

# Mission and Spirit Religions

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## Introducing the Questions

There are a number of fundamental questions that I wish to share with you at this time. They concern the presence of spirit religions in parts of the world such as Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean. Has the Church in Europe and the rest of the Western world anything to learn from these spirit religions? Can these religions assist in our theological understanding? Have they insights as to how we might be more creative in the way we worship? Do they have anything to contribute as to how we might be more effective in mission and outreach?

## Vaudou - Spirit Religion in Haiti

I take as my starting point the phenomenon of *vaudou*. The word *vaudou* is derived from the Dahomean (West African) term *vodun* meaning spirit and therefore describes a spirit religion that was born in Africa. Its worship is based on the veneration of spirits, or *loas* as they are called. *Vaudou* came to the French and Créole speaking Caribbean Republic of Haiti at the turn of the sixteenth century when persons from Africa were seized and brought as slaves. The name Haiti means “land of many mountains”.

As a religion *vaudou* concentrates upon the worship of God, who is referred to as *Bondieu* (French for “good God”) and *Gran Met-la* (Créole for the “great master”). The Créole term can also be translated as “the grand master”, which is reminiscent of the highest rank attainable within Freemasonry. Although *vaudou* is an expression of African Traditional Religion, when it was transplanted onto Caribbean soil, not only did it develop and display elements of West African religions as practiced in Dahomey, Congo, Sudan, Senegal and Cameroun, but after a century or so, it also reflected elements of French Catholicism, Amerindian tribal religions and Masonry. The reason for Catholic influence was that upon arrival in Saint Domingue, there had to be conformity with an article of the Code Noir of 1685 which stipulated that all slaves had to be baptized and instructed in the Catholic faith. As far as Masonic influence is concerned, towards the end of the eighteenth century there were lodges in Saint Domingue that included freed slaves. We are therefore justified if we describe *vaudou* as syncretistic, given that we detect in it attempts to reconcile some main influences or schools of thought.

## Methodist Minister Encounters Vaudou Priest

Several years ago on my very first assignment as a young Methodist Probationer Minister in Haiti I had pastoral care of four congregations, one of which was in Giotte. This was a little rural community near to Leogane, just under an hour’s drive from where I lived in Petionville, a suburb of the capital city, Port-au-Prince. Public transport consisted of *tap-taps* which were brightly coloured local buses with religious slogans clearly printed on the front. However as a Methodist minister I was assigned a car which made travelling a little less stressful than it would have been on the *tap taps*. To get to Giotte meant that I could drive myself for most of the journey, then when the terrain would not allow it, the vehicle had to be parked, I would alight, cross a stream and undertake the rest of the journey on foot.

I used to invest more time doing pastoral work within Carrefour, the largest of the four congregations. For Mellier, Thor and Giotte, it was usually the preacher who lived on site would do the bulk of visitations, including interviews for baptisms and weddings. Giotte in those days did not have a school or recognized educational institution. Persons had to travel outside of the community to be educated.

On one of the Sundays when I was planned to administer the sacrament of Holy Communion at Giotte, I arrived at the chapel and was informed that there was also to be the sacrament of Holy Baptism. A baby girl was to be baptized. Under such circumstances, I would not necessarily know whose child it was. What I did know was that the leaders had already done the necessary baptismal counseling with the parents. The service got underway, and when it came to the baptism, I realized that only one of the parents, the

mother, was present. The father was not. However there were church members who assumed the role of sponsors, so in keeping with the regulations of the church, I baptized the infant.

After the service I was taken to the home of the child's father. Mind you, I had not requested to see him. I had not even been told why he had absented himself from the baptism. It was the expressed wish of the church steward on duty that I paid the visit, so I went. When we got to the house I was informed that he was not a member of the Methodist Church. He was a *houngan* or *vaudou* priest. I don't recall all the facts, whether he and the child's mother were in an intimate relationship or whether this had been him, using his position of prestige in the community – for that is what *vaudou* priests enjoyed - to father as many children as he pleased. But he had not asked to see me and in fact displayed anger towards those church members who had escorted me to his house.

What an awkward situation! I was ill prepared for the confrontation. My wife was present with me and to this day, when she tells the story of what transpired afterwards, she never stops laughing. Why? I had been so overcome by the shock of learning that this was a *vaudou* priest, that my first reaction was to pose what she considered to be a rather daft question: "Did you go to school here?" It really was a silly question because there were no schools in the vicinity. Maybe if I were more knowledgeable, I would realize that if one was indeed a *houngan*, then part of the education for the priesthood would involve training in a more developed environment than that of Giotte.

