

Book Review**Title:** What is Not Sacred? African Spirituality**Author:** Laurenti Magesa**Number of pages:** 220 pages**Price:** KSH 1,400**Year:** 2014**Publisher:** Acton Publishers, Nairobi, Kenya**Contact:** P.O Box 74419-00200, Nairobi, Kenyawww.acton.co.keinfo@acton.co.ke**Reviewer:** Francis Njuguna

Is the African religious worldview a reality?

Does the African person hold his/her own spirituality and should African theology be studied alongside other theologies of other people the world over?

These are some of the questions the author of the book tries to raise as he tackles this topic -- African spirituality and what kind of sacredness it holds?

Under the two distinct parts, namely: **Encounters: the Phenomenology of African Spirituality** and **Conversation: The Contribution of African Spirituality**, the author Laurenti Magesa draws some lived spiritual experiences among the African people. This well researched work affirms his strong standpoint on the very reality of the African people's religious values.

The author states convincingly that some of the held "beliefs" by some people on the "non-existence" of the African people's religious worldview were due to the ignorance they hold on the issue.

He says a deep concern on the issue, accompanied by a study, would prove wrong those who still hold to the view that this religious worldview is non-existent.

"Even in an academic approach, students need to pay great attention to the lived experience, the fundamental dimension of shared human existence. But since lived experience is differently expressed by different people and communities, it is legitimate to speak of various spiritualities, for example, English, German, American, or African spirituality. Further, it is possible and perhaps necessary at times to consider Catholic, Anglican, Presbyterian, Hindu, or Buddhist approaches to life as distinct spiritualities. Additionally, there are Franciscans, Ignatian, and Vincentian spiritualities, among many others. Within African spirituality one may further distinguish Chagga, Hausa, Igbo, Xhosa, Zulu, or Bobo spirituality, for example. Without losing sight of their essential inner unity, we must acknowledge that each of these ethnic groups constructs spirituality within the larger whole of its own traditions and customs according to its own immediate environment," the author emphasizes, page 6.

The book apportions some of the blame as to why the African spirituality has failed to be "centralized" as the case is with other religious worldviews in the world on the side of the expatriate missionaries.

“Two centuries of modern Christian activity in Sub-Saharan Africa demonstrate that the evangelizing method should have been different; it ought to have been one of inculturation. Inculturation, the process of inserting the message of Jesus Christ in a particular cultural context so that it not only takes up the façade, but, more importantly, ‘becomes a principle that animates, directs and unifies the culture, transforming and remaking it so as to bring about a ‘new creation,’ was always part and parcel of the Christian movement since apostolic times” (Dhavamony 1997, 92), the author observes, page 18.

But nevertheless, the book observes that there has been a change in attitude since the last half of the twentieth century. Assisted by new, less prejudiced findings in the social sciences, articulate arguments to show the “translatability” of the Christian faith have been advanced. African and Africanist philosophers, theologians, churchmen and women, and members of the general population have taken up the task of recapturing the African memory, of “remembering” Africa (Thiong’o 2009), page 19.

On page 26, Magesa stresses that in the African worldview, spirituality is more of an activity than a passive quality. Rather than a "state of being," it is a way of behaving or, rather, relating. It involves dynamic relationships between visible and invisible powers. Better yet it entails the mutual exchanges of energies among all beings.

African spirituality does not hold as its primary objective the achievement of a specific goal among other goals, such as piety, meekness, or fear of God, says the book, stressing that if there is a goal in the perception of African spirituality, it is to totally experience the "good life" and to completely avoid the "bad life." Indeed, formal associations, societies, or solidarities, similar to spiritual groups in other religious traditions can be found, but the purpose of each is to integrate the life forces for greater, better, and more abundant life in this world achieved through the constant interaction between faith, environment and society. Consequently, there are no movements in the indigenous traditions of black Africa that distinguish the "sacred" from the "profane" or "secular." For, indeed, just what is not sacred? he poses, page 32.

