

**Esther E. Acolatse, *For Freedom or Bondage?: A Critique of African Pastoral Practices* (New York: Eerdmans, 2014), 224 pp.**

This book aims to address the problem of “pastoral diagnosis for care and counseling,” using as its social location the Independent Charismatic Churches on the African continent and among African diaspora groups. In the introduction, Acolatse outlines the central role of “worldview” in “how people perceive and present their difficulties and how pastoral counselors process and interpret presenting problems.” She contends that effective pastoral diagnosis is contextual and incorporates the client’s worldview. This approach to counseling has liberating potential for the counselee as well as the counselor. Such an approach helps clients seek more effective interventions from their context and worldview and frees the pastoral counselor from imposing interventions that are ineffective because they reflect their own context and worldview. Additionally, Acolatse emphasizes the importance of cosmology in appreciating, valuing, and understanding worldview because “cosmological ideas influence the diagnostic process in pastoral counseling encounters.”

One of Acolatse’s main concerns is her critique of the approach of leaders of Independent Charismatic Churches to pastoral care and counseling for those presenting problems and seeking pastoral counseling. She contends that pastoral interventions emphasize the spiritual prowess of the counselor’s ability to influence the spiritual world, which leads her to conclude that these leaders’ “current methods of healing are not from the Word of God, as one might assume, but rather from beliefs acquired from African Traditional Religions, with their strong sense of the spirit world and its pervasive influence on natural phenomena.” Acolatse’s belief that the power of God reigns supreme over all spirits and powers, and that God’s healing power is not held captive to “demonic spirits” that strangle counselees and can only be liberated through the power of pastoral counselor to exorcise the oppressing spirit, is at the crux of her critique. Another important dimension of Acolatse’s argument is that many problems are not caused by “demonic spirits” and that it is imperative for charismatic/evangelical pastors to consider psychological aspects of the presenting problem as well as its “psycho-theological” origins in order to bring about holistic healing.

As a Ghanaian pastoral care practitioner, I have firsthand experience with the concerns raised by Acolatse. For many Ghanaian Christians, every life experience is seen from a spiritual lens, which unfortunately has empowered some pastors to lead their congregants down a path that is not only oppressive but is one in which healing power flows only through the pastor/pastoral counselor. Congregants become dependent on their pastor’s interventions and directions. Those in need of healing also engage in a costly and pastor-to-pastor search for the “most powerful healer.” However, I would like to add that this phenomenon is not limited to the evangelical/charismatic faith traditions, which was the focus of Acolatse’s research, but is also prevalent in all the Christian denominations heavily influenced by the Western dualism of good and evil that colonial Christianity introduced.

This phenomenon results in careseekers searching for remedies to their problems through methods and rituals of spiritual “deliverance.”

Acolatse talks about transcultural pastoral counseling problems concerning worldview, as she sees them, and also outlines the prescription in addressing this phenomenon through the application of Barthian theology in dialogue with Jung’s analytical psychology. Acolatse’s approach enables the pastoral counselor to explore with clients all the facets of their worldview so that issues that are psychological are addressed with psychological interventions, theological issues with theological interventions, and spiritual concerns with spiritual interventions.

I would like to sound a note of caution to avoid stereotyping. Acolatse is not discounting people’s beliefs emanating from traditional African religions, nor for that matter any other religion and its worldview. I think this book highlights the important “transcultural” fact that people are not one dimensional beings; our therapies will provide healing when we explore and consider “worldview” with our clients in dealing with the presenting problem. For most people, worldview is informed by traditional or indigenous beliefs, from whatever context that might emerge, as well as Christian beliefs. I caution readers not to perceive Acolatse’s line of thought as necessarily creating a sense of opposing concepts because holding the worldviews reflected in the traditional African context and a Christian context is a way of life for people who are influenced by both worldviews.

For pastoral counselors who are by and large trained in the Western approach to therapy, it is important to work with the truth that many of my African brothers and sisters, both on the continent and in the diaspora, find themselves in a form of “spiritual struggle” with their religious, spiritual, and cultural beliefs, with the constant reminder that the Western way of life is positioned as better. Thus, it becomes difficult to integrate the totality of who they are in their lives, healing practices, and religious beliefs because “the interpretation of human experience affects pastoral theology and hence pastoral counseling.” Acolatse concludes that the “real strength of African emphasis on unity is that it provides a basis for a holistic approach to therapy.”

This book sheds light on the religious and spiritual leanings that are transcultural, and it should be prescribed reading for all engaged in pastoral care and counseling, particularly to better understand Charismatic and Pentecostal pastoral care movements and practices in the United States. This book is also for everyone interested in better understanding spiritual/religious expressions all over the world. It will help you better understand the “witch” killings that occurred in 169–1693 Massachusetts as well as the “demon-infused” worldview of the leaning towards the religious present in the U.S. government today.

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