

<sup>76</sup> See Morris, *Apostolic Preaching*, 184-213, esp. 202.

<sup>77</sup> James Moffatt, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (ICC 12, 3 ed.; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1951), 39. Cf. also the critical apparatus of NA<sup>27</sup>, s.v. Heb 2:17.

<sup>78</sup> Morris, *Apostolic Preaching*, 205. Hill, *Greek Words and Hebrew Meanings*, 25, states: “On some occasions Morris appears to force evidence to support his argument.”

that “some” of the scribes in Hebrews follow the LXX pattern that this verb must be followed by a dative.<sup>79</sup> In the LXX the dative is often of a person asking God to forgive him/her. It alludes to an exhortative meaning of “be merciful or gracious to someone.” Luke 18:13 is a clear imitation of this construction. Second, when this verb occurs in the LXX with a dative as its object, the subject of the verb is often God, and not Jesus. In such instances, the usage varies from case to case and is not always consistent.<sup>80</sup> In the NT, the verbal form of this ἰλάσκομαι word-group does not appear frequently enough (Heb 2:17 and Luke 18:13). Luke 18:13 is the only dative case functioning as the object of the verb in referring to the publican who asks God, not Jesus, to be merciful. The verbal ἰλάσκομαι in Luke 18:13 carries no lexical meaning for expiation or propitiation. Hebrews 2:17 is quite different. The printing of τὰς ἀμαρτίας (accusative plural) in NA<sup>27</sup> is supported by all major and more superior MSS. Thus, to determine the more probable sense of ἰλάσκεσθαι in Hebrews 2:17, we have to probe its context. The verb ἰλάσκεσθαι is employed as the infinitive form of ἰλάσκομαι, and its voice is grammatically construed as the middle deponent.<sup>81</sup> Two points need explanation. First, “A verb in the middle voice shows that the subject of the verb does the action, but that the action somehow returns to the subject, that the subject has a special interest in the action of the verb.”<sup>82</sup> Verbs in the middle voice can be either transitive or intransitive. If the middle voice of ἰλάσκεσθαι is treated as transitive, then it is appropriate to take the accusative plural τὰς ἀμαρτίας as its direct object. In this case, the dative plural ταῖς ἀμαρτίαις renders less

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<sup>79</sup> Büchner, “Ἐξιλάσασθαι: Appeasing God,” 249-50.

<sup>80</sup> When this happens in the LXX, the object almost always refers to a “certain” person in dative, a “certain” thing in both dative and accusative. See Ex 32:14; 2 Kgs 5:18 (2x); 24:4; Ps 24:11; 64:4; 77:38; 78:9; 2 Chron 6:30; Lam 3:42; Esth 4:17.

<sup>81</sup> BDAG, 473.

<sup>82</sup> Hardy Hansen and Gerald M. Quinn, *Greek: An Intensive Course* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1992 [1978]), 163.

appropriate the phrase “to expiate the sins of the people.” If the middle voice of ἰλάσκεσθαι is construed as intransitive, both the accusative and dative plural of ἁμαρτία affects the structure of the phrase. Then τὰς ἁμαρτίας and/or ταῖς ἁμαρτίαις are understood as accusative and/or dative of respect; and the phrase can be translated as either “to expiate with regard to the sins of the people” or “to make propitiation [propitiate himself] with regard to the sins of the people.” If ἰλάσκεσθαι is intransitive, one has the impression that whoever does the action of remitting the sins of the people, he does it for himself and for his own sake. This intransitive rendering of ἰλάσκεσθαι has been favored by Hughes, who argues that God has propitiated himself on our behalf.<sup>83</sup> But Hughes seems to have overlooked two important points. For one, the subject of the verb here is not God as it is sometimes in the LXX. In Hebrews 2:17, Jesus is the subject of the verb, who does the action of expiating the sins of the people. For another, Hughes has not paid attention to the second element of the infinitive ἰλάσκεσθαι, namely, its being deponent in form. This leads us to the second grammatical explanation.

