

Engage 360 | Episode 17: Afro-Caribbean Religions and Christianity

Introduction: Welcome to Engage360, Denver Seminary's podcast. Join us as we explore the redemptive power of the gospel and the life-changing truth of Scripture at work in our culture today.

Dr. Don Payne: Hi there. I'm Don Payne. Your host for Engage360. We're glad you're with us again. Throughout the history of God's people, from the ancient Israelites to the contemporary church, they -- we -- have faced the continual challenge and struggle of being faithful to our unique identity and purpose. In the middle of cultures where alternative values constantly vie for our allegiance, the New Testament writers acknowledged this repeatedly like Jesus did also in John 17, where in the world he had the world's values. The world's allegiances are not to define us. Even the early Church had to draw up on the language, the conceptual framework of the Hellenistic, the Greek world, to formulate faithful theological confessions. And in doing so, they experienced those risks which was the reason Tertullian posed the famous question: "What has Jerusalem to do with Athens?" And as the gospel has spread into the non-western world, it has regularly faced the challenge of syncretism, the blending of Christian faith with religions that dominate those areas. And sometimes Christianity has been welcomed in those settings as yet another option on a religious menu, sometimes Christianity has had to dilute certain teachings in order to be accepted. But this syncretism has always presented Christians with the hard work of proper contextualization on one hand, while at the same time, on the other hand not losing the core distinctiveness of the gospel and the redemptive power of that gospel.

So, our guest today knows a lot about that tension, and in fact, has recently written on the subject and it's the book that he's recently published. That is the reason we ask him to appear on this episode. And so, I'm happy to introduce to you my friend and colleague, Dr. Dieumeme Noelliste, who is professor of theological ethics here at Denver Seminary. Let me tell you a little bit about him. I'll introduce him and then we'll have some conversation about a variety of things, but particularly about his recent book. Dr. Noelliste joined the faculty of Denver Seminary in 2007 as both professor of theological ethics and as director of the Vernon Grounds Institute for Public Ethics. He received a law degree from the State University of Haiti, which is his home, received an L.L.D. from Bethel College in Indiana, a ThB from William Tyndall College and MDiv from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and a PhD from Northwestern University. Before coming to Denver Seminary, Dr. Noelliste served as academic dean and then as president of the Caribbean Graduate School of Theology. He was president of Jamaica Theological Seminary and of the Caribbean Evangelical Theological Association. He is widely recognized for his role in theological education in the non-western world with the International Council for Evangelical Theological Education and other societies.

So, Dieumeme, welcome to Engage360.

Dr. Noelliste: Well, thank you, Don, my friend.

Dr. Don Payne: It is good to have you here.

Dr. Noelliste: Nice to be here with you.

Dr. Don Payne: Now, before we get into the meaty subject matter of today, which you've written about in your recent book, I want our listeners to get acquainted with you just a little bit. So, take a take a minute or so and tell just a little bit about yourself, your family, your background. How did you find your way here to Denver?

Dr. Noelliste: Big questions -- is the question that people ask me all the time. In fact, yesterday I met somebody and I was telling -- in fact, I was meeting with one of our prospective students, having lunch with him in our center. And of course, in the course of the conversation, he got to know that I am from Haiti and I live in Jamaica. And he said, "How in the world did you make it from Jamaica to here?" And I told him I received a call to Denver Seminary in Lima, Peru.

Dr. Don Payne: Well, of course.

Dr. Noelliste: And he says, "How can this be?" So I gave him the whole story. Well, yes, as you said, I am from the Caribbean, particularly from the good country of Haiti. Grew up there and went to school. And went to law school. And then after law school -- well, before even taking the bar, so I did not get a law degree from Haiti, but God called me to change course. He made the way, reluctantly, for me to come to the United States, and I began all over, studying theology and philosophy. And one thing led to another. I got married while doing these things--

Dr. Don Payne: To your wonderful wife, Gloria, one of the greatest people I know.

