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Can I Get an “Amen”? Affirming the Contemporary Ghanaian Usage of Amen

Introduction

The word amen needs no introduction. It is a gem of ancient history that has not only survived the test of time, but has also proliferated across the cultural spectrum of humanity through the spread of Christianity and to a lesser extent among the followers of Islam. In the Christian context, while its most frequent usage is as a final word in Christian prayer, amen is also often used as an interjection to communicate affirmation, approval, or agreement in a general way. As such it performs both liturgical and communicative functions. For example, liturgically, it is sung as a conclusion to pastoral prayers. Communicatively, it is said after a choir has ministered through song, or at certain points during a sermon when people wish to express a strong sense of agreement with what has been or is being said.

Some Adventist commentators have recently called into question the appropriateness of many instances of the second class of usage. For them, amen is often used in ways that are contrary to its meaning and proper function. Many also feel that its frequent repetition robs it of the meaning sustained by active thinking, leading to mindless and therefore meaningless repetition. The claim is also made that such indiscriminate usage of amen is traceable to indigenous Ghanaian religions and its libational culture. This study seeks to carefully look at the claim that certain uses of amen in Christian communicative context are inappropriate, to show how the term is used in these instances is largely in conformity with its original meaning and biblical usage, and that the contemporary application reflects valid contextual interpretations of that meaning that are by no means restricted to Ghanaian thinking. Doing so will affirm today's believers in their appropriation of an ancient term that can add a deeply meaningful dimension to the worship experience that should not be curtailed if it is used conscientiously. This article also aims to reignite

an appreciation for the deep meaning of the term, and thus instigate a positive mental attitude that makes the use of amen purposeful and rewarding. The study proceeds primarily on the basis of an assessment of the etymology of amen from antiquity to date, and secondarily on a comparative reflection on the ancient and contemporary uses. Finally it offers a brief analysis of the formal reasoning from which some of the objections are raised.

In this study I will focus on the use of amen within the liturgy of Seventh-day Adventism in Ghana for two main reasons. First, the discussion on the right use of amen has increased in recent times, with some ministers advocating what they consider more appropriate response formulas for various situations in corporate worship. Further to the point, the discussion has taken on a theological dimension around the influence of Ghanaian culture on Christian praxis. Second, the Ghanaian context is the one I am most familiar with and have the easiest access to.

The Meaning and Basic Function of Amen

Amen is a biblical term of Hebrew origin. It comes from *'aman*, which means “to be firm or faithful” (Strong n.d.:536). H. W. Hogg suggests that the underlying concept in the root is that of “stability, steadfastness, [and] reliability” (1896:2). Bruce Chilton notes the broadness of the semantic range, which includes, through various verbal forms, “support,” “be faithful,” “sure,” “established,” “stand firm,” and “believe” (1992:184). *Baker’s Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* says that amen is “a Hebrew adjective originally meaning ‘reliable, sure, true’” (Dorani 1996). In the Old Testament it is used to mean “So be it” or “Let it be so” (*Encyclopedia Britannica* 2013). Chilton touches on the enigma of a precise translation by offering that while “sure,” “truly,” and “so be it” may be a clear indication of the meaning of amen, “none of those renderings entirely captures the nuance of the Hebrew” (1992:185). In terms of the actual biblical usage, he explains that amen in the Hebrew Bible “typically appears at the close of commands, blessings, curses, doxologies, and prayers. Fundamentally, it is used to confirm what has been said before, by way of response” (Num 5:22; Deut 27:15-26; 1 Kgs 1:36; Jer 11:5; 28:6; 1 Chr 16:36; Neh 5:13, 8:6) (184).

Hogg maintains three categories as far as the Old Testament usage is concerned: (1) *Initial amen*—amens used before a statement that itself denotes affirmation; “So be it!” (Deut 27:15-26; 1 Kgs 1:36; Jer 28:6), (2) *Detached amen*—amens in which the statements following the amen “are to be understood from the situation” (Neh 5:13), and (3) *Final amen*—amens used at the ends of liturgical applications, usually as “amen, amen” or “amen and amen” (Ps 86:52; 1 Chr 16:36) (1896:3, 4).