Second, “Verbs which lack an active voice, and which show only middle or passive forms, are called deponent verbs. . . . Since middle deponent verbs lack an active voice in contrast to which the middle can have the force of ‘having something done’ or ‘doing something for oneself,’ a middle deponent is translated by an English active verb with no additional middle force.”<sup>84</sup> In classical Greek, there is no formal explanation for either why a verb expresses certain actions in the middle voice or how to determine a certain verb deponent. One recognizes its voice through the pattern of the verb’s principal parts. Liddell and Scott list the existing principal parts of this verb: (part 1) ἰλάσκομαι (present middle deponent); (part 2) ἰλάσομαι or ἰλάξομαι (future middle deponent); (part 3) ἰλασάμην (1<sup>st</sup> aorist middle deponent); and (part 6) ἰλάσθην (aorist

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<sup>83</sup> Hughes, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 122, also 121 n. 123.

<sup>84</sup> Hansen and Quinn, *Greek: An Intensive Course*, 316.

passive).<sup>85</sup> It is grammatical that this infinitive ἰλάσκεσθαι appears as middle deponent.

According to the behavior of the middle deponent, τὸ ἰλάσκεσθαι should not be understood as intransitive and as taking a dative or accusative of respect. It is more explainable to conceive this infinitive to be transitive, so that the accusative following the verb becomes its direct object. In this sense, the discussion is left with two options in translating the middle deponent ἰλάσκεσθαι, namely, to expiate or to make propitiation.<sup>86</sup>

We can adhere to the dative plural ταῖς ἁμαρτίαις and render ἰλάσκεσθαι as “to propitiate or make propitiation with respect to the sins.” Furthermore, we should not confuse the dative plural in this case with that in Luke 18:13. There we find: ὁ θεός ἰλάσθητί μοι τῷ ἁμαρτωλῷ meaning “Lord, be merciful to me a sinner!”<sup>87</sup> Though the objects of the verb in both cases are dative, they are two different types of nouns: the former is an abstract noun (ταῖς ἁμαρτίαις); the latter a personal pronoun (μοι). If we insist on the sense of “to propitiate”, the infinitive is better interpreted as an intransitive. As shown above, however, the intransitive verb for this infinitive is less likely the case. If one stresses the sense of “to make propitiation,” the infinitive is now

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<sup>85</sup> H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, eds., *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: University Press, 1968 [1843]), 329. Because ἰλάσκομαι is middle deponent, principal parts fourth (perfect active) and fifth (perfect passive) do not exist. Also certain verbs are called passive deponent or partial deponent. The former has the aorist passive in form, but deponent or active in meaning. Thus, for instance, we have: βούλομαι (1), βουλήσομαι (2), lack (3), lack (4), βεβούλημαι (5), ἐβουλήθην (6 – aorist passive in form but active in meaning), meaning “want” or “desire.” The latter has the middle voice in certain principal parts, but not all six principal parts. Likewise, we have: ἀκούω (1), ἀκούσομαι (2 – deponent in form), ἤκουσα (3), ἀκήκοα (4), lack (5), ἠκούσθην (6), meaning “hear” or “listen to.” The forms of these two verbs often appear in the NT.

<sup>86</sup> Here I leave out the dual aspects of atonement argued by Koester, *Hebrews*, 121-22. For they do not help clarify specific arguments between propitiation and expiation.

<sup>87</sup> In Luke 18:13 the first aorist imperative passive ἰλάσθητι no longer carries the “exact” meaning of propitiating or expiating, but a passive sense “be gracious” or “be merciful.” Cf. Liddell and Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 329; and J. P. Louw and E. A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains: Introduction and Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1988), §84.75.

better understood as transitive. In this sense, however, the syntax does not support the presence of the dative plural ταῖς ἁμαρτίαις in the sentence, because it then means “to make propitiation with respect to the sins”. This is unlikely because, in the LXX, when the propitiatory sense is found in this word-group, it is often accompanied by the word for “wrath” or “anger” of God. The common construction in the LXX, where the subject is someone *other than* God and where the propitiatory sense is detected, would give the impression that he/she appeases God’s wrath. But in Hebrews 2:17,<sup>88</sup> the sense of divine wrath is entirely absent. Thus ταῖς ἁμαρτίαις is unlikely used in Hebrews 2:17 to be the direct object of the middle deponent ἰλάσκεσθαι. We can stand by the accusative plural τὰς ἁμαρτίας and render it as the direct object of the transitive middle deponent ἰλάσκεσθαι.<sup>89</sup> Then the phrase τὸ ἰλάσκεσθαι τὰς ἁμαρτίας τοῦ λαοῦ can be rendered as “to expiate the sins of the people.” This seems to be the better rendering of the verb-object agreement so as to establish the sense meaning of the construction. Not only is the accusative plural witnessed by the more superior MSS, but also the infinitive middle deponent ἰλάσκεσθαι makes better sense when it takes τὰς ἁμαρτίας as its direct object. Being middle deponent in form and voice, the infinitive ἰλάσκεσθαι has lost its middle force (i.e., the

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<sup>88</sup> Neither words nor implication for the divine wrath appears in Hebrews until 3:7 and 4:3. However, Koester, *Hebrews*, 122, argues that divine wrath is detected in the sacrificial death of Christ because of the dual aspects of atonement.

