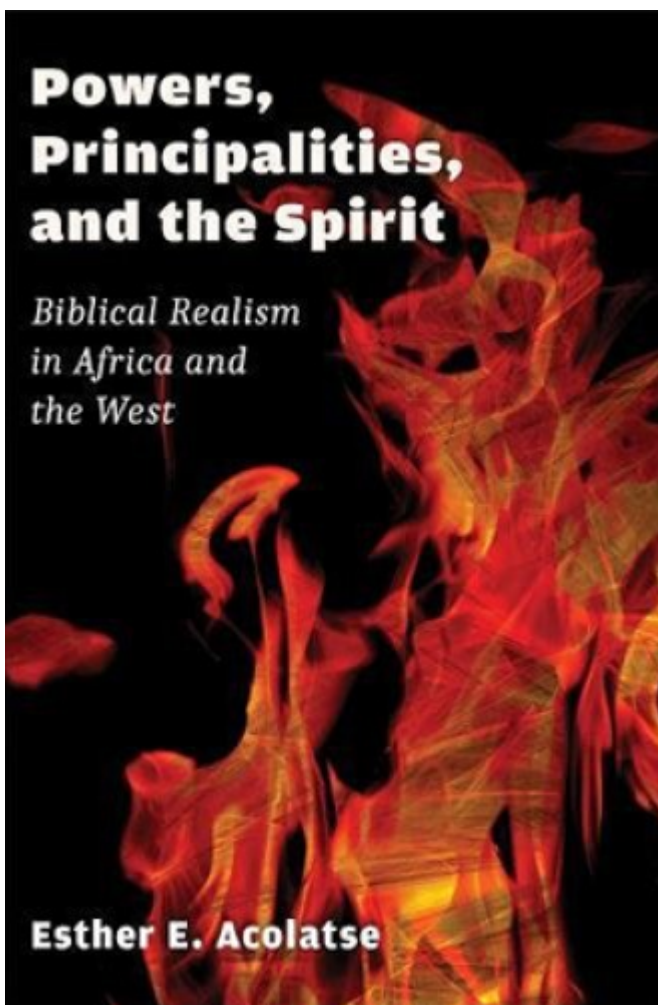


A Ghanaian theologian considers demons

Are they real? and other questions in Esther Acolatse's work.

by [Alan G. Padgett](#) in the [October 10, 2018](#) issue

In Review



Powers, Principalities and the Spirit

Biblical Realism in Africa and the West

By Esther E. Acolatse

A pastoral theologian from Ghana who teaches at Knox College and the University of Toronto, Esther Acolatse has built a career on bridging the theological understandings and ecclesial practices of Africa and those of the West. Her new book addresses a topic that may surprise those not familiar with popular Christianity in Africa: demons.

Although it's impossible to ignore the evil in the world, accepting the existence of a literal devil can look like a step back to superstition or just plain weird. For many of us, Satan is no more than a myth from ancient times, the province of fake preachers, or the delusion of a borderline personality. Academic theologians often assume that miracles, angels, and demons are simply myth.

But this assumption isn't universally accepted. Many Catholic, Pentecostal, and black church theologians espouse a theology of the supernatural. And most Christians in the world—rich or not, learned or not, regardless of race or culture—accept the reality of supernatural miracles, angels, and evil spirits. It is the virtue of Acolatse's new work to seek a dialogue between these alternative perspectives on the powers. She seeks wisdom and finds fault in both camps, always with an eye toward better theological understanding and pastoral care.

Acolatse draws upon Euro-American and African theology throughout the book. She shows that European theologians during and after World War I—Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Jacques Ellul, for example—took the concept of “the demonic” far more seriously than the liberal Protestant theologians of the previous generation. Given the sociopolitical stimulus to rethink the full reality of evil, it's no surprise that these theologians translated the language of demons and spiritual evil into terms of politics or existential estrangement. Most of them held a bias against acceptance of demons as personal beings. More recently, Walter Wink's volumes on the powers have championed a similar view of the demonic.

Given this background, Acolatse wisely begins her argument by introducing two biblical theologians Kwesi Dickson and Rudolf Bultmann. Dickson is a Ghanaian with a particular interest in relating biblical theology to traditional African religion. Acolatse's brief explanation of traditional African religions provides a helpful background to understanding Dickson's biblical hermeneutic. She then contrasts his interpretive framework with Bultmann's famous program of demythologization.

Bultmann comes in for no little critique, but Acolatse's purpose is positive: "to provide an alternative to demythologization that serves the interpretive and ecclesial needs of a global church." Her main point is that Bultmann did not take the Holy Spirit or unclean spirits seriously enough as realities in their own right. Her alternative proposal, "biblical realism," suggests that we can and should accept demons as real spiritual beings.

Much of the book is a historical discussion of theological and pastoral views on demons and the powers. Acolatse does not follow a chronological order throughout the book, but instead she divides it up by topical interest. The discussion of early Christian writers, for example, is found in the chapter on Wink. She engages the biblical pneumatology of Jon Levenson in a chapter on contextual hermeneutics. John Calvin, Charles Hodge, and the Puritan divines appear in a chapter on living our theology.

Acolatse's critical analysis of Wink is well worth study. She shows the ambiguity in Wink's language, attracted as he is to the dynamic, personal language of the New Testament and yet rejecting biblical realism about the powers. He does not accept demons as distinct spiritual beings but interprets them rather as structural evil: the human evil of sociopolitical oppression of all kinds.

In a chapter called "After Bultmann," Acolatse proposes that we reimagine myth and accept it as an essential form of truth telling. While I accept the substance of this argument, I prefer to follow those Native American teachers who use the term *sacred story*. Because *myth* in our time just means a falsehood, using it to describe the sacred stories of other peoples is colonialist. For the Christian church, scripture contains true sacred stories, not myths as we mean this word today. Alas, even the best efforts to shift a word's meaning is vanity and chasing after wind.

Acolatse engages with Barth more positively than she does with Bultmann and Wink. But her argument focuses on Barth's view of religion rather than his theology of evil and the demonic. Barth argued that Jesus Christ is the criterion of judgments for all religions, proclaiming in Jesus a kind of Hegelian critical synthesis (*Aufhebung*) of all religions, including Christianity. Acolatse sees this model as a paradigm for appropriating the views of the powers held in both the Global North and the Global South. She rightly sees the African viewpoint as consonant with that of the New Testament and the early church. In contrast, the sciences and modernity have, for many in the Western tradition, forced a rejection of realist views of the spiritual

world. A critical synthesis is thus called for—not only for the sake of North-South dialogue but out of faithfulness to the biblical witness itself.

Barth took evil seriously, defining it as those things in history and creation that are opposed to God and calling it the Nothing (*das Nichts*). He actually had a demonology of sorts. But it's strange that Acolatse does not take Barth more to task, since his language about evil is nearly contradictory. While his naming of evil in history is realistic and dynamic, his theology did not accept the reality of evil in the order of the world. Naming no-thing as the Nothing does not explain how it becomes a real power in history.

This is a fine book, and I recommend it to anyone interested in spiritual evil. In the end, Acolatse does not develop a demonology or any practical suggestions. Seeking a framework in which creative engagement can take place, she allows for a spectrum of views, “opting to leave in the shadows what continues to be troubling doctrinal issues concerning the spiritual world.” Her contribution is in questioning the uncritical modern assumption that the devil is a myth. But her call for new globally aware antidemonic theologies and practices has yet to be answered.