Dr. Noelliste: I mean, you know, hey, I [married] up. And then I really, Don, wanted to go back to Haiti. I remember when I was doing my work in Chicago at Trinity Divinity School and at Northwestern after that, I was impatient. It's amazing. In 1981, I was counting down to 1985 when I would go to Haiti. That's four long years. That's too long. But in God's providence I was never to go back to Haiti to have a ministry kind of there, in residence, because I am still involved. Instead, God had a plan for me to go to Jamaica, to work out at the graduate school. That institution was in the making at that time. No professor, no president, no dean. They were simply looking. And then they found me and we received a call. After much prayer we went to Jamaica. Packed up our two children and whatever belongings we had, and went to that land, initially, for three years. [That's] what we said. And three years became six, six became nine, nine became 15, until we spent 20 years in Jamaica developing that institution. It was in -- while in Jamaica, God called to come to Denver Seminary. After much prayer, we just decided to join the seminary. It has been a good joy being here so far, twelve years now.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah, well, I'm delighted you're here. Now, I have to tell listeners who don't know you, and maybe many who do, about an interesting feature of your personality. When I entered the world of higher education and began to breathe a rarefied intellectual air of a seminary environment, I did not expect to have a colleague who was an accomplished trash-talker.

Dr. Noelliste: Really?

Dr. Don Payne: Really, really. And especially, someone from outside the U.S. And you have distinguished yourself as a trash-talker.

Dr. Noelliste: Really?

Dr. Don Payne: Oh you have. I mean, I can hardly encounter you in the hall without being verbally assaulted and my character aligned. But with all that on the table, I have to also tell listeners about one of your relentless spiritual vices, which is covetousness. Because since you arrived on our campus 12 years ago, you have badgered me to give you one of my cars, which I'm not going to do it.

Dr. Noelliste: Well listen, I said that after much prayer. When I came here I was, "Why did God lead me here?" And after meeting you, it became clear. It is for me to work on your sanctification.

Dr. Don Payne: Well, clearly. I know you mean the best by this, because you're convinced it would be good for my character if I gave you my car.

Dr. Noelliste: Really. I mean, I don't know why you take so long, but I keep at it. I would not give up.

Dr. Don Payne: I'm really glad to know that. Hey, okay. I have in front of me, a book. Not the book that you just wrote, but another book. This is actually a novel by the well-known American historical novelist, James Michener. And I'm not going to pronounce the title of this book, but I want you to settle a longstanding controversy, linguistic controversy, here in the U.S., and tell me how you pronounce this word. What is the proper pronunciation of this word?

Dr. Noelliste: You should not ask me, because I am linguistically challenged and confused. I say Caribbean, Ca-ri-bean.

Dr. Don Payne: Cari-be-an.

Dr. Noelliste: Ca-ri-bean. No. I put the accent on the "i", Ca-ri-bean.

Dr. Don Payne: Ca-ri-bean?

Dr. Noelliste: Yes.

Dr. Don Payne: That's not the way you say it, typically. You say Cari-be-an.

Dr. Noelliste: No, I say Ca-ri-bean, always. You don't really hear me well.

Dr. Don Payne: You said it the other way, just 30 minutes ago. Okay. Wrong answer. [Because] James Michener, in one section of this book, he has a little editorial comment where he says that the proper pronunciation is Cari-be-an, but that Americans who want to fashion

themselves as more elitist, manufactured the pronunciation Cari-bbean. But that's not the way it's pronounced.

Dr. Noelliste: I see.

Dr. Don Payne: And I wanted you to settle that. But you have apparently fallen into -- you've been Americanized, and you say Cari-be-an.

Dr. Noelliste: We'll be talking about culture in theology. I guess the American culture has rubbed on me sufficiently, because I've been here at Denver for 12 years, and before that, 11 years, to study theology. So there must be some kind of rubbing of the American culture.

Dr. Don Payne: How do people who live there pronounce it?

Dr. Noelliste: You know, there's an English, there's a British and there is a Caribbean. I don't know if the British says Cari-be-an.

Dr. Don Payne: I just heard you say Cari-be-an.

Dr. Noelliste: No. I just said Ca-ri-bean. I know that in French, we say Cari-be-ene, so we put the focus on the final syllable. But in English, I'm told that you say Ca-ri-bean.

Dr. Don Payne: I don't, but I don't speak English very well. So, that probably explains that. Anyway, back to the point of our conversation today. You have recently published a book with Langham Press, their French arm.

Dr. Noelliste: Yes.

Dr. Don Payne: And the English title of the book is *The Afro-Caribbean* -- or Afro Cari-be-an -- *Religions in light of Christian Faith*.