### **Fear Of / Respect For ..... Each Other's Religion?**

Upon reflection, I can say that it was because I was relatively new to Haiti and had heard so much about *vaudou* before going there, that I just could not believe that I had unexpectedly come face to face with a *houngan*. I did not necessarily fear the *vaudou* religion or its priests, because I convinced myself that as a Christian and a minister of the Gospel, I place my confidence in God Almighty. So it was more a question of me being overcome with surprise, hence my confused state.

That Sunday morning I learned a lot about *vaudou*. Why would a *vaudou* priest want or agree to his child being baptized into Christianity? Why did the members of that congregation lend their support to the baptism taking place by ensuring that there were the sponsors of the child from among the congregation?

From the point of view of the *houngan*, having his child baptized as a Christian was to ensure that she was protected from any curse that the likes of him would try to impose. *Vaudou* curses never seemed to trouble church members, especially those who were Protestants. I recall being told this by a ministerial colleague, Sister Paulette, a deaconess and a nurse who ran a medical clinic in the church compound at the suburb of La Saline. She said that a *houngan* who eventually became a member of the church had confessed to having tried unsuccessfully on several occasions to cast spells on church members. This had prompted him to try and discover why. He therefore attended services, purely out of curiosity, but came under the authority of the Gospel and eventually received the "right hand of fellowship". A similar story was told me by members of the congregation at Mellier as it related to another *houngan* who gave up *vaudou* to become a follower of Christ. For him they held a ceremony in which his books and artifacts were burned so as to symbolize his complete break with the old religion.

From the point of view of the church members at Giotte, if the *houngan's* child become a Christian, this would give them a foothold in the *houngan's* camp so as to facilitate winning him over to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. They were aware that the *vaudou* priests believed in the power of Christianity. They were also aware that the respect was especially towards the Protestant Churches and not so much the Roman Catholic Church. This was because *vaudou* contained some rituals that were similar to Roman Catholicism. In *vaudou* as in Catholicism there is an altar that occupies a central place in the religious ceremony. In fact there are two altars in *vaudou* as obtains in the spirit religion of *umbanda* in Brazil. One altar is dedicated to good, whilst the other may focus on practices deemed to be evil. It is important to insert here that in many spirit religions God is conceived of not solely as an ethically good being, but, like human beings, God may also be vengeful.

There has been a fear of *vaudou* among many Haitians, particularly because of some of the negative practices associated with it. This fear seemed to be erased when persons converted and became Christians. In

fact, converts tended to distance themselves from that which resembled the old religion. One of the things I learned shortly after my arrival in Haiti – and this was during the nineteen-seventies - was that drums in worship would not be as acceptable as seemed to obtain in other Caribbean countries. Even during a concert that formed part of a youth camp, the youngsters from some rural congregations were annoyed that participants from the Port-au-Prince congregation used a drum to accompany one of their sung items. One young person explained to me: “Once those drums start to beat, they encourage the wrong spirits to attend worship!”

There was much mystery associated with the religion. For several weeks after the incident at Giotte, I informed myself further as to why people were so fearful of *voudou*. People linked it to what was called *obeah* (or harmful magic) in other parts of the Caribbean region. Some emphasized its evil nature, such as its practitioners’ sticking pins into dolls made in the image of those whom they intended to harm. It was believed that *houngans* could turn their enemies into *zombies* - “*living dead*”. Many were scared of the ritual drums, the beating of which supposedly called ancestral spirits to mingle with the worshippers.

### **Seeking to learn from Spirit Religions**

My earliest exposure to *voudou* motivated me to do some research into it. So in between ministering to congregations – not just four but after a year or so I had three more added on - I learned as much as I could. I befriended a priest of the religion who was also a biochemist and whose children attended Nouveau College Bird, the Methodist institution at which I was chaplain. I learned an awful lot from conversations with him and from attending ceremonies at his *peristyle*, the area in the *houmfort* (worship hut) where the ritual dances took place.

Information gleaned from my initial sojourn in Haiti formed the basis of my doctoral thesis at the University of Birmingham. It was published as *Theology in Folk Culture: the Theological Significance of Haitian Folk Religion*, Frankfurt, Peter Lang, 1984.

