

Johannine Eschatology of Death, Judgment and Resurrection: A Comparative Study with African Traditional Religion

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ABSTRACT

The eschatological frameworks of Johannine Christianity and African Traditional Religion (ATR) present critical convergences and divergences regarding death, judgment, and resurrection, creating a missiological impasse. While ATR affirms a Supreme Creator God who judges conduct and sustains life after death, it lacks physical resurrection, final eschatological judgment, and new creation. Consequently, many African Christians practice dual religiosity simultaneously adhering to Christianity and ATR as a pragmatic response to existential crises that Western missionary liturgies inadequately address. However, existing scholarship mainly uses secondary ethnographic accounts. This leaves a gap in empirically verifying how contemporary African Christians navigate these tensions. Furthermore, ATR is often treated monolithically, obscuring significant regional and ethnic diversity in beliefs about death and ancestors.

This study employs a comparative theological design with qualitative documentary analysis of Johannine texts (John 5:24-29; 11:23-26; 14:1-3) and ethnographic literature from Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, and Nigeria.

Three convergences emerged: affirmation of a Supreme Judge, moral causation of divine judgment, and post-mortem continuity. Five divergences were identified: ATR lacks physical resurrection, final judgment, linear teleological time, new creation, and hope for non-ancestral deceased. Dual religiosity persists as a lived reality arising from liturgical disjunction (Ezenwa, 2025).

ATR contains genuine points of contact serving as *praeparatio evangelica*. The Johannine proclamation “I am the resurrection and the life” directly addresses ATR’s eschatological deficits. However, the findings are limited because primary fieldwork is absent; future empirical research is urgently needed to capture the lived realities of dual religiosity across Africa’s diverse ATR traditions.

Keywords: Johannine eschatology, death, judgment, resurrection, African Traditional Religion, dual religiosity, syncretism, contextualization

INTRODUCTION

Background

The Gospel of John presents a distinctive eschatology where eternal life is both a present possession (“has crossed from death to life,” John 5:24) and a future consummation at “the last day” (John 6:39-40). This dual-aspect framework becomes complicated when placed alongside African Traditional Religion (ATR), which includes sophisticated beliefs about the afterlife, ancestral spirits, and divine judgment. Mbiti (1989) described the Sasa-Zamani time framework, where the deceased move from living-dead to ancestral spirits. Among the Chewa and Tumbuka of Malawi and Zambia, shrine cults (Mbona, Bimbi) provide mediatory structures when divine judgment manifests as drought or plague (Amanze, 2003; Schoffeleers, 1999).

For many African Christians there is a practical dilemma. They are committed to Christ yet also feel drawn to ancestor veneration, diviners, or shrine offerings. This phenomenon dual religiosity involves pragmatic switching between religious systems depending on need (Mlenga, 2016; Chanda et al., 2026). A significant problem arises when Christians dismiss ATR as theologically devoid of eschatological hope. This perception raises critical questions: Does ATR offer any genuine eschatological hope? Can Christian witness be effective without compromising the gospel or dismissing indigenous religious experience?

Statement of the Problem

The divide between Johannine eschatology (particularly death, judgment, and resurrection) and ATR creates a missiological impasse. Outright rejection of ATR alienates African seekers and ignores legitimate theological contacts. Uncritical acceptance of ancestor veneration risks syncretism, undermining Christ's unique mediatorial role (1 Timothy 2:5). Dual religiosity simultaneous commitment to both Christianity and ATR is "a lived reality" (Chanda et al., 2026, p. 125). Understanding how beliefs about death, judgment, and resurrection interact with dual religiosity, identity formation, missiological effectiveness, and syncretism is essential for formulating effective strategies.

