

# Tell me about AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION

The religion of any native people group is called traditional religion. Primitive or underdeveloped people all over the world have traditional religions that are much like African traditional religion.

There are many variations, but the essence of traditional religion is belief in one supreme God, while also calling for help and sacrificing to many smaller or “lesser” gods or spirits. The smaller gods are often represented by an image of some kind.

The rationale behind worshipping lesser gods rather than the supreme God is that since God made everything, He also made the lesser gods or spirits, and since He made them, He must want us to call on them for help. Traditionalists are ambivalent about the nature of these gods. It is often said that they are good or mostly good or neutral in character, but at the same time, it is admitted that these gods do kill people, usually innocent people, especially when they are sent out by their adherents to search out the guilty. Strangely, they do not accomplish this by killing the guilty, but rather by killing one member after another of the guilty person’s family. These gods are often greatly feared, not in the sense of reverent awe, but in the sense of fearing for one’s life and safety.

To traditionalists, everything is ultimately spiritual, so it’s not surprising that many of the lesser gods are associated with objects in nature. It is believed that everything has a spirit, so rocks, mountains, rivers, oceans, and most other objects in nature are worshiped. The ancestors who have died are also regarded as gods to be worshiped. Some spirits or gods are thought to specialize in healing sickness, some in helping women conceive and give birth, others in giving success in war, while others, often known as “legba” protect houses or villages or fields.

The lesser gods are served by pouring of libation, water or an alcoholic drink, on the ground, by animal and human sacrifice, by enslavement of victims, and by prayers and other rituals. Many of the rituals are secret or known only to initiates, and many shrines have their own secret or private language.

## The Christian response to African traditional religion

The Bible calls on us to worship God alone and not even to make, much less serve any image for worship (Exodus 20:1-4, Matthew 4:10, Isaiah 43:10-11). Christians define any worship, sacrifice or prayer to any other god other than the Creator as idolatry, because God desires and deserves all our worship and our love (Isaiah 42:8, Revelation 4:11). The terms “idolatry,” “idols” and “idol worshipers” are unpopular with traditionalists because they are viewed in an unfavorable light in most modern African societies, but even African Christians call traditional religion idolatry. Usually it is meant as a simple description.

Christians believe that Satan was created good by God but became proud and led a rebellion against his Creator (Isaiah 14:12-15, Ezekiel 28:12b-15, Revelation 12:9, Luke 10:18). Christians believe that one third of the angel spirits joined in this rebellion (Revelation 12:4a). Falling from their positions as God’s servants, they became God’s enemies. The Bible describes these spirits as deceitful and destructive (John 8:44).

Christians also believe that no good spirit will accept worship, because this is due only to the Creator. Therefore, any spirit that accepts worship must be one of the deceitful, destructive, rebellious spirits that are fighting against God (Revelation 12:9-10, 20:10). This is why they see the spirits of traditional religion as being evil, reinforced of course, by the description of the behavior of those spirits given by traditionalists themselves. In addition, the Bible explicitly states that those who think they worship idols are in reality worshipping demons (Deuteronomy 32:17, I Corinthians 10:20, Revelation 9:20).

Those who turn to Christianity leave their idols as converts have always done no matter what their background (I Thess. 1:9).

## Bridges to the Gospel (Redemptive Analogies)

African traditional worshipers believe there is a supreme God, a Creator who made everything. This gives a good beginning point for discussion.

They also understand the concept of sacrifice. Comparisons and contrasts can be drawn from this practice. They also offer animals in payment for sin, but those animals do not effectively remove sin, for more continue to be required. They can respond very positively to the truth that Jesus paid for all our sin.

African traditional shrines are very poor in comparison to the Temple or even the Tabernacle of the Old Testament, but there is in them still the concept of a place where their god dwells which is forbidden except to the priest and to shrine slaves who are supposed to be “married” to the god of the shrine. There is an outer courtyard, and a second inner sanctuary, both or at least the inner sanctuary guarded by a veil. So the fact that God tore the heavy veil of the Temple from top to bottom and opened the way for sinners to come into His presence is another truth that can help open the understanding of traditional worshipers.