### **Can spirit religions assist in our theological understanding?**

My answer is in the affirmative. As long as we can move beyond the accusation that spirit religions are all about evil and harmful magic, we will come to appreciate the overriding concept of God as Creator. God cares for the created universe and has given everything needed for our well being. Trees, plants and herbs contain the ingredients that we need to maintain health. From them we may extract substances to treat illnesses. In addition, there is the teaching – skeptics dismiss it is *animistic* - that within every tree there dwells a spirit or living force. The result is that spirit religions engender in their followers a profound respect for nature and an attitude conducive to eco-justice and the integrity of creation.

Spirit religions help us appreciate that theology is a reflection of the culture in which the religion operates. For example African cultural practice is such that if an ordinary member of a community wants to communicate with the tribal chief, he or she will not go directly to the chief. Instead a close friend or relative who knows the chief personally would speak on his or her behalf. A similar protocol is observed in the approach to God. The spirits of those who already departed the present life are very close to God. With God they exist in the spiritual realm. Similar to what obtains for saints within Roman Catholicism, the spirits perform an intermediary role. It is wrongly assumed by onlookers to spirit religions that their followers are praying to the spirits. They are in fact praying *through* the spirits to God.

Spirit religions challenge us to sharpen our cosmological understanding by affirming the presence of the spiritual realm that exists quite apart from the physical. They affirm the Biblical cosmos in which there is the Supreme spiritual being, God, the angelic host and a number of lesser spirits. They can also help Western Christianity in its attempt to explain the creedal teaching pertaining to the communion of saints. Spirit religions teach about the possibility of the two worlds – spiritual and physical – communicating regularly with each other. When, for example, a worshipper is “possessed” by a spirit, this is regarded as an intentional effort on the part of the spirit world to communicate with the material world. As obtains in the Biblical

world, there is credibility attached to the idea of God communicating to mortal beings using various means including dreams and visions.

### **Do spirit religions have insights as to how we might be more creative in worship?**

One definite challenge given to us by spirit religions is how to make use of God given talents and gifts in worship. In *voudou* there is the *vèvé* or symbolic drawing on the floor that is supposed to invoke the presence of the *loas*. Apart from icons in Orthodox churches, stations of the cross, statues of saints and colourful priestly vestments in churches of the Anglo Catholic tradition, not enough use is made of art within the worship of Protestant denominations, Methodism included. With regard to language, the one employed in spirit worship is that of the common people. In Haiti it is the Créole, spoken by the masses, as opposed to French which is the language of the elite and educated classes. Several attempts are made for worship to reflect the people's everyday cultural reality.

As a *voudou* ceremony develops, there is music and dancing as worshippers move to the rhythm of the drums or other indigenous musical instruments. One is less inhibited and actually feels liberated for not just the heart and head but for the entire body to be employed in worshipping God. Churches of the Pentecostal tradition do this on a regular basis, as worshippers make use of movement, clapping hands, dancing and singing. Within Methodist worship in the Caribbean there is the occasional "liturgical dance" not engaged in by everyone but performed by specialized groups. The challenge that is meted out today is for more experiments with the artistic gifts with which God has blessed us. Worship can be exciting, not "boring" (as children complain), if only the liturgist/s would dare to be creative, include art, dance and drama, and in general ensure that it is a celebration in which as many of the five senses are actually being put to use.

My research into a spirit religion helped to enhance my understanding of spirit reality. The phenomenon of spirit possession in *voudou* made me appreciate that there is a basic difference in the concept of possession by a *loa* and possession by the Holy Spirit. Possession by a lesser spirit tends to be accompanied by a change in the individual's personality. For the entire duration of possession the individual actually becomes the spirit and assumes its character traits. With regard to possession by the Holy Spirit, there is no drastic alteration of personality. Aspects of the individual's personality may be enhanced, but he or she does not become the third person of the Trinity. The Holy Spirit remains the "wholly other", integral to the Godhead.

I may add here that possession by a lesser spirit is not always a welcome event. There can be involuntary spirit possession that takes place even outside the context of worship. When this occurs one is presented with a phenomenon that parallels or is even identical with demon possession. This can only be corrected using the rituals and symbols associated with exorcism, thereby highlighting a truth, namely that not all human conditions resembling neuroses can be treated by counseling and psychotherapy.

Note must equally be made of the value placed on the spiritual leadership of women. Women in the spirit religions serve, not only as mediums but as in the case of *voudou* they are *mambos* or female priests. Herein lies a challenge to those branches of the Christian Church wherein there is skepticism accompanied by resistance to the idea of women holding or assuming positions of spiritual authority.

