"WHO DO PEOPLE SAY I AM?" CONTEXTUALIZING CHRISTOLOGY IN AFRICA

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African Traditional Religion and Christianity

In 1 Corinthians 1:22, the Apostle Paul categorises all Christological heresy into two basic types:

> Jews demand miraculous signs,
> and Greeks look for wisdom (NIV).

One might expect that this wonder-wisdom dichotomy might not be quite as evident in Africa due to the relatively short history of Christianity on the continent. However, the Word of the Lord did not enter a theological vacuum in Africa. On the contrary, it immediately came into contact with long-established religious traditions. For most if not all Africans, the religious heritage forms an essential part — many would say, the heart and core — of their culture as it is expressed in the people's everyday existence. And this natural religion, which is so much a part of life that it needs no written 'scripture', displays the familiar universal affinity for all sorts of wondrous signs and wise sayings.

As in the case of the Jewish legalists of Christ's time, so also in Africa the component of 'wisdom' is directed towards the past and the revered teachings of the fathers. These ancestors, however, are believed to continue to exert their conservative influence as personal spirits in various ways on the present generation, particularly by inflicting fitting punishments upon those who violate the established customs, values, mores, and norms of society. The 'wonders', too, as performed by a diverse assortment of religious specialists (from the witch-finder to the rain-caller), are very practically oriented — so much so that they are not really regarded as miracles at all. Indeed, there is no sharp dividing line between what the Westerner would regard as the natural and supernatural, the sacred and secular, or the physical and spiritual realms. In essence then, one's existence becomes a continual struggle for survival, for life, in the local sense of a dynamic personal potency or vital-force which may be augmented or diminished from day to day depending on the quality of one's specific relationship to a complex association of beings in the hierarchy of interpersonal power within the cosmos.

It is into this highly 'spiritualised' setting that Christianity has intruded, and it has been contextualized from the beginning due to the very nature of traditional African religion. Although African religion is, like any natural human philosophy, implicitly antithetical to the Gospel, it is more accommodative and innovative than most. To some extent this may be due to the relatively large number of correspondences, both formal and functional, real and apparent, that exist between African religion and the Bible, especially the Old Testament narrative accounts. Thus there is a ready-made framework of belief and behaviour into which traditional elements can be fitted (or vice-versa).

In certain important respects, then, the 'Christianity' that results from this encounter is often syncretistic to varying degrees, depending on the situation (time, place, sociocultural circumstances, etc.) On the one hand, we find 'Christianised tradition', where certain compatible elements of biblical faith and practice (largely the latter) are superimposed upon a fundamentally traditional base—in this case mainly the ancestral belief system. This is characteristic of the many indigenous independent churches which are springing up all over the continent. The deficient Christology in this instance is not due to *too much* of the wrong kind of education (i.e. rationalistic relativism — as is the case for many prominent theologians in Africa), but to *too little* of the right instruction, that is, in the very basics of Scriptural truth.

At the other end of the spectrum of syncretism we have 'traditionalised Christianity', where the core of the biblical faith is present, at least in the official doctrinal position of the church body concerned. However, it is under continual pressure from the advocates of tradition who wish to compromise to an ever greater extent with the 'wisdom' of customary beliefs and practices, on the one hand, and the 'wonders' of various measures of 'life'-enhancement on the other. All such contextualizing procedures are intended to make Christ more 'meaningful' to the present day, especially in matters pertaining to protection, healing, and deliverance from oppression. These latter concerns form the basis for the following survey of various instances of 'over-contextualized' Christology in contemporary African religious thought (cf. Kraft, 1989: 131). We will focus upon some particularly important examples of this tendency, namely, a triad of setting-specific, anthropological analogies which portray Christ as 'Ancestor', as 'Witchdoctor', and as 'Liberator' (or 'Freedom Fighter'). The three fall along a gradient ranging from the most traditional and spiritualised (the first) to the most modern and secularised (the third).

The Illusion of Analogy

The problem with comparative analogies, whether used for description or exposition, is that they are only partial. They manifest some important similarities of form, function, or significance with respect to their referent, but they do not correspond in every detail. And often we even find some noteworthy

contradictory characteristics between the topic and its image which are tolerable only because they do not happen to be in focus in a given context. For this reason analogies can often be misunderstood, namely when people perceive a relationship between the topic and image that is not really there, or one which was not intended by the one making the analogy. A more serious problem occurs when the analogy is not recognised at all, and people either interpret it literally or begin to identify the image and the topic. In either case, the result is confusion, whether it is recognised or not, and a serious breakdown in understanding and/or communication ensues.