In the New Testament the term is used to mean “truly,” “verily,” or as a doxological formula. Hogg maintains three classes as maintained by “the best texts” of the NT: (1) *introductory amen* (Rev 7:12, 14:4, 22:20), (2) *detached amen* (Rev 5:14; 1 Cor 14:16), (3) *Final amen*, the doxological and benedictory amens of the epistles (1896:8). The *introductory amen* is particularly noteworthy as it stands in isolation from the normal, responsive usage of amen in the New Testament. It is the usage of Jesus as per “truly” or “truly, truly (amen, amen) I say unto you” (Matt 6:2, 10:15; Luke 21:32; John 1:51). This usage suggests further inner-biblical evidence of evolution or adaptation in the usage of the term.

Without recourse to the documentary hypothesis employed by Hogg in his analysis, it is clear that as the religion of Israel became more formalized, the Hebrew word amen, which in ordinary conversational usage denoted truthfulness and reliability, came to be employed in an increasingly narrower liturgical sense as an acceptance of blessings, curses, and other dictums of Israelite religious ceremonies. Thus, it is important to establish early on that from ancient times, amen has always been used “in a variety of contexts” (DeMoss and Miller 2002:22). This reflects Chilton’s warning about the enigmatic nature of the term, evidence of which is found in the “unusual, introductory, and asseverative usage” of the term by Jesus in the Gospels (1992:185). Chilton summarizes Joachim Jeremiah’s explanation for this unusual usage of Jesus as a creative re-adaptation by Jesus of the term, and K. Berger’s insistence that the introductory amen was already a part of the vocabulary of Hellenistic Judaism (185).

Relying on usage in the Old Syriac Gospels, Chilton offers the mediating solution that the introductory amen of the Greek New Testament was a Hellenistic transformation on the Aramaic locution of assurance, *bqwt* or “in truth” (186). It is thus safe to conclude that the Bible itself encompasses a spectrum of usage that indicates the natural evolution of language within the context of changing and developing religion. The various semantic applications of the word are distinguishable in contemporary times is not inconsistent with this precedent. For example, *Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary* (n.d.) suggests that amen is “used to express solemn ratification (as of an expression of faith) or hearty approval (as of an assertion).” The *Encyclopedia Britannica* (2013) offers that it is “an expression of agreement, confirmation, or desire used in worship.” With the exception, perhaps, of Rev 3:14 where Jesus calls himself “the Amen,” it stands out noticeably in all usages of the word that some reality—actual, promissory or supplicatory—is being accepted, whether as desirable (as in blessings), true (as in assertions), intentional (as in oaths), or fair/just (as in curses). Thus James C. Martin (2011:179) is quite on point with his concise classification of amen as “a Hebrew term used to express assent.”

This concept of acceptance is the common *functional* denominator that is traceable in all its contextual meanings.

Recent Objections

Since the format of our discussion is primarily that of response, it seems reasonable to begin by establishing that which is to be rebutted, namely, the objections to the contemporary non-liturgical use of amen which I am calling the “communicative” usage. I will examine four objections that are often raised in informal theological discussion, and one that emerged recently in scholarship. On the informal side, I examine the views that certain uses of amen in Ghanaian Adventist worship are: (1) often liturgically inappropriate (after introductions, after songs, etc.), (2) often thoughtless or flippant, and (3) culturally indicated. Concerning this third objection I will focus on the specific position of Opoku-Gyamfi and Opoku (2017:9) who have recently outlined a case against what they call “the Ghanaian misuse of amen.”

The uses I am concerned about are (1) amen as an interjection of agreement during sermons, (2) amen as an acknowledgement after an introduction of the person or persons in church (e.g., in welcoming visitors), (3) amen as a response to a ministration (e.g., after a song by a choir or individual), and (4) amen as a response to specific doxological calls such as “Hallelujah.” First, I will outline the arguments made in support of each claim, and then to address them sequentially and systematically. Relevant definitions, background, analyses, and opinions will be provided within the context of each treatment as appropriate.