Dr. Noelliste: Correct.

Dr. Don Payne: Now, we could have this entire conversation in French, since you published a book in French, except, the extent of my French vocabulary is about 10 words. So, we're going to rely on you to interpret your book for us. But your book is significant, because going back to my introductory remarks, as I understand, the premise of the argument of your book, you are trying to do a theological analysis of some of the syncretism that has plagued, or perhaps continues to plague, the Church in the Caribbean states. Is this correct?

Dr. Noelliste: Yeah. It is of partly correct. The syncretism is one, but there is also another aspect that the book tries to address in the relationship between the Afro-Caribbean religions and the Christian faith. Historically, since, I would say, 16th century, the slave trades and what is called the discovery of the Americas by Columbus. So, that region of the world, which was just occupied by the original Caribbean people, called the Caribs and the Arawak's and the Tainos, that region began to receive an influx of people from outside

the region itself, particularly from Africa, after the Indians died, pretty much, and subsequently, from Asia and other parts of the world. But with the arrival of the Africans themselves, because you have the rubbing of the shoulders between the religious heritage of the Africans and Christian faith. There has been this kind of proximity and rubbing. And the question has been, how can those two relate? So when [approaching] the approach of complete disengagement, the complete separation. It's as if two neighbors who live next to each other, and they see each other every day but they never say "Hi" to each other.

The other one is the argument for replacement, that is now that a new religious reality becomes part of the Caribbean scene. Some are the arguments of some [thinkers], "Let's just replace the Christians' heritage with the Afro-Caribbean heritage. And so, in this instance, in Christian faith, it's completely replaced. Another approach is that, "Well, let us get a mixture of the two." This is where the concept of syncretism comes in. My argument is that we need an approach -- are just critiques. Those approach in the book suggests that we have, instead, an approach that recognizes that there are similarities, but there are profound differences. And I argue in the definition of a relationship between those two, we need to engage in a dialectic of these two concepts. And that in the interplay of the similarities -- how I call "similitude" in French, this is the subtitle of the book *Similitude and Differences*. That is, similarities and differences. And then find out how we can come to an understanding that [takes] seriously, the religious reality, and that doesn't however compromise Christian faith as we come to understand it. That is the argument in the book.

Dr. Don Payne: Okay. So, what motivated you to write this book? You've been away from Haiti for a long time, but I know you've stayed actively involved with the church scene in Haiti. What prompted you to write this?

Dr. Noelliste: I would say there is a threefold motivation. The first one, you mentioned Haiti, but the book talks about the Afro-Caribbean religions. It covers--

Dr. Don Payne: The entire region.

Dr. Noelliste: The entire region. It attacks a number of religions, which cover the entire region. So when I get to Jamaica -- I [arrive] in Jamaica at the graduate school -- one of the courses I taught was a course in Caribbean Thought and Culture. In that course, we address things such as Caribbean history, Caribbean music, Caribbean literature, Caribbean politics, and Caribbean religions. The course was taught by a variety of persons, because nobody is an expert in [inaudible 16:34], and I thought the section dealing with Caribbean religions. And I began to do research. I didn't do a thing. I went through education here in the United States all the way to the PhD, but never any study in this area. But I became interested because it's part of our culture. So I studied Voodoo, Shango, all of these other religions, to really help our students understand the context so that they can make the gospel confront that context and challenge it to change.

So, I did that for about 20 years and then left it there. When I came here, in the United States, I didn't teach that at Denver Seminary. But then God opened a door for me to go to Paris -- to France -- to teach a course at The Afro-Caribbean Bible Institute. I

presented the material, in French, for the first time. And after I did that, the students said, "Wow. That's great. You did this for us for about a week or two, but do you have anything to leave behind for us?" There was no such time. And so, that was the motivation.

The third motivation is the argument of the book. That is, for some people, there must be complete separation, as I said. For others, there must be a straddling of the two. That is, the Afro-Caribbean Christianity, what the Haitian -- Jamaican think that they can straddle Christian faith and this religion as well. And so the argument is, that I put, with the similitude and differences, is to say that you can -- as Christian, we can recognize the similarities and appreciate the deep differences so that we don't have to straddle and mix the two, if we are to be faithful Christians. At the same time, we have to understand enough of this religion so that we can engage them redemptively. We can have a conversation with the neighbor next door, to the point of introducing them to Jesus Christ, which is what we can provide to them what they are really looking for in life.