This is also true to a certain extent with some of the analogies that are applied to Christ in the Scriptures. Our Lord himself found that at times his own parables, metaphors, and similes were either not perceived (e.g. by the Jewish masses, cf. "the Bread from heaven", (Jn. 6:41) or they were misinterpreted (e.g. by the disciples, cf. his Kingship, Ac. 1:6). This was due of course to the erroneous preconceived notions that most people, including those who were most closely associated with him, had about the promised divine Messiah. Thus his oft-used Messianic titles, which were analogical in a traditional formulaic sense, usually failed to make the correct, if any, impression upon listeners, i.e. Son of God, stressing his deity, and Son of Man, stressing his humanity. Christ's earthly demeanour and outward circumstances were so contrary to their material hopes and aspirations that their minds simply could not bridge the gap between conventional expectation and apparent reality. While closely conforming to popular opinion and religious tradition, their faith was so far removed from the essential Messianic implication of the Old Testament writings (as viewed from the perspective of the New Testament) that only the miracle of Pentecost could restore it to its proper foundation. And the same thing occurs nowadays when overly-contextualized theologies transform the Christ of Scripture into what amounts to a glorified, but essentially human (even if heroic), 'salvation' cult figure.

There is certainly a communicative risk then whenever the language of theology, whether directly biblical or derived, employs familiar comparisons to present divine revelation. The worldly resemblance becomes the reality, as it were, and this in turn begins to serve in place of its spiritual referent as the primary object of people's faith and concern. However, this threat of conceptual transposition did not prevent either Christ or the apostolic writers (e.g. Hebrews in particular) from using analogies and figurative language in their religious discourse. Such a manner of speaking was, and still is, an effective — sometimes the only — way to convey infinite, eternal truths to finite and mortal minds.

Thus it is only to be expected that the process of theological analogising would be extended also to missiological contextualization in a cross-cultural setting The obvious purpose is to present the basics of the Gospel message in linguistic terms that people can immediately grasp and in cognitive categories which

their ethnic background has already in certain respects prepared them to receive. Tiénou rightly calls attention to the possible danger here, that is, in adopting a "mnemic hermeneutics" — a theology of "remembrance" based upon cultural correspondences:

> Mnemic hermeneutics is allowing one's own natural analogy to become the crucial key in understanding Scripture. In this case, the African understanding . . . is read back into Scripture without prior questioning. This in turn makes the biblical message go beyond its intended meaning (Tiénou, 1984: 160).

Alternatively, we might add, the "intended meaning" of the Scriptures is actually *replaced* by an alien sense, one which issues from the world-view of a present-day sociocultural environment. Two crucial questions must therefore be raised with regard to the essential endeavour to contextualize the Gospel. How far can one legitimately go in such an exercise of comparative adaptation? And secondly, how is one able to lessen the danger of possible misunderstanding, misapplication, and hence also a mistaken approach to the development of Christian theology? The three African case-studies to follow may be instructive in this respect.

Our "Advocate with the Father": Christ — the Great Ancestral Mediator

The ancestors, especially the recently departed or 'living- dead' who remain in the conscious memory of their survivors, play an indispensable role in the ontology and phenomenology of African traditional religion (for details, see Wendland, 1987: chapter 3). One's personal ancestral spirit (*mzimu*-Chewa) serves to preserve life, mainly by protecting its ward from the attacks of witches and sorcerers, in return for periodic rites of sacred 'remembrance' in the form of prayers, offerings, and appellation (i.e. giving its name to a child or initiate). The same thing occurs on a communal level with regard to prominent family, clan, and tribal spirits. Where such recognition is not forthcoming or is rendered in an unsatisfactory manner, however, the offended ancestor may chastise the negligent person(s) by allowing some sickness or accident to befall. Similar punitive measures will also be effected if one violates traditional custom, especially the important taboos which govern interpersonal relations (e.g. a case of incest).

Thus when calamity strikes, whether on an individual or corporate scale (e.g. a drought or plague), then upon the advice of a diviner or an obvious act of revelation from the spirits (e.g. a dream, omen, or case of possession), people will seek to make amends through the stipulated sacrifices of appeasement and expiation. Similarly, when earthly blessings have been received (e.g. a new child or a good harvest), the appropriate offerings of thanksgiving have to be made. Though it is said that in such venerative ritual action the spirits act only as 'mediators' to present their descendants' supplications or oblations (as the

case may be) to the High God (e.g. *Leza* [Tonga], *Mulungu* [Chewa], *Kalunga* [Luvale]), it often appears that the latter is only a remote divine figurehead and that the real worship is directed towards his semi-deified representatives. These intermediaries have for all practical purposes supplanted the Supreme Being in the hearts and lives of his people. A danger of similar displacement exists then in Christian theology when the ancestral analogy is contextually applied to Christ.

The case for viewing Christ as our great 'Ancestor' is eloquently presented by Moyo as follows:

> Since religion is an integral part of the African's culture, a rejection of one's [traditional] family religious practices can only lead to a crisis of identity, . . . since one's identity can only be expressed through relationships in the community of the living and the living-dead, and through them with the Supreme Being. An African community without the living-dead, the ancestor shades, is deprived of life in the present, in the future, and of a life with God . . . . [Therefore], until Christ is brought right into our fellowship with the living-dead, most of our African Christians will continue to suffer from . . . 'religious schizophrenia' . . . (Moyo, 1988: 82-83).