Amen Is Often Used Inappropriately

The claim that amen is used at variance with biblical prescription is often made. One reason often given is that the amen is said in situations in which the right response is not “Let it be so.” For example, when a musician or choir renders a song during a service, the right response when they are done is not “So be it!” It seems to be the not so implicit suggestion of Opoku-Gyamfi and Opoku that the Old Testament sanctions amen only in the context of oaths and doxologies (even though they also include blessings) and as a divine title. They further observe that all the usages of amen in the Old Testament point to “an acknowledgement of a statement that is valid and binding” (2017:4). Certainly not all instances of amen in the Old Testament are “binding” in the sense of an oath. But we concur with the view that all instances point to things said that are deemed “valid” in multiple senses: valid in the sense of being desirable, acceptable, just, or fair.

Hence the phrasing “valid *or* binding” is here preferred. In the New Testament they rightly identify the formal and liturgical usage in epistolary and doxological formulas, as well as its frequent use by Jesus “to show the reliability and truth of his message” (5).

Once it is established, however, that underscoring amen is the idea of acceptance, it becomes apparent that a wide array of expressions during worship can fit sensibly into the function of amen. In sermons, preachers often say things that are acceptable because they are particularly true. An “Amen” in these situations simply expresses that idea and such a usage bears grammatical semblance to the original adjectival meaning of “it is reliable or true,” as provided by the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Elwell 2001:268). Daniel Doriani (1996) comes close to capturing the breadth of the functions of amen when he asserts, “The idea of something that is faithful, reliable, or believable seems to lie behind the use of amen as an exclamation on twenty-five solemn occasions in the Old Testament.” It turns out then, that “So be it” is only one functional meaning of amen, one that happens to be the meaning that dominates Old Testament usage, but not the only one indicated either by the Bible or by the etymology of the word. To grasp the true denotative breath of the term, however, one must go right back to the adjectival root in which it denotes that which is firmly established as true. When preachers say things that are deemed true or believable, an amen cannot be inappropriate.

The same can be said of other forms of ministration during worship services. Often the context involves a musical ministration that is acknowledged at its conclusion by an amen from the congregation. To hold that that type of amen is inappropriate is to be oblivious to the content of the ministration. Music in Christian worship is, or should be, aimed at blessing and edifying the listeners. This blessing may be acknowledged and affirmed as desirable with an amen, much like they were in the Old Testament. This is true particularly of the content of the ministration, such as the lyrics of a song. Needless to say, Christian musical lyrics are often replete with content of myriad theological and evangelistic import, including doxologies, instructions, and affirmation of loyalty, all of which have been attended by amens in the Bible. To proscribe an amen in this context is not only to undermine the benedictory value of the ministration, but may also amount to a presumptuous judgment of the way in which individual hearers receive it. If the mode of reception is right, then the worshipper rightly uses amen to, in the words of Chilton, “confirm what has been said before, by way of response” (1992:184).

Another use of amen that on the surface may appear to be improper is when it comes after the introduction of a person or group of persons during a worship service. But here too we must ascertain what is the value

of the introduction. If, as is often the case, a person is introduced as one who is about to perform a role connected to worship, then an amen can be highly appropriate. For example, saying amen when the officiator for a pastoral prayer is introduced can have a double significance. First, it is to affirm that the individual is acceptable to the congregation for that role; that they are confident his ministration will be a blessing. Second, and less obvious to most people, it is to affirm the desirability of the role itself as a form of blessing. For example, when we hear that "John shall lead us to the throne room of grace through prayer," we are hearing not only that John is the one to take us there (and "Amen!" if John is a righteous, praying man), but we are also hearing that we are indeed going into the throne room of grace!" It seems almost preposterous to forbid an "amen" in such cases. Even when people are introduced by saying, "We wish to acknowledge the presence of Jane and Joe," amen can express the idea that the congregation is blessed to have them in its presence.

There appears to be no sustainable biblical basis for claiming that these instances in and of themselves constitute a misuse of the term. Recent attempts by some congregations to replace amen in these contexts with statements such as "God bless you" are wholly therefore unnecessary even if useful in some respects. As per their biblical function, they are no more appropriate than amen is. This fact, and the extent of their usefulness, will be further explored in our discussion of the third objection.