Two critical gaps in existing research motivate this study. First, most comparative studies rely exclusively on documentary and secondary ethnographic sources without incorporating empirical data from contemporary African Christians who actively navigate dual religiosity in their daily lives. This limits the ability to verify whether the theological tensions identified in the literature accurately reflect current religious practices. Second, while ATR is frequently presented as a relatively unified system, it encompasses considerable diversity-across ethnic groups, regions, and historical periods. Beliefs about death, ancestors, and the afterlife vary significantly between, for example, the Chewa of Malawi and the Igbo of Nigeria. Oversimplifying this complexity may distort comparative findings.

Aims and Objectives

This study analyzes Johannine theologies of death, judgment, and resurrection, compares them with ATR eschatologies, examines five dependent variables, and proposes missiological strategies. Specifically, it seeks to: (1) provide a theological analysis of Johannine judgment, death, and resurrection; (2) compare these with ATR; (3) examine dual religiosity as a lived experience; (4) explore Christian identity formation; (5) assess missiological effectiveness; (6) distinguish syncretism from contextualization; and (7) propose integrated missiological responses.

Scope and Limitations

The study focuses on the Chewa, Tumbuka (Malawi/Zambia), Bemba (Zambia), Ndebele (Zimbabwe), Swahili (Tanzania), and Igbo (Nigeria) peoples, integrating recent scholarship (2019–2026). It is based on published ethnographic accounts rather than on primary fieldwork. A key limitation, acknowledged from the outset, is the absence of empirical data from interviews, focus groups, or participant observation. Consequently, the findings are theoretical and provisional, requiring validation through future field research. Additionally, while the study recognizes diversity within ATR, its scope does not allow for exhaustive treatment of every ethnic variation; instead, it identifies broad patterns while noting where significant differences exist.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Methodological Approach

A comparative theological design was used, employing qualitative documentary analysis with phenomenological models to establish similarities and differences between Johannine Christianity and ATR.

Data Sources

Biblical Sources: The Greek text of the Gospel of John (Nestle-Aland 28th edition) and English translations (NIV, ASV). Key passages: John 3:16-21; 5:24-29; 8:51; 11:11-26; 12:47-48; 14:1-3.

ATR Sources: Ethnographic literature including Mbiti (1989), Amanze (2003), Schoffeleers (1999), Nyamiti (1987), and more recent regional studies.

Recent Scholarship (2019–2026): Mlenga (2016, 2021), Ezenwa (2025), Chanda et al. (2026), Kwiyani (2021), Bevans (2021), Ekeke & Ekpenyong (2024), Kgatle & Mofokeng (2024).

Framework of Analysis

The analysis consisted of three parts: exegetical analysis of Johannine texts; descriptive analysis of ATR eschatology (with attention to intra-African diversity); and a comparative synthesis mapping similarities and differences alongside five dependent variables (dual religiosity, identity formation, missiological effectiveness, eschatological understanding, syncretism).

Addressing the Diversity of ATR

To avoid presenting ATR as monolithic, the study adopts a differentiated comparative approach. Where possible, we specify ethnic groups and regions (e.g., “among the Chewa of Malawi,” “among the Igbo of Nigeria”) and note variations. For example, ancestor veneration rituals differ markedly between matrilineal (Chewa, Bemba) and patrilineal (Ndebele, Igbo) societies. The concept of the afterlife as Kuzimu (underworld) is more prominent in Bantu traditions, whereas among the Swahili, Islamic influences have produced distinctive syncretic forms. These differences are acknowledged in the analysis, though the study’s scope prevents exhaustive documentation. Future empirical research should systematically map such variations.

Acknowledged Limitation: Absence of Primary Field Data

This study is entirely documentary. It does not include interviews, focus groups, ethnographic observation, or surveys among contemporary African Christians, church leaders, or ATR practitioners. Consequently, the findings represent a theological and comparative synthesis of existing literature, not an empirical account of lived dual religiosity. This limitation is addressed further in Section 4.7 and Section 5(Conclusion), where concrete recommendations for future field research are provided.