It may be true to say that such an accommodation to the religious world view of African peoples makes it easier for them to 'accept' Christ. But what sort of 'Christ' are they thus led to put their trust in? Yes, he is their special brother (relative) and can serve as their mediator before God; he can also protect them from physical and mystical (i.e. sorcerous) danger; he can even suffer and die for them as the supreme example of selfless self-giving on behalf of the community at large. But the predominant emphasis in the performance of such a role remains firmly fixed upon worldly cares and concerns and thus upon Christ's humanity. One does not need *God* to function in this capacity, only a divinely endowed, wonder- working ancestor, indeed, the greatest of these. And certainly it is not too difficult to read (wrongly), and to derive proof from, the gospels (excepting John perhaps) in a way that would support such a reductionistic and syncretistic perspective.

The problem when Christ is cast in the role of the traditional African intermediary is, as Harold Turner observes, that he "is far removed from the Christian concept of the mediator, who not only provides communication but also removes the barriers of *sin and guilt* that separate men from God" (Sawyerr, 1987: 18; emphasis added). Along these same lines, Appiah-Kubi adds that "the African does not see the mediatory functions of Christ as being that of pleading for him before God for the forgiveness of sin" (1987: 71). The difficulty here is related to that of having an inadequate, indigenised conception of both sin and salvation (see below). In keeping with such a perspective, some of the most central teachings of Scripture may be temporalised, even

trivialised, to reflect a mere current, situational relevance. For example, the theology of the cross may be likened to the authority associated with royal staffs and stools as symbols of the "presence of the ever-living ancestors" (Dickson, 1987: 91).

A rationalistic approach guided by traditional notions regarding the ancestral spirits is also able to solve the (admittedly) difficult problem concerning the eternal fate of those who died having no knowledge of Jesus Christ:

> We believe that the death of Christ is for the whole world and no one either living or dead is outside the scope of the merits of Christ's death. Thus both Christians and non- Christians receive salvation through Christ's death and are linked with him through the sacrament which he himself instituted . . . . The African ancestors could also be included in the Communion of Saints in this way (Fasholé-Luke, 1974: 157).

Western liberal universalism has thus assumed African garb! The point here is not to make a blanket condemnation of all non- Christian ancestors; it is simply to assert that New Testament Christianity cannot be applied, retroactively as it were, to their present state and eternal relationship with God. Such problems arise when certain biblical metaphors (e.g. the 'body of Christ') or doctrinal concepts (e.g. the 'communion of saints') are detached from their original theological and cultural moorings and reinterpreted within a local setting, one which may have quite different presuppositions and implications.

Such an overly anthropocentric perspective on Christ's mission is often accompanied by a similar opinion regarding his person. As in the ancient Adoptionistic heresy (cf. Brown, 1984: 93-98), one discerns in many current theological writings emanating from Africa a disturbing tendency to view Christ almost exclusively in terms of his humanity, while his work on behalf of mankind is correspondingly reduced to its 'practical' applicability to the present-day and this-world:

> He is the authentic man bearing the *imagio Dei*. It was as a man that he achieved sinlessness and thus came to be seen as divine . . . . The authority he exhibited over nature and sickness was his by virtue of his perfected humanity (Pobee, 1979: 86).

It is no doubt for this reason that scholars such as Appiah-Kubi come to the pessimistic conclusion that: "[the] major titles of Jesus, the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of David, and the Son of Man have no relevance to traditional African concepts . . . . This does not fit into the thought-form of African peoples" (Appiah-Kubi, 1987: 78).

The biblical ignorance of common Christian laypersons in this matter might possibly be excused, but not the rationalistic skepticism of those who should

have been their instructors. Besides, one wonders whether there might not be more relevance to at least some of these 'praise-names' (if well translated) than the authorities may have recognised—for example, in the notion of 'anointing' (i.e. Messiah), which is practised in the royal induction ceremonies of some Central African peoples.

One of the most extensive and scholarly expositions of the ancestor analogy as applied to Christ has been produced by the Tanzanian Catholic theologian, Charles Nyamiti. In a book entitled, *Christ as Our Ancestor* (1984), Nyamiti makes an admirable effort to give a systematic presentation of "Christology from an African perspective." However, this work is unfortunately marred in many respects due to the influence of conceptual interference from the tradition of his own church, as is apparent already in the following statement from the book's preface:

> Theological inquiry revealed that not only African ancestors who died in a state of friendship with God but all the saints in heaven and purgatory can be regarded as our true Christian ancestors (ibid.: 7).

Nyamiti bases his Christological analogy on five major points of similarity which emerge from his definition of a 'brother- ancestor':

> A brother-ancestor is [a] a relative of a person with whom he has a common parent, and [b] of whom he is a mediator to God, [c] archetype of behaviour and with whom—[d] thanks to his supernatural status acquired through death—[e] he is entitled to have regular sacred communication (ibid.: 23).