It Is Used Thoughtlessly or Flippantly

Daniel Doriani (1996) laments that "in current usage, the term "amen" has become little more than a ritualized conclusion to prayers." What is more, the result of this ritualization is that it is often said inattentively and with a lack of seriousness. That concern is shared widely, including by me. Too often we hear heartless amens that barely reach the pulpit from the pews. Too frequently, disinterested amens are emitted around family dining tables from children who are not on the same religious wavelength as their devout parents. In fact, very often, congregations are so dull that an amen has to be extracted from them by the preacher, and sometimes only after several attempts have been made. These amens are uninspiring to say the least, and perhaps dishonest to say the worst.

This cannot in itself however constitute grounds for replacing the word. People tell all sorts of lies, and we cannot suddenly proscribe all the words they use to tell them. That is a strategy based on fallacious reasoning, because removing the words does not take away the motivation to tell the lie. New words will be found, and this is exactly what is now transpiring. Not only are phrases like "God bless you" suggested as being somehow

more appropriate than amen, it is also claimed that using new phrases will refresh the mental attention given to them. This is however true only insofar as it is realized that any increase in attentiveness is caused by novelty, rather than by the actual words themselves. Very rapidly, these new formulas deteriorate to the same state of cold formality; they too grow stale, lose the force of their meaning, and are uttered with the same casualness and flippancy as amen before them. Essentially, they die of the same disease: monotony.

Any bid to eradicate thoughtlessness and flippancy from the responses of a congregation, even if possible, must seek to reduce routine and emphasize variety. This may be achieved by varying liturgical responses from time to time, as is done with liturgical songs, doxologies, calls to worship, and canticles, or with the order of the worship service for example. Or it may be done on the basis of pure spontaneity by individuals. A formulaic amen, expected at the end of every prayer, is a very different thing from a spontaneous amen elicited from the consciousness of a person on whom a worship-related experience has an effect.

Some argue that amen is a holy word. As such it should not be disrespected by frequent or flippancy usage. If amen is a holy word it is made so by a holy context. Just as the altar sanctifies the gift and not vice versa, it is the context of Christian worship, individual or corporate, that imparts sacredness to the elements present in it and not the other way around. There is nothing holy about an *amen* spoken after an occult imprecation. Amen may be sacred relative to holy worship, but it is not in and of itself sacrosanct.

Amen is Culturally Indicated

Certainly the most interesting of the objections being considered is the one that says that Ghanaian Christians' use of amen is indicated by the religious heritage of their culture. Specifically, Opoku-Gyamfi and Opoku (2017:8) allege that Ghanaian Christians' use of amen reflects a culturally indicated tendency toward active rather than passive participation in worship; the same tendency that is expressed in the call and response formulas of libational oratory and storytelling. In Akan libation, the officiant works deliberately towards an emotionally charged atmosphere by stimulating audience participation through call and response. They explain that "With the assistants leading the way, any member of the audience can interject interlocutory responses such as *sio* or *wiee*, meaning 'yes' and 'true'" (8). Dennis Ampofo-Nimakoto (2012:113) however clarifies that the interjection is more a feature of a fixed, formal structure of the libational prayer, where *wiee* is said after each completed phrase of the prayer, of

which the early ones end with “*nsa*” (here is drink). For Opoku-Gyamfi and Opoku, “This African traditional religiosity, more or less, resonates in the various Christian worship centers today. Intermittent shouts of amen in Christian prayers are not by chance. It is by intuition, duly contextualized to conform to Christian modes of worship” (2017:8).

The problems that arise at the nexus of Christian faith and indigenous African religion are well documented. Much has been written including by this writer on the ills of philosophical and theological leakage from indigenous religion into Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy in the African context (Agana and Prempeh 2018). It is not immediately vital to rehash the detailed points of that discussion. What suffices is that the influence of culture and religious tradition on Christian behavior is acknowledged. Further, some prayer formulas employed in Ghanaian Adventist worship do bear an unmistakable resemblance to libational practice, for example, the “*daa—amen*” formulas described by Opoku-Gyamfi and Opoku (2017:9). The amens spoken at various points during a sermon do hearken back to African storytelling culture. No conclusion can be drawn on the matter, however, that is not debatable. The Old Testament does provide several examples of a call-and-response paradigm involving the repetition of amen at various points of a prayer or oration. In Deut 27:15-26, Moses commands the people to say amen after each of eleven curses declared by Levite priests.