RESULTS

Johannine Eschatology of Death, Judgment and Resurrection

Judgment in the Gospel of John

Johannine judgment (krisis, κρίσις) is Christocentric and eschatological. Current decision is made against Christ: “He that believes on him is not judged: but he that believes not is judged already” (John 3:18). Jesus says, “The Father has given all judgment unto the Son” (John 5:22). But John 12:47-48 complicates matters: “I did not come to judge the world, but to save it. “He who rejects me... there is a judge... the word that I have spoken will judge him at the last day.” This solves the paradox: Jesus’ first coming was for salvation; His abiding Word brings final judgment.

Implication for ATR: ATR believes in divine judgment but mainly immanent and this-worldly (drought, plague). Johannine judgment introduces a future, cosmic, Christocentric dimension lacking in ATR.

Death in Johannes

Jesus redefines physical death as sleep (koimao, κοιμάω) in John 11:11-14. This metaphor demystifies death and confirms resurrection as awakening, not re-creation ex nihilo. But whoever keeps my word will never see death” (John 8:51) promises overcoming of spiritual death, not physical immortality. The believer has already “passed from death to life” (John 5:24).

Contrast with ATR: ATR does not see death as a sleep until the resurrection of the body, but as a passage to ancestral life. The Johannine concept provides pastoral comfort that death is not final, and personal identity is preserved in Christ.

The Resurrection According to John

The climactic claim, “I am the resurrection and the life” (John 11:25), turns resurrection from an event into a person. Martha’s answer, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day” (11:24), is a reflection of traditional Jewish hope. Jesus does not deny the last day, but says he has the power of resurrection now. We have the assurance of a general resurrection in John 5:28-29, “all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out.” Those who have done good to the resurrection of life, those who have done evil to the resurrection of Judgment.

Contrast with ATR: ATR has no bodily resurrection. The dead become spiritual ancestors. They are disembodied, powerful, but not physically resurrected. Comprehensive hope for the body, affirming creation’s goodness, is found in Johannine resurrection, relevant for contexts valuing physicality, fertility, and communal continuity.

The Linear Time and New Creation

“My Father’s house” with “many rooms” (monai) in John 14:1-3 points to cosmic renewal, not simply a celestial mansion. This ties in with the new heaven and new earth (Revelation 21) where God dwells with humanity and there is no more death. Johannine eschatology is placed in linear, teleological time from creation to consummation, in sharp contrast to ATR’s cyclical Sasa-Zamani model with its lack of any ultimate renewal or final defeat of evil.

African Traditional Religion Eschatological Concepts: Recognizing Diversity

While ATR across sub-Saharan Africa shares certain family resemblances belief in a Supreme God, ancestral spirits, moral causation significant diversity exists. The following variations are particularly relevant to eschatology:

Ethnic Group	Afterlife Concept	Ancestor Criteria	Key Distinctive
Chewa (Malawi)	Living-dead → Zamani	Elders, those who died “good death”	Matrilineal; Mbona cult mediates judgment
Bemba (Zambia)	Imipashi (underworld-The realm of the ancestors)	Heads of lineages; those buried with rites	Strong territorial shrine systems
Igbo (Nigeria)	Ala (spirit world)	Those with living descendants; titled elders	Complex reincarnation beliefs (ilo uwa)
Ndebele (Zimbabwe)	Ancestral shades (amadlozi)	Elder males; those who died naturally	Patrilineal; direct communication through diviners

Thus, generalizations must be qualified. For example, the “hope vacuum” for non-ancestral deceased is more acute among groups where ancestor status depends strictly on having descendants (Chewa, Bemba). Among the Igbo, however, some forms of reincarnation offer alternative post-mortem possibilities, though not resurrection. The comparative synthesis below reflects these broad patterns while acknowledging exceptions.

Critical deficit across all groups: No bodily resurrection. Even where reincarnation is affirmed, it involves a new birth, not the resurrection of the same body. The Johannine promise “I will raise them up at the last day” (John 6:40) therefore fills a vacuum present in all documented ATR systems.