While one recognises here certain general correspondences with the biblical teaching of Christ, to attempt (as Nyamiti does) to force these into a systematic theological framework can only result in some examples of the worst excesses of contextualization. For instance, in his discussion of "our regular sacred communion with [Christ]", the author makes an application that is not only contra-Scriptural, but is also patently anthropocentric in the extreme, a manifestation of universal *do ut des* natural religion:

> By punishing those who fail in this regard, Christ's action is similar to that of African ancestors who punish their negligent descendants. On the other hand the Saviour rewards plentifully His faithful members. Here again His attitude corresponds to that of the African ancestors who are supposed to reward their faithful descendants (ibid.: 39).

Quotations such as these clearly indicate that what some theologians regard as "a true 'praeparatio evangelica'" (ibid.: 70), namely key religious concepts from the traditional belief system, have been analogically pushed to the point where they blur and sometimes completely blot out the uncompromising Christology of the Scriptures. Indeed, "if we do not let the biblical paradigm

control our interpretation, then the danger of distortion of the biblical message
is great" (Tiénou, 1984: 159).

"Jesus and the Witchdoctor: An Approach to Healing and Wholeness"

The title of our second case-study in Christological contextualization is taken
from a book by the same name, written by a Catholic White Father who has
been teaching for many years in East Africa (Shorter, 1985). In this extensive
study the author seeks to apply biblical principles to the widespread physical,
social, psychological, emotional, and spiritual ills of contemporary Africa
through the analogy of Christ as a *Sing'anga* par excellence. It is difficult to
find a suitable one word equivalent for the term *sing'anga* [Chewa, but the root
is common to many Bantu languages], for the function of this important
traditional specialist in medicine, psychiatry, and religion varies according to
the particular situation in which he happens to be carrying out his practice.

The translation 'witchdoctor' is somewhat misleading since it suggests to many
that this individual is himself guilty of the evil of 'witchcraft'. On the contrary,
a *sing'anga* is the person that most people, including many Christians, turn to
when they believe that they are being, or have been, attacked by witches or
sorcerers (the distinction between these two nefarious beings is blurred, but
the first is essentially a mystical cannibal, a necrophile, while the sorcerer is
someone who is thought to physically harm or rob others through magical
means). Some *bang'anga* (pl) also operate as healers by utilising traditionally
sanctioned concoctions of roots, herbs, leaves, bark, and other natural sub-
stances. Most 'doctors' are also diviners (of various types), for they rely on
such mantic means to make their diagnoses. Certain *bang'anga* specialise in
predictive prophecy, especially those who are controlled by an ancestral spirit
of possession, and others in rain-calling or witch-finding activities according
to the need. It is obvious that the role of *ung'anga* ('doctor-ship') is an
extremely vital one in African society, whether in a traditional or modern
environment, particularly as it relates to the all- embracing indigenous reli-
gious system (cf. Wendland, 1992).

It is tempting to forge an analogical relationship between the pivotal person-
ages of Christianity and traditional religion, that is, between Christ and the
sing'anga respectively. This is what Shorter has attempted to do in his book,
and in certain respects he is successful, especially in dealing with the psycho-
spiritual aspects of witchcraft beliefs, which he characterises as "a form of
auto-salvation" (Shorter, 1985: 96). Particularly helpful are his suggestions
concerning the power of prayer (ibid.: 135-6) and a "sacramental approach"
to such problems (ibid.: chapter 16), though the latter is flawed by an overly
rigid Catholic perspective. African Christians need to realise their *complete*
dependence upon Christ, the holistic Healer, to overcome their deep-seated
fears of the ubiquitous evil spiritual forces that populate their traditional
universe (cf. Imasogie, 1983: 79-81). However, they should not do this at the

expense of a belief in the objective personal reality of Satan, as Shorter seems to suggest (Shorter, 1985: 114-5), or by coming to the disturbing conclusion that "evil remains always a mystery, but ultimately it is located in God as ultimate cause" (ibid.: 116). Such thinking is neither biblical (cf. Job 34:10; Ps. 5:4; Prov. 8:13) nor traditional African!

There are a number of other problems pertaining to biblical Christology in Shorter's presentation with respect to both the source and the receptor contexts. With regard to the former, he tends to place undue emphasis on the use and function of miracles in Christ's ministry. Indeed, it is going too far to claim that:

> Jesus of Nazareth certainly conformed to the type of itinerant healer-exorcist of his own day in rural Palestine, . . . [and thus we] see him imitating the 'mumbo- jumbo' of contemporary healers (ibid.: 10).

There were certain correspondences in procedure, of course, but Christ's primary role was that of *rabbi*, or 'teacher', and this was how he was usually addressed formally, even though "he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law" (Mt. 7:29, NIV). To be sure, his healing ministry was important, for it served to bear witness and lend credence to his Messianic claim and saving purpose, but this was always kept secondary to his primarily prophetic and priestly mission. However, there is perhaps an ulterior motive in Shorter for this emphasis on miraculous signs because he returns to the subject much later in the book in an ingenious effort to validate miracles of healing in the Catholic tradition and at the same time to discount those alleged to occur in the practice of African traditional religion:

> Although they are associated with holy places where miracles once happened and may happen again, [Catholic] pilgrimages are not a pragmatic or manipulative process like the affliction rituals of contemporary Africa, the spirit mediumship and therapeutic communities of people like Maji-ya-Soda [i.e. a famous spirit-medium living in southwestern Tanzania] (ibid.: 217).