In drawing a line between Islam, Christian, and African spirituality, the book has found out that the three share many fundamental links, central among them is the emphasis on union with God through prayer and works of charity. All three underline the necessity of leading an ethical life in this world. The ethic of love, compassion and care for human beings and the universe form part and parcel of fundamentals of these faiths. For African spirituality, for example, to respond to the voice of tradition is to enter into a relationship with God, the ancestors, and the universe at large. This relationship enables and brings about the attainment of the good life: happiness and peace in the world and contentment as an ancestor as a continuation of life in the world, page 135.

On Small Christian Communities Magesa states: “Structurally, Small Christian Communities (SCCs) are capable of manifesting the sense of being church in Africa in many of its dimensions. Genuine inculturation requires that SCCs become truly respected as *theological* expressions of the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit. They should exercise freedom in terms of ministry and governance. The practice of justice in the church is best realized in SCCs when they are allowed to develop as the Spirit directs them. They should be allowed to develop structures of justice in society, with new ministries dictated by the needs of the place and hour,” page 190.

In support of the author's view on the topic, Catholic priest/author, Bénézet Bujo from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in his foreword on the book, emphasizes that “Christianity and other religions need to respect the African religious concept and experience because God was already with our ancestors from the very beginning. Their experience of life is in reality the experience on the way to Emmaus: full revelation occurs of course, in Christ’s breaking of the bread, as he did at the last supper, but a real encounter with him already takes place on the way. Here I see the importance of Magesa’s gathering of several experiences across Sub-Saharan Africa in trying to show convincingly how African people did and still do overcome many difficulties, thanks to a traditional way of life that gives them energy and a spirituality of hope,” page ix-x.

Maryknoll Missionary priest, Father Michael Kirwen, of the Maryknoll Institute of African Studies, Nairobi, Kenya in a comment on the book observes: “It is not for you to call profane what God counts clean (*Acts* 10: 15). Did Christianity replace traditional Africans’ Spirituality with the arrival of European missionaries in past centuries? Or did Sub-Saharan cultures maintain their religious world views and distinctive spirituality even after accepting the salvific message of Christianity?”

Kenyan theologian, Professor Jesse Mugambi, of the University of Nairobi, Kenya in a comment says “Laurenti Magesa illustrates how the African cultural and religious heritage persists and permeates African individual and social consciousness in the midst of and often overriding current pressures both local and global. Magesa consistently and persuasively emphasizes that African Spirituality belongs to the mainstream religious heritage of humankind. *What is Not Sacred?* is a must on the bookshelf of anyone interested in understanding and appreciating African religious self- definition. Fascinating, convincing, consistent, illuminating, inspiring, encouraging and enlightening!”

The author enriches his work with a number of interesting African Proverbs and Sayings including one at the beginning of each chapter. Two examples: *If you want to speak to God, tell it to the wind. Even the best dancer on the stage must retire sometime.*

In summary Magesa emphasizes several points, namely:

- No type of spirituality whether it is in the form of personal piety or a religious system of a community, can endure without firm roots;
- Spirituality for the people of Africa is not a passive “given”; it is played out in a day-to-day, through observance of moral codes, rites and ritual, and patterns of relationship;
- The cosmos is a “moral” reality in the African worldview;
- Relationships for the promotion of the force of life must embrace “others” in all their differences, for all creation and various ways it is experienced and expressed contain the spark of divine, “spiritual” life;
- Patient dialogue rather than forced conversion, therefore, is the direction indicated by the awareness of “twinning” reality; multiple significations is the only acceptable path into the wider and deeper world of the divine presence in this multi-dimensional universe;
- The goal of African spirituality, and African Christian spirituality for that matter, is the good life (*John* 10: 10);
- African spirituality can inspire Christian theology and pastoral approaches to “unbind the Spirit,” the very same Spirit or Advocate whom Christ promised that he would send into the world to enlighten and ever guide it to complete truth (*John* 14-16).

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Francis Njuguna
Nairobi, Kenya
osnjuguna@yahoo.com