Dr. Don Payne: Okay, so your book has not been out very long. When was it released?

Dr. Noelliste: It was released just last month, in August.

Dr. Don Payne: Okay. This may be too early to tell, but do you have any preliminary response or indicators from the Caribbean region to the book's argument? How is it being received so far?

Dr. Noelliste: No idea yet, except for the few friends who have read it. I've given it to many people in the Caribbean, even in France, to read and to assess. These responses were very helpful to the argument that I made. But as far as the wider people, the broader Caribbean region and the Afro-Caribbeans outside the region, this is yet to come.

Dr. Don Payne: Okay, well you know the region well, you know the context, so what type of response do you anticipate?

Dr. Noelliste: Because it is in French, the other countries that I address in the book, such as Jamaica and Rastafarianism in Jamaica, Obeah in Jamaica and others in Trinidad and Tobago, in Cuba, in Puerto Rico, Dominica Republic, obviously, that would be limited because it is -- So, people have been asking me, "When will you have an English translation?" But I expect that a number of schools in Haiti have already decided to use it as textbooks.

Dr. Don Payne: Very good.

Dr. Noelliste: In fact, I get an invitation to go and teach it myself, and teach the course in a very kind of wonderful university that is in the [Northern] Haiti. And I look forward to do that. I have not seen this disengagement, certainly not in French. And I will go to Paris in 2021 to teach it again. So I'm hoping that the response will be encouraging. That's why I do it. I didn't do it in English, I think that [it's deliberately done] in this language. Canada, I interact with, in the book, with a book called *On Voodoo*, arguing for a syncretistic approach. I took him to task--

Dr. Don Payne: I'm glad you brought that up because I knew that you had a section in the book *On Voodoo*. Talk to us about that.

Dr. Noelliste: Yes. Well, I chose Voodoo -- I call it Voo-doo. I don't like Voo-doo, its nasal sound.

Dr. Don Payne: It all sounds the same to me, but go ahead.

Dr. Noelliste: And that doesn't really give people an appreciation of the importance of this religion. Sometimes people see Voodoo as an ancient religion that should not be taken seriously because it is engaged in magic and all of these things, in ugliness and so forth. And I think while some of this is true, it doesn't represent the cultural element, mindset and worldview that this thing presents. And so, I begin with Voodoo first, because I think most of its teaching resonated in the other religions, so I begin with Voodoo and I put the other religion, beside Rastafarianism, in conversation with Voodoo in the second chapter of the book. Because I have, really, a passion for the mindset, the Voodoo culture, the understanding of life, the Voodoo worldview, that really penetrates the mind of my people to be transformed by the gospel. And I will make no apology for that in the book. And some people who have read it, they are more sympathetic to the Voodoo worldview than I am, and they know where I come from. They say, "Well, you admit the argument in the case for that, so we appreciate that."

Dr. Don Payne: Well, I feel like we could talk about that very topic for a long, long time. Give us, maybe, one or two brief examples of how you understand the gospel speaking into and challenging redemptively, the Voodoo mindset?

Dr. Noelliste: Yes. Thank you. It's a lot that can be said here. For example, the concept of God, which is what you call the loas I call, in fact, Voodoo or the worship of the loas. The loas, a second tier in the Voodoo Pantheon. The Voodoo god, the high god is supposed to be elevated. In much of the Caribbean religion, elevated -- not really accessible or interested that much in the affairs of human being. This is relegated to the second tier divinities, which are the loas. And there are a multiplicity of loas, and so forth. And keeping these divinities happy so that you can navigate life, it's a huge task. I'm saying this because the [realist] family practice Voodoo. My grandmother was a Voodooist. I know that, firsthand. It's not just second hand. And it is when my family, my mom and my dad, became the first person to accept Jesus in that village, because they could not satisfy these loas. Then things began to change in our lives. So we believe the challenge of the Christian faith to the Voodoo religion is that, what you're seeking in Loas, only God can provide. A God that cares about us. A God that doesn't remain detached from humanity. A God is transcendent, but that is also human, that is close to us. And a God that shows his love so much for us that he becomes incarnate among us. He did not have any fear to become part of us for the purpose of redeeming us. It is this God, revealed in Jesus Christ, that we need to get the satisfaction, the deliverance, salvation, that we seek in the world of fear, that so many forces are unleashed against us. This is the understanding of the Voodoo mentality. The universe, its people--

Dr. Don Payne: Not as hostile.