Do we not have here a case of the pot calling the kettle black?

Despite its limitations, Shorter's provocative study does in general retain a proper focus upon both the spiritual aspect of the human predicament and the divinity of Christ in this contextualized use of the traditional-healer analogy. The same cannot always be said, however, of some contemporary African theologians who have written on the subject. Pobee, for example, discusses the Lord's healing signs in strongly Adoptionistic terms:

> Miracles were a sign of God's power with Jesus to heal and save . . . .
> Jesus was in a perpetual state of holiness, perpetually ensouled with
> God so much so that the divine power was like a continuously flowing

electric power in him, unlike the traditional healer, who has the
occasional experience of it .... He is superior to the other ancestors
by virtue of being closest to God and as God (Pobee, 1979: 87, 93, 94).

One has to wonder why the author chose to add "and as God" in the final line
since it is clear that he views Christ as some sort of glorified, or deified,
medicine-man. He differs essentially only in degree, that is, in the "continu-
ously flowing" quantity of his therapeutic power, not really in kind from human
healers, except that he was "ensouled", or possessed, by God rather than some
ancestral spirit.

Then, as far as the significance of Christ's healing work is concerned, there are
many scholars who depreciate such activity as having a bearing on purely
physical matters and worldly affairs. Appiah-Kubi, for example, calls attention
to the traditional African belief in the ever-present reality of mystical, but
humanly manipulatable, evil forces which are at the disposal of those bent on
enhancing themselves at the expense of others. These witches and sorcerers,
not Satan, are the cause of all misfortune, disease, and finally death, while
Christ is the ultimate, but not necessarily the only, solution:

> Jesus Christ is thus conceived by many African Christians as the great
> physician, healer and victor over worldly powers *par excellence*. To
> many, Jesus came that we might have life and have it more abundantly
> (Appiah-Kubi, 1987: 76).

The problem for many in Africa is that this "abundant life" has not yet been
fully or even partially realised according to expectation. The great obstacle
here has been widely identified as "the missionary churches" who "have not
been able to meet the deep-seated needs of the African convert in health as
did the traditional religion" (ibid.). Unflatteringly describing the members of
such churches as "EuroSemitic bastards," Appiah-Kubi looks instead to the
example of indigenous African Christian churches for guidance in how to
correct the alleged errors of the past. The "missionary-dominated" churches,
on the other hand, mislead the people theologically as well as practically, for:

> Salvation ... to the African is a matter of here and now. Eschatology
> as understood in the western world does not form part of the African
> thought-form (ibid.: 76).

One wonders whether biblical soteriology or eschatology is any more compat-
ible with a secular Western world-view than it is with a traditional African one.
In any case, although the author supports a holistic approach, that is, one
involving the "total personal healing of spiritual, psychological and physical
man" (ibid. 78), he gives the first dimension almost no consideration at all in
his rush to direct people's attention to Jesus as "the power by which they can
overcome their daily worries, concerns and fears." And he goes on to exhort
them (in language typical of an African 'Christian' prophet):

> Bring all your worries of unemployment, poverty, witch-troubles, ill-luck, enemy, barrenness, sorrow, blindness, etc. Jesus is ready to save [sic] all who come to Him in belief and faith. *We treat, and God or Jesus heals* (ibid.).

Here we have additional evidence of a theologically liberal overemphasis upon the humanity of Christ and his predominantly worldly mission, a focus which definitely encourages a syncretistic approach to religion in general. Accordingly, indigenous African faith and praxis is accepted on equal terms with the Scriptures, and the resultant hodge-podge of belief manifests a serious detraction from biblical Christology in particular.

Jesus Christ, Liberator of the Oppressed Masses

> We declare that in Jesus Christ, God has rescued us as a race of man from all the principalities and powers of the African world . . . . And so we have hope: a hope that we wish to share with our people — those tormented by poverty, racism, tribalism, economic, political and elitist exploitation. We are convinced that God is on their side in the struggle. In Jesus Christ, he has taken his place among the poor, the oppressed, the powerless — the black people of Africa.

So proclaims the "Kinshasa Declaration," a communique released by the All Africa Conference of Churches at the close of their Executive Committee Meeting of October 28-31, 1971. That was two decades ago, and the call has not abated. If anything, it has grown stronger and more strident over the years as theologians and politicians alike try to capitalise on the analogy of Christ as a modern-day saviour for the common man, reincarnated so to speak within the new ideological mythology which has developed in his name.

There is no real traditional antecedent for the notion of 'Liberator', such as we found in the case of Christ as 'Ancestor' or 'Doctor-Healer'. To an outsider, the paramount chief of a tribe or kingdom-nation might seem at first admirably suited to fit the situation. But generally speaking, at least for Central Africa, hereditary rulers were either not known for their outstanding military prowess or they were actually oppressors of their people, rather than liberators. Furthermore, in a traditional setting the chief tended to be more of a religious than a political functionary (cf. Kofi Busia, cited by Pobee, 1979: 94). Thus as the 'high-priest' of his people, an African chief falls more into the framework of the 'ancestor' analogy discussed above. He represented his subjects as a mediator — some claiming for themselves (semi-) divine status in this regard — one who stood within the human community, yet at the pinnacle of the hierarchy of mystical power, just below the great ancestors.