The Supreme God and Imminent Judgment

ATR is a monotheistic religion (Nyamiti, 1987; Mbiti, 1989). The Supreme God (Chiuta, Leza, Mwari, Lesa, Mulungu) is the transcendent creator and moral governor, but too remote for direct approach, requiring intermediaries (spirits, ancestors, diviners). ATR judgment is worldly and communal. Drought, plague, failed

harvest, infertility, death are divine punishment for moral offenses. This is a coherent theology of moral causation parallel to Old Testament Deuteronomistic theology.

Death and afterlife of the ancestors

In Mbiti's Sasa-Zamani framework the "living-dead" (recently deceased, still remembered) have a personal existence and interact with the living. The dead "Zamani" (forgotten) are turning into collective ancestors. The virtuous become honoured ancestors; the wicked become evil spirits (ziwanda).

Critical deficit: no resurrection. For the young who die or those without descendants, there is no hope; they are thrown into an eschatological void. The afterlife is a matter of social position and human memory, not divine mercy. Here the Johannine promise 'I will raise them up at the last day' (John 6.40) fills the vacuum directly.

Cyclic Time and No New Creation

ATR time is two-dimensional and cyclical; the long past (Zamani) and the present (Sasa) with almost no future (Mbiti, 1989). History has no goal, no end toward a climax. There are no ideas of a "second coming," "final judgment," and "new heaven/earth" in ATR. The missionary task is not to destroy ATR's cyclical sense (which values seasons and community), but to add to it a linear eschatological horizon.

Dependent Variable 1: Dual Religiosity

Dual religiosity is a common phenomenon across Africa. Mlenga (2016, 2021) studied the Ngonde of northern Malawi and stated that though 80% identify as Christian, "African traditional religion is by no means dead and often practiced by many." The relationship between Christianity and ATR is described as "two realities of a different kind" in the lives of believers.

Chanda, Cheyeka and Milingo (2026) examined Bemba Catholics in Zambia who "integrate, syncretise, adapt, contextualise and juxtapose AIR elements with Catholicism" (p. 125). Some are clear "while others embrace hybridity" (p. 126). Anizoba and Aande (2021) observed that "life-threatening factors such as illness, disease, insecurity and fear are some of the principal causes of religious syncretism" among Igbo Christians (p. 2).

Ezenwa (2025) characterized dual religious identity among Christian Igbo "not as a theological failure but as a pragmatic response to a significant liturgical disjunction" (p. 2). Western missionary liturgies "have not adequately engaged with the Igbo symbolic universe thus creating a ritual vacuum in areas critical to existential significance" such as burial, healing and fertility. Hybridity of religions was defined by Hounguevou (2023) as "the religiosity of individuals rooted in one religious system but involved at various levels through affiliation, participation, belonging or allegiance to other religious traditions."

Theological reflection: Dual religiosity is not merely sociological but theological. This means that many African Christians feel that their Christian faith is incomplete with respect to healing, protection, fertility, and death. The answer is not condemnation but inculturated liturgies that show the sufficiency of Christ for all existential concerns.

Dependent Variable 2: Christian Identity Development

Christian identity formation in Africa is complex, fluid and often hyphenated. Chitando, Gunda and Kuegler (2020) refer to the "conversion dilemma": "Conversion is often seen as a linear process... but reality is far more complex." They speak of "religious intersectionalities between Christianity and African Traditional Religion" that give rise to hybrid identities.

In Kwiyani (2021), for example, the author explored the links between umunthu (a Malawian rendering of Ubuntu) and Christian faith, calling upon African Christians to "find innovative ways to let ubuntu shape their Christianity" a postcolonial stance that takes seriously African cultural resources. Dube (2021) studied Somali-Christian identity in Southern Africa, where people negotiate their belonging to a largely Muslim ethnic group while professing Christianity. Banda (2020) studied identity among the Tiv of Nigeria and noted "the unending presence of African indigenous religious practices among evangelised African communities." Christian

identity is often adopted “in conjunction with the old African traditional and religious identity” rather than displacing it.