### **Do spirit religions have anything to contribute as to how we might be more effective in mission and outreach?**

One of the complaints that have been leveled against western Christianity is that it caters for intellectuals and middle class folk. By contrast spirit religions appeal to the poorer working classes. The question is whether those of us who are numbered among the upper echelons of society will be humble enough to learn of the reasons why we might have failed. Is it that we no longer speak the same language that the masses speak? Are we unaware of their felt needs and not in any position to offer meaningful and effective responses?

As I think of Haiti, I am reminded that within that context the work of mission takes place among those who are poor. Health concerns tend to dominate people's existence. Churches consider it to be an

essential aspect of their work and witness to set up clinics where people especially those in rural communities may receive medical care. Interesting to note is that even before church clinics had established themselves, the *vaudou* priests were prescribing herbal remedies to those who came to them for help. This was a spin off from the type of formation received by the *vaudou* priests. They have to be familiar with the rituals of Roman Catholic priests but must also be knowledgeable in so far as the medicinal properties of leaves, herbs and plants are concerned. I often wonder whether spirit religions attach more credibility to the suggestion as presented in the Book of Revelation (ch. 22, v. 2) that “the leaves of the trees are for the healing of the nations.”

However they do it, the spirit religions seem to bridge the gap between what one does in church and what happens in the rest of the world. Christianity everywhere in the world must affirm that God is interested in every sphere of life. In fact, historically this was a message that *vaudou* felt committed to. In the drama of Haitian liberation, it was a religious ceremony of *Bois Caiman* held in 1791 that bonded the slaves together, so that in their eventual battles with Napoleon’s forces they were convinced that their spirits were alongside them. In 1804 the inevitable occurred; they gained their freedom from the French. *Vaudou* is one of those spirit religions that challenge us to address matters of liberation and justice because the God revealed in Jesus Christ is interested in all such issues that affect the people of God today.

## **Conclusion**

Based on what we have shared today, I contend that there is an awful lot that the Church can learn from spirit religions if we would, in humility, allow them. For one thing, their existence is a reminder that God continues to give revelations of Self in many and varied ways. Because of them our cosmological knowledge is improved, given that they help us to appreciate the reality of the spirit world and of ways whereby both spiritual and material worlds may interact with each other. By making use in worship of art, dance, indigenous musical instruments, and day to day cultural facets including language, we are challenged to be more creative liturgically. Spirit religions encourage us to further investigate the spirit concept with a view to greater understanding of the relationship between the lesser spirits of the universe and the great Spirit, the third Person in the Holy Trinity. They challenge chauvinistic attitudes within Western Christianity as they affirm the spiritual authority of women. They also challenge elitist trends as we are called upon to incorporate in the life, witness and mission of the church the masses of people who might be poor and marginalized. They help us to appreciate God’s providential care, namely that in nature God has given to us everything needed for health, wholeness and overall wellbeing of God’s people – the leaves of the trees for the healing of the nations. Drawing heavily upon on the example of *vaudou*, a spirit religion in Haiti, we are all reminded that that the Church throughout the world must address liberation, justice and whatever issues might affect the people of God in this the twenty-first century.

## **Biographical Information about the author:**

The Revd Dr George Mulrain was born in the Caribbean Republic of Trinidad & Tobago, and after initial theological training and ministerial formation at the United Theological College of the West Indies (UTCWI), Jamaica, he took up his first appointment as a Probationer MCCA Minister in the French and Créole speaking Republic of Haiti. Since then he served as Tutor at the British Methodist Church’s mission training facility at Kingsmead College, Selly Oak, Birmingham (1977-83), Lecturer in the Comparative Study of Religions at UTCWI and the College’s Academic Dean (during 1984-1989), Principal of Kingsmead College, Vice Principal of the United College of the Ascension and Deputy Dean of the Selly Oak Colleges School of Mission and World Christianity (during 1989-1997) and Senior Methodist Ministerial Tutor at UTCWI (1997-2003) after which he was appointed Connexional President of the Methodist Church in the Caribbean and the Americas (MCCA). Dr Mulrain holds the Diploma in Ministerial Studies from UTCWI, the BA in Theology from the University of the West Indies as well as the following qualifications from the University of Birmingham – Postgraduate Diploma in Pastoral Studies (DPS), Master of Philosophy in Education (MPhil Ed) and Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Theology. He is married to Zada

Elaine Mulrain, a nurse educator and they have two grown-up daughters and two grandchildren. He is gifted musically and among other things sings folk hymns that he has composed while strumming his guitar.