It has become fashionable for religious scholars who want their voice to be heard nowadays to castigate the impotence and irrelevance of what they term

"Western theology" in Africa. The present state of affairs is naturally blamed
on the "very pietistic" early missionaries who paid too much attention to "the
salvation of the soul, creating very negative attitudes toward the world, and
advocating no involvement in socioeconomic and political issues" (Moyo,
1988: 87). "Missionary" or "Western" doctrine is a disparaging epithet that is
readily ascribed to any church which proclaims a more conservative, evangel-
ically-oriented and biblically-based brand of Christianity than they are com-
fortable or even conversant with. Obviously, familiar teachings, which in
Johannine fashion emphasise the other-worldliness of the believer's present
life as he prepares for the life to come, cannot grab the headlines of the national
press, nor invite interviews on public television and radio, nor generate offers
of sponsorship for the publication of a book.

Mbiti, for example, criticises the "false spirituality" of those who seek, as he
puts it, "to escape into the Christian world of the hereafter at the expense of
being a Christian in the here and now" (1971: 60). Rather, the Church in Africa
should actively address the pressing social, political, and economic concerns
of its people, which he enumerates as follows:

> National Survival (liberation, revolution, African culture, racism),
> Community survival (tribe, clan, age groups, drought, famine, pesti-
> lence, calamities), and Personal survival (health, healing, slums, hous-
> ing, school, fees, clothes, witchcraft, magic, and sorcery) (cited by
> Gehman, 1987: 61).

Could anything of earthly concern possibly be missing from this list? If so, one
may simply tack it on, for curing social sickness and public deprivation is seen
as the primary business of Christ and his Church today. The root spiritual cause
of all these problems, namely human depravity and failure in relation to a
sovereign righteous God, rarely enters into the discussion at all. And if it does,
it is treated in such vague and general — almost apologetic — terms that the
eternally vital Word about sin and grace, Law and Gospel, is hardly audible
due to the din raised by seemingly urgent contemporary concerns. "Doing
theology", therefore, becomes a matter of setting project priorities and for-
mulating corresponding proposals for action. Nowadays many people simply
take it for granted that it is primarily to temporal problems and issues that the
church should be devoting its resources of time, talents, and treasure.

Furthermore, if it is accepted that "Salvation as a theological concept cannot
be complete without Liberation as a socio-political concept" (Mugambi, cited
by Tutu, 1987: 49), then there is little doubt where the overriding emphasis will
be placed. Advocates fail to recognise, however, that the latter is an endless,
impossible task, for: "Liberation here must be understood in its totality, as
removal of all that which keeps the African in bondage, all that makes him less
than God intended him to be" (Appiah-Kubi, 1987: 74). It is this sort of all-
inclusive assumption, in turn, which makes way for crassly materialistic and

millennialistic notions that transform the heavenly hope into a worldly wonderland:

> The experience of salvation is a sign that with the coming of Jesus,
> suffering and death are eliminated, and these will have no room in the
> Kingdom of God established here on earth (ibid.: 76).

A valid question that could, and should, be raised here is this: what need of Christ at all? How does he fit into this scheme of things — in this re-drawn picture of the role and function of the church which bears his name? It would certainly seem that for many, not least those in leadership positions, the adverse present secular situation has superseded the original motivating spiritual condition as defined by the Scriptures — an instance of 'de-contextualization', as it were. Of course it is not right to divorce the secular from the spiritual, but a definite and predominant commitment in favour of the latter concern needs to be maintained. However, this is what many supporters of radical contextualization in Africa and elsewhere have failed to do. For them the priority is reversed, and to such an extent that one has to wonder sometimes whether the spiritual dimension is even retained anymore.

This type of 'revolutionary' thinking is particularly prominent in so-called liberation theology, which is often identified with Roman Catholic priests of South America, but which has been proclaimed just about as long and hard by prominent Protestants of Southern Africa (where it is sometimes termed "Black Theology", cf. Tutu, 1987). In a 1980 address to the World Council of Churches for example, Rev. Canaàn Banana, at the time also a high ranking official in the government of Zimbabwe, pointed out what he (among many others) saw as the main problem with the conventional message of Christianity:

> The common understanding of Jesus and his message errs on the side
> of spirituality. Interpreters wish to keep clear of temporal connota-
> tions 'to preserve Jesus from becoming a political leader' .... The
> reality of the historical Jesus in the world must be accepted so that
> one discovers in him the plenitude promised to the poor, [for] 'the
> hungry he has filled with good things' (as summarised by Shedd, 1984:
> 221).

Another well-known spokesman for the liberation cause puts the position this way:

> Christians should be engaged in historical action. They should, to the
> best of their ability, be doing the will of God, i.e. liberating the
> oppressed .... Because Christ's liberation has come, total human
> liberation can no longer be denied.... Not only must a Christian ethic
> be a social ethic, it must be a decidedly *political* ethic ... leading to
> the transformation of oppressing and inhuman structures ....