<sup>89</sup> Morris, *Apostolic Preaching*, 204; and Hughes, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 121 n. 123, consider τὰς ἁμαρτίας as the accusative of respect. The accusative of respect can be used interchangeably with the dative of respect. They differ in that the dative is used instrumentally and less specific while the accusative is to specify or limit the force of an adjective or verb, especially a passive verb or one indicating a state. Cf. Hansen and Quinn, *Greek: An Intensive Course*, 380.705; Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament with Scriptures, Subject, and Greek Word Indexes* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 203. Besides, in using the accusative or dative in this sense, its employment is often without the definite article, and rather less common in Attic and Koine Greek. Though the infinitive ἰλάσκεσθαι is middle/passive in form, it is deponent and active in meaning. Certainly, τὰς ἁμαρτίας is not used to limit the expiatory efficacy of the death of Christ; rather Christ’s death surpasses all effects of human sins because the action of his expiating is initiated by God’s love.

interest of the action of the verb returns to the subject). In this case, it is more difficult to establish the sense “God propitiating himself.” Rather the subject of ἰλάσκεσθαι does the action (i.e., expiating), not for his own sake, but for the sake of the object (i.e., the sins of the people). Hence, the active meaning of “expiating” should be perceived in this infinitive middle deponent ἰλάσκεσθαι. The phrase εἰς τὸ ἰλάσκεσθαι τὰς ἁμαρτίας τοῦ λαοῦ is grammatically and theologically directed at expiating sins, and not propitiating God’s wrath.<sup>90</sup>

The discussion thus far has looked at the verb-object agreement. Also important is the meaning of εἰς τὸ ἰλάσκεσθαι τὰς ἁμαρτίας τοῦ λαοῦ. In Hebrews 2:17, the one who expiates is Jesus himself; and his death implies the action of expiating. What makes special the construction of the infinitive is the preposition εἰς preceding τὸ ἰλάσκεσθαι.

Simply put, εἰς τὸ ἰλάσκεσθαι τὰς ἁμαρτίας τοῦ λαοῦ is an articular infinitive. The use of an articular infinitive is very common in Greek. In the NT, there are over 300 times when an articular infinitive is employed, and two-thirds of which are governed by a preposition.<sup>91</sup> In several occasions, Hebrews employs an articular infinitive preceded by εἰς. Worth noting is that τὸ ἰλάσκεσθαι preceded εἰς occurs for the first time here in Hebrews 2:17.<sup>92</sup> Beside its indication of motion *toward* or *into* a place, εἰς can also introduce a purpose clause.<sup>93</sup> The neuter τὸ preceded ἰλάσκεσθαι is the accusative singular. Grammatically speaking, this can be a purpose clause governed by εἰς. In Hebrews 2:17b, the fact that Jesus might become a faithful and

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<sup>90</sup> Attridge, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 96 n. 192.

<sup>91</sup> Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 610-11.

<sup>92</sup> Other similar constructions of this prepositional clause in Hebrews do not occur until rather later:

**εἰς τὸ ἐντυγχάνειν** ὑπὲρ αὐτῶν (7:25); Πᾶς γὰρ ἀρχιερεὺς **εἰς τὸ προσφέρειν** δῶρά τε καὶ θυσίας καθίσταται (8:3); καθαριεῖ τὴν συνείδησιν ἡμῶν ἀπὸ νεκρῶν ἔργων **εἰς τὸ λατρεύειν** θεῷ ζῶντι (9:14); **εἰς τὸ πολλῶν ἀνενεγκεῖν** ἁμαρτίας (9:28); **εἰς τὸ μὴ** ἐκ φαινομένων τὸ βλεπόμενον **γεγονέναι** (11:3); **εἰς τὸ μεταλαβεῖν** τῆς ἀγιότητος αὐτοῦ (12:10); and **εἰς τὸ ποιῆσαι** τὸ θέλημα αὐτοῦ (13:21). Bold type added.