That said, even if the connection is accepted without dispute, it does not appear to be a wrong reinterpretation of a cultural practice. Christian mission has suffered for a long time from numerous failures at contextualizing the Christian faith and religion so that Africans can assimilate it seamlessly and even naturally. This is an ongoing struggle of mission even today. Mission must leave behind the historical practice of ignoring, dismissing, and even demonizing indigenous African concepts and practices wholesale. Instead, elements within the culture that lend themselves to biblical constraints and can be expressed in consonance with biblical theology present an important inroad for the gospel into the African psyche, which for better or worse, remains highly tenacious. It appears that in this case, culture affords an anthropologically natural vehicle by which the genuineness and effectiveness of prayer can be enhanced in the Ghanaian setting. Indeed, this is true for many African settings in which similar cultural practices pertain. Rather than dismiss it outright, the Church needs to find ways to harness it in ways that improve corporate worship that is both biblical and culturally sensitive. Bruce Bauer’s (2007:246) admonition in this regard seems highly instructive: “Much of the syncretism that is observed in our world is caused by poor contextualization, not over contextualization.” He calls for church leaders to “learn to do contextualization right” (246). In that spirit I offer the following suggestions.

The Argument for Relevance

Within the context of making Christian religious categories relevant and relatable in an African context lies the particular discussion on how the relevance of amen can be maintained in contemporary worship settings. The suggestions that follow are inspired by the advice of Bauer who proposes “critical contextualization” (2007:249) and Bertil Wiklander (2007:119), who calls for contextualizing Adventism in a manner that is practical, innovative, balanced, and “amenable to the stability and unity of God’s people.”

Foster Authentic Worship

Worship is an offering first and foremost of the mind. No true worship can be produced when the mind is not engaged. Rather, meaningless formality results instead. For example, one preacher once told of a meeting with deacons in which he deliberately asked them to turn in their Bibles to the book of Hezekiah. For a considerable period of time they dutifully searched their Bibles for it until he informed them it just was not there. Will Graham (2017) recounts how “in a meeting I was explaining what Pantheism is all about. Whilst I taught the congregation saying: “Trees are god; rivers are god; everything is god!” one man in the assembly shouted out ‘amen’! I had to stop the message and inform the man that we can’t say ‘amen’ to such false statements. . . . In another meeting I once asked the church “Who is a Gentile?” Someone responded by saying ‘amen.’”

Another example is not directly from corporate worship but still of note is a recent online experiment in which Jacob Dufour (2018) posted the text of Luke 4:7 in a Christian Facebook group. According to him, over 90% of more than 576 comments the post received were expressions of agreement, hundreds of which were “Amen.” Worship leaders need to find contextually suitable methods of fostering attentive corporate worship. This may involve the use of music, call, and response formulas or demonstrations. The principle is that if the worshipper is attentive, then their actions and words are more likely to convey genuine intent of meaning.

Strive for a Balance between Spontaneity and Structure

Spontaneity within Ghanaian Adventism need not be viewed as a negative thing. Within the context of a deliberate plan for liturgical order and decorum, spontaneous, heartfelt, culturally appropriate worship responses should be encouraged (1 Cor 14:26, 33). In this regard, amen has the advantageous attribute of brevity. This allows worshippers to actively

respond without disrupting the service. The added benefit of its almost universal familiarity is that when one worshipper shouts a spontaneous amen, it does not severely disrupt the attention of other worshippers. If anything, it can offer them a quick mental nudge to consider more deeply what has been said or sung, and perhaps respond with their own amen, nod of the head, or other personally appropriate gesture. Indeed, the requirement of intelligibility in 1 Corinthians 14:16 suggests that amen was spoken in worship settings as a spontaneous response to intelligible words of blessing and thanksgiving, because amens can easily be repeated in a rehearsed liturgy even if the language of doxology is not understood. Hence the *New Bible Dictionary* rightly describes the New Testament usage of amen as “a natural response to be expected in public worship” (Taylor 1962:30). What is needed therefore, is not opposition to it, but a deliberate approach to maintaining order and decency while fostering authentic, spontaneous worship that amen can represent and facilitate.