> Righteousness is that side of God's love which expresses itself
> through black liberation (Boesak, 1987: 131-134).

One must notice the lack of options or flexibility in the above quotation: the
categorical "must-should' approach is typical of such pseudo-religious pro-
nouncements. References to the New Testament Scriptures are also conspic-
uously absent in writings on liberation theology. This is inevitable, since Christ
never preached it. Instead he taught his followers to submit to what would
today be regarded as an oppressive military regime (Mt. 22:21). The Apostle
Paul is even more explicit on the subject (Rom. 13:1-7). Almost the only
passage that ever gets cited (monotonously so) is Luke 4:18-21, but then the
textual context is completely ignored, i.e. with its focus upon Christ's primary
spiritual mission of liberating people from the power of sin and Satan (e.g. Lk.
4:2-8, 23-27, 33-36, 41, 43).

The difficulty of identifying just exactly "Who is Christ?" for the African
Christian is summarised by Taylor in the following terms:

> Christ has been presented as the answer to the questions a white Man
> would ask, the solution to the needs that Western man would feel, the
> Saviour of the world of the European world-view, the object of
> adoration and prayer of historic Christendom. But if Christ were to
> appear as the answer to the questions that Africans are asking, what
> would he look like? If he came into the world of African cosmology
> to redeem Man as Africans understand him, would he be recognisable
> to the rest of the Church Universal? And if Africa offered him the
> praises and petitions of her total uninhibited humanity, would they be
> acceptable? (Waliggo et al, 1986; 75).

If the "questions being asked" by Africans (or anyone else in the world) are
misinformed or wrongly motivated to begin with — if their concept of "redemp-
tion" or their picture of the Redeemer does not correspond to that of the
Bible — or if they seek to praise or petition him in their "uninhibited humanity"
without first being regenerated by the Spirit of God, then they are definitely
bound to be disappointed by the answers which they receive from the
Scriptures.

One tends to become less than optimistic about future developments within
the Christian Church in Africa, despite the strong outward evidence of its
rapid and extensive growth on the continent, when one hears leaders issue
statements as sympathetic to the traditional religious beliefs of the past and to
modern political philosophies of the present as the following:

> If we concede that the African Trinity [i.e. 'a Trinity of spirits: the
> Father, the Mother, and the Son'] implies the presence of Christ
> within African culture, one may say that salvation is a built-in concept
> there as well (Muzorewa, 1985: 85).

> Any outright rejection of violence is an untenable alternative for African Christians .... In accepting the *violence of the cross*, God, in Jesus Christ, sanctified violence into a redemptive instrument for bringing into being a fuller human life (Canon Burgess Carr, cited in Kato, 1973: 164).

It is indeed discouraging to observe how the supreme example of selfless suffering and non-violence (cf. Is. 53) on the part of One who provides the *only* way to salvation in heaven (Jn. 14:6-7) can be so casually and carnally transformed into its polar opposite. What appears to be evident here is a case of ideological inversion, motivated by a rationalistic theological bias and a corresponding preoccupation with current socio- political and economic conditions.

Is it any wonder then that many Christians in Africa are perplexed — whether as a result of the harsh living conditions which they are often forced to endure, their own ignorance of the chief teachings of Scripture, or the misleading instruction of leaders who have already facilitated the displacement of the Christ of the Bible? As one foreign commentator characterises the situation:

> African churches have not yet developed a consensus about African theology. Instead . . . there is a major dispute on the most central question — namely, who is Christ in Africa and what is African Christianity? (Professor Lee E. Snook, from a Religious News Service report quoted in *Christian News* 28:5 [29/1/90] 24).

The dilemma may be stated as follows — according to this same observer:

> Now who is Christ in that situation . . . ? Is Christ to be found in the religion of the white men who have all the political and economic power? Or is Christ among their African brothers who have taken up arms in a war of liberation? (ibid.).

With advisers like Professor Snook to rely on for guidance as to how to contextualize the Gospel of Jesus Christ in Africa, is it at all surprising that there is uncertainty and outright confusion in many quarters?

On the Christologizing of Context

In this study we have only been able to touch upon several of the important issues that concern the contextualization of Christology in contemporary Africa, particularly in relation to three analogies which have been commonly used to present Christ to people in a more relevant and culturally meaningful way (cf. the various studies in Carson, 1984, and Gilliland, 1989). We have seen that, in the process, a proper balance has not always been maintained, and this has often resulted in an 'over- contextualization' in the direction of the local

indigenous religion or a secular sociopolitical setting. We notice also a corre-
sponding 'under-contextualization', or de-valuation, with respect to the orig-
inal historical setting, namely, that delineated by the content and purpose of
the Scriptures themselves. As Carson observes:

> To appeal to the demands of the interpreter's cultural context is
> legitimate, provided that the intent is to facilitate the understanding
> and proclamation of the Bible within that context, not to transfer the
> authority of the Bible to conceptions and mandates not demonstrably
> emerging from the horizon of understanding of the biblical writers
> themselves (Carson, 1984: 17-18).