Dr. Noelliste: It's hostile. And one has to find one's own footing, and security is important. And we say that this is exactly what the gospel comes to provide us.

Dr. Don Payne: The doctrine of the incarnation becomes the proclamation of the gospel.

Dr. Noelliste: Correct. Very key, to say, "God is here. Not away in the skies, not concerned about us." Before that, I wrote a piece about 20 or 25 years ago called *Transcendent but Not Remote*. God is transcendent, but not remote. He's here with us and he is here to make a difference in our lives.

Dr. Don Payne: Okay. So how might your argument in this book be a sort of case study that Christians in very different contexts, such as the U.S., could benefit from?

Dr. Noelliste: Yeah, a good question. And here, I think they engage the understanding of culture. And there are two things here. First of all, culture outside culture. That is, which are not our own. I remember I was a student at Northwestern and there was a movie, a part of a documentary that was put out, and it was on Voodoo. And we were offended by this, Haitian intellectuals in the country. Basically, a kind of negative portrayal of the culture. And in the West, there is a tendency to do that, with respect to Voodoo. I hope that people--

Dr. Don Payne: Well, I don't think many Americans can think about Voodoo, except in terms of sticking pins in dolls.

Dr. Noelliste: Exactly. That's the point. And in fact, [received a copy of] the book when Langham was working on the cover, they had some things so kind of esoteric. I said, "No. I don't want that, because I want serious people to read this. It is not what I want to portray." And in so far as American readers would read this book in French, I want them to get an appreciation of the Voodoo religion beyond what they used to think -- like needles--

Dr. Don Payne: Sticking pins in dolls.

Dr. Noelliste: That's exactly right. The second thing is about our understanding of our own culture. In the book, and talking about kind of leading to the approach of similitude and differences, I argue that we need to engage in cultural critique. A theology of culture that views culture as consisting of elements -- of positive good elements, bad elements and also neutral elements. The first, we need to challenge. The second -- or the last, the third one, the good one -- we need to embrace. And the third in between, we need to redeem. And what is it for us? There may be a tendency in some countries, we say, "Well, my culture, right or wrong," No. culture is a human invention. And humans are fallen. So, in every culture there will be the bad, the nice, the good. There will be also the ugly, that it will be challenged, and there will be those in between. And our job as Christians, is not to just take an uncritical approach to our culture. A big argument of the book is what I call the [to our culture] is the concept of critical appropriation. We appropriate what is good, we critique what is bad and we redeem what is a neutral.

Dr. Don Payne: Let's talk just for a moment about redemption. How has your experience in Haiti, your research on the book, how has all of that clarified for you, maybe illuminated for you,

what redemption looks like when the gospel comes into a very convoluted religious scene in a culture?

Dr. Noelliste: I assume, and this is what, again, in every chapter we just try to say what are the similarities and what are the differences. What the gospel does, is to provide clarity. For example, the Caribbean religions talk about the need for mediation, any mediation. So in the chapter on Christology, we address that. I say, yeah, the concept of mediation is a biblical concept. Between God and men, there is a gulf between us and God. There must be mediation and the Caribbean religions are right to focus on that. But then when it comes to how they fill in that theology -- who are the mediators? Well the mediators are the loa in Voodoo, they are the spiritual forces in Shango, in the case of Rastafarianism, it's la haile Selassie, just a man. And I said, no. The scriptures clarified that there is only one person who qualifies as the mediator and that is the incarnate Christ.

So, this is what I want the Caribbean readers to get that [case of] clarity. The Holy Spirit, for example, the spirit is a huge area. Possession is in all of the religions except West Africanism. All right. So there is a confusion. Sometimes people say, "Well you know, it's possession. Possession is spirit in spirit." as if everything goes. I say no, no, no. Let's look at who is that this spirit who has possessed us, that it can be bound to our good. It is a spirit of a particular ontological status, who is God himself. Hence the Trinity becomes so critical in this discussion. Secondly, is a spirit who is not morally ambiguous, as is the case in the other religions. They can be good and bad spirit, the same gods -- Voodoo gods -- can do me good, but when I went to turn him against you, do you bad. That is called moral ambiguity.