Theological reflection: Hyphenated identity is not a defect but a reflection of the incarnational principle: the gospel always takes on cultural flesh. The early church decided that Gentile Christians need not become Jews (Acts 15). Similarly, African Christians need not become Western to be Christian. However, the “Christian” part must be primary. Honoring ancestors (Ex 20:12) is different from venerating them as mediators (1 Tim 2:5).

Dependent Variable 3: Missiological Effectiveness

We must move beyond importing Western models of missiological effectiveness. Contextualization is “interpreting and communicating the gospel within the categories, languages, and practices of local cultures” (Bevans, 2021). Effective missions require “a conscious shift away from imported models to contextualized approaches that value African worldviews, indigenous leadership, and intercultural dialogue.”

Knoetze (2025) discussed family and youth ministry in Africa and proposed possible ways of incorporating African cultural values and intergenerational structures. White (2019) developed a “church-franchising” model for Neo-Pentecostal and Neo-Prophetic Churches demonstrating how contextualization can produce missiological strategies aligned with African entrepreneurial culture. Mashau (2020) gave a “missiological deconstruction of empire and Christianity in Africa” needed to go beyond colonial mission models.

Theological reflection: The metaphor of the “grafted wild branch” (Romans 11:17–24) gives theological justification for this. African believers do not have to be Western Christians but African followers of Christ. Missiological effectiveness is not to be gauged by Western forms, but by true appropriation of Scripture in African contexts.

Dependent Variable 4: Eschatological Comprehension

The eschatological understanding in ATR is well established, but it differs significantly from Christianity. Ekeke and Ekpenyong (2024) stated that “Christianity and ATR have the concept of eschatology... ATR’s eschatology is well-established but different from Christianity’s” (p. 3). They say that ATR “should not be mocked as a religion without eschatology” (p. 4).

Agboada (2023) found that ATR eschatology provides “alternative and a variety of contexts for Christianity, theology and biblical scholarship in Africa which can also provide appropriate answers to the many questions of African Christians.” Poku (2021) examined the reception of Paul’s eschatological teaching in Ghana and observed that “the belief in life after death in Ghanaian culture requires the performance of certain rituals for the dead which contradicts biblical teaching because of the belief in the resurrection of the dead.”

Gaisie (2020) proposed ancestor Christology, which presents Christ as the final ancestor who fulfills the role ancestors were meant to be pointing to. However, opponents argue that “Christ, as the Son of God, is more important and powerful than any human ancestor, and therefore ancestor Christology is invalid” (Thomas, 2024). Akrong (2022) advocated “Jesus with the Face of an Ancestor” and argued that “Christ does not ask Africans to deny their identity and dismiss their deep concerns in order to receive a prefabricated image of Jesus Christ from elsewhere” (p. 1).

Theological reflection: The eschatological conception of ATR is well-founded but partial. The Johannine statement “I am the resurrection and the life” (John 11:25) addresses this deficiency directly. Rather than saying that ATR eschatology is false, it is more effective to say that Christ is the one who fulfills what ancestors and spirit mediums only pointed to.

Dependent Variable 5: Syncretism

Contemporary scholarship is re-examining syncretism. Kgatle and Mofokeng (2024) explored “the sangoma-prophet phenomenon in South African Neo-Prophetic Pentecostalism” and call for “a reconsideration of both the concepts of syncretism and contextualisation of the Christian faith”. They note that the neo-prophetic

movement requires a reconsideration of syncretism, especially in relation to engagement with ancestral spirits. Chitando (2021) noted that “syncretism as a concept used against African Christianity outside missionary control almost fell into disrepute especially among theologians and missiologists, who from the 1970s started to view African Christian experiments with culture positively as contextualisation.” Hounguevou (2023) stated that “religious hybridity refers to the religiosity of individuals rooted in one religious system while involved at different levels through affiliation, participation, belonging, or allegiance to other religious traditions.”