As we have seen from the several examples cited, over- contextualization and
under-contextualization may reinforce each other to place undue emphasis on
the humanity of Christ at the expense of his deity. This inevitably leads to a
reductionistic approach, which promotes syncretism in relation to traditional
theology and promotes adoptionism in relation to biblical theology. The
doctrinal distortion that results is clearly evident in the following quotation,
taken from one of the leading advocates of African theology:

> These claims [i.e. about Christ's deity] have not been difficult to
> accept because the idea of Divinity being capable of taking
> 'possession' of a human being, . . . the coming of Divinity into the
> human person . . . to make it blossom to a higher level of sensitivity,
> . . . is not foreign. [African theology] accepts unequivocally that in the
> man of Nazareth can be found the fulfilment also of its teachings
> about man's relationship with Divinity and its hopes for humanity
> (Setiloane, 1986: 35).

The preceding manifests an obvious failure to recognise and enunciate the
unique and unfathomable mystery of the incarnation, the God-Man Christ
Jesus. In addition, we also observe the inability to distinguish correctly be-
tween the natural (but partial) knowledge of God, which is made available to
all people through creation, their conscience, and the moral code established
by their society on the one hand, and on the other hand the only sufficient and
reliable revelation of the Word of God as inspired in the Holy Scriptures. This
further results in an apparent total lack of appreciation for that crucial divine
paradox which integrally links together the eternal and universal lordship of
Christ with his mediatorial role as a suffering Servant and the spiritual Re-
deemer of all humanity.

As has been noted, some modern African scholars like to fix the blame for the
supposedly backward spiritual state which they see around them upon the
early colonialist missionaries and their "Western systematic, intellectual, arid
and philosophical theology born out of the belief in 'pie-in-the-sky-when-you-
die'" (Appiah-Kubi, 1987: 79). To be sure, these pioneers often did make

mistakes in their ministries in not contextualizing enough certain biblical forms, whether in preaching, teaching, organising, or administering. Many conservative church bodies are still paying the price of that failure to evaluate and utilise correctly the rich spiritual resources of African cultures.

But it may be argued, on the other hand, that the real source of the current problems in determining the relevance of Christianity on the continent is to be found rather in the subsequent generations of their colleagues who, from the ivory towers of European and American seminaries and university schools of religion, filled visiting African students with the liberal brand of Western theology, one characterised by an assortment of '- isms': humanism, rationalism, skepticism, secularism, and universalism.

Thus it comes as no surprise that one of the first African scholars to make a significant contribution to world Christian literature, John S. Mbiti, the "father" of African Theology (Gehman, 1987: 54), has this to say about some of the central teachings of Christianity:

> Thus, Gehenna is a christological symbol, the negation of incorporation into Christ . . . . In the Christian context it is a symbolic imagery and has no independent reality . . . . The New Testament is explicit that Jesus never promised us a heavenly utopia, but only His ownself and His own companionship both in Time and beyond, both in space and beyond . . . . The Scriptures emphasise a spiritual rather than a physical Resurrection body . . . . The N.T. is silent on whether or not physical death closes the door for the salvation of those who die *without or apart from Christ* . . . . One finds it almost impossible to imagine that their punishment [i.e. that of non-Christians] will last for all eternity in the same way that Redemption is for eternity . . . . The very being of God will so flood our separate beings that we will be resurrected into His own corporate and eternal being (Mbiti, 1971: 67, 89, 173, 175, 179).

With these ideas, Mbiti is simply reflecting the worst of equivocal (and un-biblical) Western theology, which in the twenty years since he set forth this position has remained the dominant voice in most of Christendom, especially through such ecumenical organisations as the World Council of Churches.

The continued theological sterility of much of Western liberal Christianity (along with all whom it happens to influence) is reflected in a recent cover story of the *U.S. News and World Report* entitled, "The Last Days of Jesus", where we read:

> The Gospel narratives are a mix of legend and fact that attempt to describe a historical and mystical encounter with one who called himself the Son of Man . . . . Historians and theologians . . . through

the centuries have sought to answer the compelling, central question
of the Passion: "Why did Jesus die?" (April 16, 1990, pp. 46,49).

As for the actual answer to this question, one cannot expect anything better
from such theologians today, whether in America or Africa, than Christ
himself received from Pontius Pilate: "What is truth?" (Jn. 18:38). Indeed,
where these fundamental Christian questions go unanswered, or are answered
wrongly, it is not really a more serious contextualization of Christianity that we
need to worry about achieving, but a more basic 'Christologizing' of context.
By that we mean a sustained, inclusive instruction in and appropriate applica-
tion of the simple Gospel message of Jesus Christ within the total sociocultural
situation in which and wherever it is being presented. And the divine Source
of such guidance is the same for contemporary disciples of Christ, no matter
what their culture, as it was for his first recruits—namely, the Spirit of truth
working through the Word (Jn. 14:26, 16:13).

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