Dr. Don Payne: Which leads to fear.

Dr. Noelliste: Exactly. So I said, the Spirit of God, does it have this kind of ambiguity? That's why we call him "Holy Spirit."

Dr. Don Payne: Well, it gives a whole new illumination to Paul's comment to Timothy, that God has not given us a spirit of fear. Of course, he had a particular application in mind with that comment, but it does fit. God does not give us a spirit of fear.

Dr. Noelliste: It does fit. And that is the thing with the deduction of the Spirit, is the action of the Spirit on behalf of the believer. In the Voodoo gods or the Voodoo religion or in the other religions too in the Cari-- we talk Shango and the revivalist religions, we have to do something to keep the spirits happy, to keep them on our side. And so, we had to do sacrifices, and do this thing and this that, to keep them in our corner. There is no such thing in the spirit [inaudible 33:33]. So I'm talking about the clarity. The gospel -

Dr. Don Payne: Love it, love it. Okay. Last serious question. As you look forward to scholarship that will build upon the work that you've done, what lies ahead? What work needs yet to be done by theologians and other Christian scholars in the arena of Afro-Caribbean religion?

Dr. Noelliste: There is a sense that this is really kind of an introduction. I mean, I just do [inaudible 34:05] 10-12 [chapter] on one of those religions. One can write books on these exploring the various contours of these religions. I mean, at the end I talk about eschatology, for example. Maybe if I were to do something I would just write a chapter on the doctrine of the last things, which is something which is lacking in many other religions. Its look at everything is confined fully to now. The "now" is important. As you know me, I focus on the abundant life here and now, but it is not all that is before us. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians Chapter 15, even only in this life we hope when we are miserable indeed. But what I would like to do -- in fact, Langham has just graciously given me a contract -- is a book on the role of the Church in social change and transformation. And the--

Dr. Don Payne: In Caribbean cultures, or in general?

Dr. Noelliste: I will do that in general, particularly looking at the majority world. Christian faith, as you know, is growing a lot in the majority world. So the trust is growing. And my concern is that how can that Church be positioned, be equipped, be formed so that it can challenge society and gear it in the direction of the life that God wants for human beings? That is work I would like to write.

Dr. Don Payne: Okay. If your voice is reaching any young budding gifted Caribbean scholars, what's the next book that they should write?

Dr. Noelliste: I'm going to come about Haiti. I mean, this is a Caribbean -- The Caribbean is not monolithic. Every territory has its own challenge, challenges. That is kind of a broad stroke on Caribbean as a whole, but I am Haitian and my passion is to see how the gospel -- and what I would like to see a budding Caribbean theologian do -- how the gospel can address the challenge of Haitian societies prosperity and deliverance from the scourge of poverty and what is that? I wrote a little piece some time ago called *There is so much Christianity and so much poverty*. How can we resolve this kind of--

Dr. Don Payne: So, something that has some socioeconomic implications to it?

Dr. Noelliste: Implications to it.

Dr. Don Payne: Oh, good.

Dr. Noelliste: You know what I do in the institute. I don't believe that there is any theme that is outside of the purview of Christian faith. That's what is living faith. So, what can the gospel provide hope for people -- I mean, obviously hope of heaven, hope of the afterlife. That's true, that is good. But when I see millions of young Haitians remaining in abject conditions that they are, I am concerned.

Dr. Don Payne: So, we've been interacting this week with Dr. Dieumeme Noelliste, professor of theological ethics here at Denver Seminary. Want to give him, just our gratitude for the work he's done in this recent book, and our prayer that it's going to be really impactful in the body of Christ around the world. This is Engage360 from Denver Seminary. We are

glad you've joined us. Hope you'll continue to join us. Visit our website denverseminary.edu. And if you'd like to give us comments, questions, any kind of interaction, we'd love to hear from you. podcast@denverseminary.edu is our email address. On behalf of our production team, Dusty Di Santo, Christa Ebert, Rob Foley, Aaron Johnson, Michael Roberts, Maritsa Smith, Shawn Trueman, and Andrea Weyand. I'm Don Payne, your host, thanks for listening. Hope you'll check in again next week for another episode.