In the context of a musical ministration, the brevity of amen helps to ensure judicious management of time in transitions between a song and the next ministration. For these situations, Opoku-Gyamfi and Opoku (2017:10) suggest clapping as an appropriate replacement for amen “where human contributions in the service are recognized.” I find nothing wrong with acknowledging the excellence of human agency in worship per se. The question, however, is one of what worship culture a congregation finds acceptable. Clapping after a song has blessed the audience or after an instrument has been dexterously played makes elicits a response meaning, well done. Saying an amen makes the statement, “What you have sung or played is good!” There is a difference in emphasis between the two statements. The former centers the congregational approbation on the minister. The latter places it upon what has been ministered. When the Levite choir sang, rather than praise the choir, the people acknowledged the content of the song with an amen. The latter, then, seems to be more in keeping with the fundamental idea in all expressions of worship ministration: that the content of the ministration is the blessing of God upon us, or the channel of our corporate attempt at reaching up to God, and the minister is but a vessel. The vessel may shine, but it is the wine that is desired. It seems more prudent then, if we are to develop a lasting culture of worship, to found it upon an acknowledgement of the substance of worship rather than upon the worshippers themselves.

The point on spontaneity is not to say we need more of it in Ghanaian Adventist worship, but that the spontaneity already being manifested in the use of amen during sermons and musical ministrations is not necessarily inappropriate.

Educate Worshippers on the Meaning and Function of Amen

Having said this, it is important to also address the fact that many Ghanaian Adventist worshippers do indeed use amen out of place. For example, out of ignorance many people express amen in the same spirit of handclapping after a ministration. They say it as a praise to the minister rather than as an assent to the content of the ministration. For example, as Opoku-Gyamfi and Opoku (2017:2) rightly note of many Adventist services, “the person doing the introduction of persons officiating would ask the congregation after mention of each name, “What do you say to him?” and they will respond, “Amen.”” Contrary to their lament, however, this usage does not necessarily traverse the semantic range of amen. It does however appear to diverge from the theocentric principle in worship. The amen should be an affirmation of the role people play, which is the actual blessing. “What do you say to *that*?” is also a frequent, more theocentric call, and therefore a more theologically appropriate one. The answer then is education, not eradication. There is no compelling reason to purge amen from our worship contexts. Education should encompass not only the meaning and function of amen, but also the solemnity of the meaning conveyed. The use of amen should always stem from deep sincerity. Some useful guidelines for the use of amen may include: (1) only say amen when you agree with, believe, accept, or are moved by what is said or done; (2) only say amen when you have a personal reason to do so. This may also be stated as (3) never say amen only because others are saying it.

As with all other areas of worship, periodic and ongoing congregational reflection on this element of their liturgy is an imperative. Here as Bauer (2007:249) advises, by “doing intentional critical contextualization and engage in good biblical teaching,” the church has an opportunity to meet any negative aspects that emerge within its liturgical praxis without trampling benign cultural constructs underfoot.

Conclusion

Altogether then, the claim that amen as used in the instances we have discussed is inappropriate is found to lack firm biblical or etymological foundation. Neither does the suggestion that if it is a vestige of African worship culture then that provides a reasonable ground for thus condemning it. While it is recognized that amen is often babbled from mental laxity, it is suggested that the problem lies not in amen, as a word, but in the person, as a worshipper. Amen is a rich word, capable of communicating a spectrum of positive human intellectual and emotional responses to worship; a spectrum that fits squarely within the umbrella of acceptance

and assent. G. B. Funderburk (1976:127) is correct in assessing that amen is “far more meaningful than a stop or signing-off word by which a prayer, song or declaration is terminated. It carries the weight of approval, confirmation, and support for what is said or sung.” Therefore, amen does not need to be curtailed to a few formal, highly rehearsed schemes of worship. It should be embraced as the bona fide, effective, biblical expression of assent it can be in contemporary Christian worship.

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