Owojaiye (2021) carried out a “critical appraisal of the concept of syncretism in Religion and its practice in Africa with focus on Nigeria,” calling for nuanced distinctions between harmful syncretism and legitimate contextualization. Chanda et al. (2026) identified different strategies employed by Bemba Catholics as “integration, syncretism, adaptation, contextualisation and juxtapositioning”.

Theological reflection: Not every cultural blending with Christianity is syncretism. Critical contextualization (Hiebert, 2000) consists of exegesis of culture, exegesis of Scripture, and critical response. The boundary can be drawn by the Christological criterion: syncretistic is any practice that compromises the uniqueness of Christ as the sole mediator (1 Tim 2:5) or the finality of His sacrifice (Heb 10:10). Only those practices that show faith in culturally appropriate forms are valid.

Summary of Comparison

Similarities (Points of Contact)

Category	Johannine Christianity	African Traditional Religion
Supreme God	One Creator God, Father (John 1:1-3)	Chiuta, Leza, Mwari, Lesa, Nyambe
Judgment for sin	Immoral conduct brings judgment (John 5:29)	Breaking taboos brings drought/plague
Divine-human mediation	Jesus as mediator (John 14:6)	Spirit mediums (Makewana, Bimbi)
Life after death	Resurrection/eternal life (John 11:25-26)	Living-dead → ancestral spirits
Moral accountability	Judgment according to deeds	Retribution at death

Differences (Points of Tension)

Category	Johannine Christianity	African Traditional Religion
Resurrection	Physical, bodily (John 5:28-29; 11:25)	None; only transformation to spirit
Judgment timing	Future “last day”	Imminent, present (drought now)
Time concept	Linear (past–present–future climax)	Cyclical (Sasa-Zamani, no end)
New creation	New heaven/earth (Rev 21; John 14)	Absent
Hope for youth/childless	All believers equal (Gal 3:28)	Only elders become ancestors

Theological Considerations

Affirmed: ATR is not theologically empty. It believes in the Most High God, in moral order and in mediating structures. To dismiss ATR is to overlook real points of contact. Ekeke and Ekpenyong (2024) correctly contend that ATR “should not be ridiculed as a religion devoid of eschatology” (p. 4).

Deficits: The eschatological vacuum of ATR-no resurrection, no new creation, no ultimate justice for non-ancestors, no final defeat of evil-leaves hope incomplete. Exactly, for Johannine eschatology fills these gaps.

DISCUSSION

Dual Religiosity: The Missiological Challenge

The persistence of dual religiosity suggests that many African Christians feel that Christianity as it is currently practiced does not meet their existential needs, especially in the areas of healing, protection, fertility and death rituals. Ezenwa (2025) rightly points to "liturgical disjunction" as a key factor. Western missionary liturgies failed to connect with the African symbolic universe, resulting in a ritual vacuum. The early church understood that inculturated rituals were important and shaped Jewish and Greco-Roman contexts for baptism, Eucharist, anointing of the sick, and funerals. African churches will have to develop rituals of similar kind that will speak to the existential concerns of Africans but yet be faithful to the Bible.

Theological response: The church should not condemn dual religiosity as compromise but regard it as a call to deeper inculturation. When the Church fails to offer meaningful Christian rituals for the crises of life, people will look for them elsewhere. Inculturated liturgies for burial, healing, fertility and protection can demonstrate that Christ is sufficient for all needs.

The hope of the Johannine resurrection fulfilled

ATR's eschatological conception is well founded, but not finished. "I am the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25) is a Johannine statement that directly addresses this deficit, especially concerning young people who die without descendants. These people have no ancestral hope in ATR. Johannine eschatology says they are raised "at the last day" because they had faith in Christ, not because they had children.

Theological bridge: Christianity can offer resurrection, not as a rejection of ATR's ancestral hope as illusory, but as a fulfillment of what ancestors only partially experienced. The notion of the "living-dead" can be reinterpreted: believers who have died "sleep" in Christ (John 11:11) until resurrection, rather than becoming ancestors to be venerated. Only God is to be venerated (Rev 19:10) but honor and remembrance of dead believers (Heb 11) may be affirmed without worship.