<sup>93</sup> Hansen and Quinn, *Greek: An Intensive Course*, 32, 127-28.

merciful high priest should be seen *in view of* or *with the purpose of* his saving act. This is consistent with the reason for Jesus to be likened to his brothers and sisters (Heb 2:17a). Thus εἰς τὸ ἰλάσκεσθαι τὰς ἁμαρτίας τοῦ λαοῦ may be translated as “in order to [or with a purpose to] expiate the sins of the people”. This brings us to the last element of the infinitive middle deponent ἰλάσκεσθαι, namely, its being present in aspect.

As in the subjunctive, the optative, or the aorist and perfect infinitives, the present infinitive indicates aspect, not time. Here, τὸ ἰλάσκεσθαι indicates a progressive or repeated aspect. In Hebrews, the *once-for-all* expiating death of Jesus is implied in several uses of the adverbs ἅπαξ (9:27, 28)<sup>94</sup> and ἐφάπαξ (7:27; 9:12; 10:10).<sup>95</sup> So the effect of his expiatory act is lasting, and human sins may be expiated repeatedly.<sup>96</sup> While Jesus’ sacrificial death happened *once-for-all* (Heb 7:27; 9:12, 27, 28; 10:10), the expiatory efficacy of his self-giving is repeated and lasting. The present aspect of the infinitive middle deponent ἰλάσκεσθαι is to be interpreted with reference to ἅπαξ and ἐφάπαξ in Hebrews. In this sense, the expiatory efficacy of the verb ἰλάσκεσθαι is eminent and directed at removing human sins (Heb 2:17-18; 5:9; 9:12).

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<sup>94</sup> This adverb ἅπαξ is used more often in the NT: 14 times (2 Cor 11:25; Phil 4:16; 1 Thess 2:18; Heb 6:4; 9:7, 26, 27, 28; 10:2; 12:26, 27; 1 Pet 3:18; Jud 1:3, 5). Only three of these 14 times (Heb 9:27, 28; 1 Pet 3:18) refer to the *once-for-all* death of Jesus.

<sup>95</sup> The only other time when ἐφάπαξ is used occurs in Rom 6:10. In 1 Cor 15:6, Paul employs ἐφάπαξ, but there it does not denote the *once-for-all* death of Jesus.

<sup>96</sup> Albert Vanhoye, *Situation du Christ: Hébreux 1-2* (LD 58; Paris: 1969), 380, insists on the activity of the glorified Christ: “A cette fin, il utilise constamment l’aoriste grec, qui a cette valeur, et il exclut formellement le présent qui indiquerait une action continuée ou répétée (9:25). Or, ici, c’est l’infinitif présent (*hilaskesthai*) qu’il emploie, bien que cette forme soit, dans la Bible, moins fréquente que l’aoriste correspondant (Lev 1:4; 6:30; 8:15; etc.)” But Attridge, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 96 n. 193, disagrees with Vanhoye’s view on the present aspect of ἰλάσκεσθαι. In my opinion, the present aspect of ἰλάσκεσθαι has much to do with the expiatory efficacy of Jesus’ death.



5. *Implications for Interpreting ἱλάσκεσθαι in Hebrews 2:17*

For our purposes we will accept, with Stanislas Lyonnet and Harold W. Attridge, that the use of ἱλάσκεσθαι in Hebrews 2:17 may be best interpreted in terms of the mainstream NT understanding of Christ's death as a means "to expiate the sins of his people." The ἱλάσκομαι word-group in the LXX had carried both senses of "expiate" and "propitiate". This dual sense may have caused NT scholars to have different theological interpretations of this verb. Yet in Hebrews 2:17 the author has reinterpreted the present infinitive middle deponent ἱλάσκεσθαι to denote the *once-for-all* death of Jesus as a continuous effect in removing sins. Dirk Büchner sums up his study well. "Though certain LXX words and phrases have a purely symbolic function, later communities may have infused them with content that remains alien to standard Greek usage."<sup>97</sup> It is in the context of NT theology that the ἱλάσκεσθαι in Hebrews 2:17 was made distinctive.

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<sup>97</sup> Büchner, "Ἐξιλάσασθαι: Appeasing God," 256.