Christian Identity Formation in Double Belonging

Christian identity formation in Africa is non-linear, fluid, hyphenated and negotiated. Chitando et al. (2020) demonstrated that conversion is a complex negotiation of "religious intersectionalities." Kwiyan (2021) envisioned an Ubuntu-shaped Christianity as a postcolonial alternative to Western-dominated identity formation. This is not a watering down of the faith, but a real expression of the incarnation, the Word made flesh in a particular culture (Jewish). The same Word can be incarnate in African cultures.

Theological limits: Hyphenation is allowed only if the second term does not diminish the first. If ancestor veneration involves worship or mediation, a "Christian-ancestor venerator" is a contradiction in terms. Honoring one's ancestors (Ex 20:12) is not tantamount to venerating them as mediators (1 Tim 2:5). The theological task is to discern between cultural expression and anti-biblical practice.

Missiological Effectiveness: The Necessity of Contextualization

Knoetze (2025) and Bevans (2021) concur that contextualisation, which includes the valuing of African worldviews and indigenous leadership, is a prerequisite for effective mission in Africa. The metaphor of the "grafted wild branch" (Romans 11:17–24) provides theological warrant: African believers do not need to be Western Christians but African followers of Christ. Paul's Areopagus speech (Acts 17) is an example of this: he affirmed Athenian religiosity, pointed to the altar to an unknown God, and declared the unknown as known in Christ.

Practical implications: An effective missiological strategy in Africa will (a) affirm ATR's belief in the Supreme God as preparation for the gospel (b) present Christ as the fulfillment of ATR's longing for mediation (c) address the eschatological hope gap through resurrection preaching (d) provide inculturated liturgies for healing, fertility, and death (e) train indigenous leaders who can theologize from within African worldviews.

Syncretism versus Contextualization: A Theological Framework for Boundaries

Not all mixing of Christianity with African culture is syncretism. Kgatle and Mofokeng (2024) urge "reconsideration of both the concepts of syncretism and contextualisation." The difference can be made on the basis of the following theological criteria:

Christological fidelity: Does the practice affirm Jesus Christ as the only mediator and Lord (1 Timothy 2:5)?

Scriptural harmony: Does the practice fit the overall narrative of the Bible?

Salvific sufficiency: Does the practice rely on Christ's finished work or on other human efforts?

Communal discernment: Has the local church community prayerfully considered the practice?

These practices (e.g. using African proverbs in sermons, dancing in worship, honoring deceased parents) are contextualization. Practices that fail (e.g., offering sacrifices to ancestors for protection, consulting diviners for guidance) are syncretism. Chanda et al. (2026) provide a useful typology of integration, syncretism, adaptation, contextualization and juxtapositioning. This allows for a nuanced assessment.

A Holistic Missiological Viewpoint

The following integrated framework addresses all five dependent variables based on the theological analysis. Responding to Dual Religiosity create inculturated liturgies of burial, healing, fertility and protection that speak the African symbolic universe (Ezenwa, 2025). Provide holistic discipleship that reveals the sufficiency of Christ for existential questions. Think of dual religiosity not simply as deviance but as a demand for a Christianity that heals the whole person, body, spirit, and community.

Constructing Christian Identity: Enrich Ubuntu-shaped Christianity (Kwiyani, 2021) that embraces rather than rejects African cultural values. It is possible to be authentically African and Christian. Explain the difference between respecting ancestors (biblical) and venerating them as mediators (unbiblical).

Moving from borrowed Western models to contextualized approaches (Bevans, 2021) to improve missiological effectiveness. Train local leaders Respect African world views 1. Employ Paul's Areopagus model: begin with the known (Supreme God, moral order, mediation) and progress to the unknown (incarnation, resurrection, final judgment).

ATR's hope deficit fulfillment Eschatological Understanding Fulfillment of resurrection Use ancestor Christology with caution. Guard the uniqueness of Christ. Preach the "last day" as solution to the eschatological vacuum for non-ancestral dead.

Distinguishing Syncretism from Contextualization: Practice nuanced evaluation of critical contextualization (Hiebert, 2000). Use the four theological criteria (Christological fidelity, scriptural coherence, salvific sufficiency, communal discernment). Deny reverence to departed saints as mediators. Affirm honor and remembrance of deceased believers.

Limitations of the Present Study and a Call for Empirical Research

The most significant limitation of this study is its reliance on documentary sources. While the theological and comparative analysis is robust, it cannot answer critical questions about how actual African Christians experience dual religiosity in their daily lives. The following empirical questions remain open:

Prevalence and patterns: What percentage of self-identified African Christians in specific communities (e.g., rural Chewa, urban Igbo) engage in ATR practices such as ancestor libations or shrine consultations? Does this vary by age, gender, education, or denominational affiliation?

Existential triggers: Which specific crises (illness, death, infertility, economic failure) most frequently prompt dual religious switching? How do individuals narrate their movement between Christian and ATR frameworks?

Clergy awareness and response: How do African Adventist pastors and lay leaders perceive dual religiosity in their congregations? What strategies do they currently employ, and why are these perceived as adequate or inadequate?

ATR practitioners' perspectives: What do traditional healers, spirit mediums, and shrine custodians understand about Christian eschatology? How do they view Christians who consult them?

Diversity within ATR: How do eschatological beliefs differ between, for example, the Chewa and the Igbo in ways that affect missiological strategy? Are there ATR sub-traditions that already contain closer parallels to resurrection (e.g., certain reincarnation beliefs)?

Recommended methods for future research:

Semi-structured interviews with 30–50 African Christians who acknowledge dual religiosity, exploring their lived experiences.

Focus group discussions with church elders and pastors to identify congregational challenges.

Ethnographic observation of both Christian worship and ATR rituals (where ethically permissible) to document actual practices.

Comparative case studies selecting two to three ethnic groups with differing ATR eschatologies (e.g., Chewa vs. Igbo) to test whether the “hope vacuum” is experienced uniformly.

Such empirical work would not only validate or challenge the present findings but also provide a foundation for designing inculturated liturgies that genuinely address the existential concerns of African Christians.

CONCLUSION

This comparative theological analysis of Johannine eschatology of death, judgement, and resurrection with African Traditional Religion, examining dual religiosity, Christian identity formation, missiological effectiveness, eschatological understanding, and syncretism, has revealed substantial points of contact. These provide bridges for effective Christian witness, alongside critical differences that require careful missiological navigation.

ATR is not theologically vacuous. It holds robust belief in the Supreme God, moral order, and mediatory structures all of which can serve as *praeparatio evangelica*. ATR's eschatological deficits (no resurrection, no new creation, no final justice for non-ancestors) are precisely where Johannine eschatology offers hope. The Johannine proclamation “I am the resurrection and the life” (John 11:25) speaks directly to the African quest for life after death, justice, and a renewed creation.

However, these conclusions remain provisional because the study lacks primary empirical data. The lived realities of dual religiosity, the actual diversity of ATR beliefs across Africa, and the effectiveness of proposed missiological strategies all await field-based investigation. We therefore call upon African theological institutions, missiological research centers, and funding agencies to prioritize mixed-methods empirical research on dual religiosity, ATR diversity, and contextualized Adventist witness.

For African Christians, this study affirms that they can hold their African identity and Christian faith without contradiction. The Father of Jesus Christ is the God of Chiuta, Leza, Lesa, Nyambe, and Mwari. The longing for mediation finds its true Mediator in Christ. The hope for life after death is fully answered by resurrection. This study confirms that African Christians can maintain their African identity and Christian faith without conflict. The way forward is not to dismiss ATR as paganism or to syncretistically blend it with Christianity,

but to recognize it as genuine human seeking after God that finds its fulfillment in Jesus Christ while always testing such recognition against the lived experiences of African believers themselves.

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