

THE STORY OF THE AFRICAN INDEPENDENT CHURCHES And Its Implications for Theology

James O Kombo

Historically, the African Independent Churches have been on the margins of Christianity in Africa. They arose outside the Christian missions and were not included in the Christian Councils. They were neither accepted by the ecumenical churchmen nor the evangelicals.

Dr. James Kombo in his article describes how many of these AIC churches are moving from the margins to the centre and are gaining greater recognition. He also discusses the implications of this for the theology of the African Independent Churches.

INTRODUCTION

The African Independent Churches (AICs) as a distinct expression of Christian faith in the context of Africa need no introduction. The current wave of the AICs has been around since 1819. What is surprising, however, is that by the close of the 1950s (about 140 years since the appearance of the first AIC), these churches still had no place within the history of African Christianity. It is partly as a result of the International Missionary Council study, published as *African Independent Church Movements* (1963), and the aid of HW Turner's two volumes (*History of an Independent Church and Independent Church*)

Dr. James Owino Kombo is an ordained minister of the Church of Christ in Africa. Currently, he is a senior lecturer of Theology in Daystar University. He earned a BTh (Hons) from Scott Theological College in 1988, and an MDiv from Nairobi International School of Theology in 1991. His MTh in Systematic Theology (1997) and DTh Systematic Theology (2000) are both from the University of Stellenbosch, South Africa.

Movements), both published in 1967, that the Christian fraternity for the first time granted these movements Christian identity and referred to them as 'independent churches'.¹ And so, whereas the 1960s marked a notable change of attitude towards AICs, the 1970s and the 1980s afforded the AICs favorable conditions for growth. In the context of South Africa, for example, the black Christian population in mainline churches was 52% while that of the AICs stood at 27%. By 1991, statistics had changed drastically and were 41% and 36% respectively.² These statistics are representative of the development in the largely Christian nations of Africa. According to DB Barrett and J Padwick, by 1993 the membership of the AICs amounted to 45 million (14% of the African Christian population).³ These statistics indicate that if present trends continue, by the end of this decade most African Christians will be adherents of AICs.

Whereas the terms 'independent' or 'indigenous' on the one hand and 'historical' or 'older' churches on the other hand have been used to distinguish the AICs from the churches that maintained their mission connection, it is becoming increasingly

¹ Before these developments Bishop Bengt Sundkler had written *Bantu Prophets in South Africa* (1948 and revised in 1961) in which he distinguished the "Ethiopian" movement from the "Zionist" movement. In a sense, this work is seminal to the International Missionary Council's study and the two volumes by HW Turner. Sundkler is the first to take a relatively soft stand towards AICs. The others preferred to see the AICs as "messianic", "separatist", "millennial", "syncretistic" and so on (see Efraim Andersson's *Messianic Movements on the Lower Congo*; CG Baëta, *Prophetism in Ghana*, London: SCM Press, 1962; DB Barrett, *Schism and Renewal in Africa: An Analysis of Six Thousand Contemporary Religious Movements*, Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1968)

² G.C. Oosthuizen. "Indigenous Christianity and the Future of the Church in South Africa" in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, January 1997:8

³ See D.B. Barrett and T.J. Padwick. *Rise Up and Walk*. Nairobi, Oxford University Press, 1989:9.

clear that these terms are experiencing strain. As AF Walls has observed, most African historical churches "... are independent in the sense that their leadership is African, their ministry overwhelmingly African, and missionary direction minimal". Further, they can also be regarded as 'independent' in the sense that, along with the independents, they are taking seriously the question raised by the African identity that concerns the continuity of the African Christian present with the traditional African past. Whereas there has been remarkable 'AIC-isation' of the historical churches, there has also been a clear 'historicisation' of the AICs. In the words of AF Walls, "... the constituency of the independents is changing; some are institutionalising, and developing along the well known lines of the older churches". This give and take phenomenon, as Walls has predicted, means that,

... the history of the African Christianity will be a single story, in which the missionary period is only an episode. The judgement of the churches of Africa will not be whether one can denominate them "older" or "independent" – that distinction, I believe, will in time, and perhaps soon, become meaningless. Their judgement, like that of all the churches, will be by the Lord of the Church on the basis of his Word.⁴

The African Christianity has unconsciously gone through a process of reassessment as well as realignment and it is beginning to experience some aspects of Walls' prediction. At practical levels, the AICs and the historical churches today participate as equal partners in ecumenical conferences and services. They train their ministers in the same Bible schools and seminaries. Indeed, as David Bosch, has observed, the AICs are at the centre alongside such major Christian traditions as "... the Eastern Orthodox churches, the Roman Catholic Church, the Protestant Reformation, and the Pentecostal Churches".⁵ TS Maluleke believes that the

⁴ A.F. Walls. "The Anabaptists of Africa? The Challenge of the African Independent Churches" in *Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research*, April, 1979:49, 50.

⁵ D. Bosch in M.L. Daneel. *Quest for Belonging*. Gweru: Mambo Press, 1987:9.

theology of the AICs, though “enacted”, “oral”, or “narrative”, is now regarded to be as valid as the written African theologies.⁶ Psychologically, the AICs are now comfortable with the historical churches, and the historical churches are clearly in the process of going through a change of attitude. The best illustration of this observation is the 1997 consecrations of the archbishops of two different Kenyan AICs. In these two consecrations, there was unprecedented, active participation by bishops and ministers of the historical churches.

This tumbling of the wall between the AICs and the historical churches and the consequent ‘historicisation’ of the AICs and the ‘AIC-isation’ of the historical churches will, in my opinion, be one of the challenges for the African church for decades to come. For the first time the historical churches will be forced to acknowledge that they are not necessarily ‘more’ church and the independents will also be compelled to re-evaluate their understanding of the role of indigenous culture in Christian faith. Yet ‘historicisation’ of the AICs must not be seen as a strategy of mere ‘Westernization’ of an already indigenised African Christianity, neither may ‘AIC-isation’ of the historical churches be viewed as simple identification with the AICs. The process of ‘historicisation’ taking place within the AICs means that the independents are genuinely seeking to improve their structures as well as their processes, and that they are also actively aligning themselves with the tradition of the Christian faith. The process of ‘AIC-isation’ in the historical churches, on the other hand, means that these churches have recognised the theological strategy in indigenous Christianity and are genuinely prepared to use the intellectual tools of the African culture to articulate the elements of the Christian faith. What will this mean to African Christianity?

UNITY OF THE HISTORY OF THE AFRICAN CHURCH: ONE STORY, ONE CONTRIBUTION

⁶ T.S. Maluleke. “Half a Century of African Christian Theologies: Elements of the Emerging Agenda for the twenty-first Century”. *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 99 (November 1997:17).

For some reason, it is still difficult for the African Christianity to come to grips with the reality of the above mentioned processes in its midst. There is a need for the Christian church in Africa to acknowledge, at least at a formal level, that these processes are taking place in its midst and that the African church is one church, regardless of the different ecclesiastical traditions. The fact that all the African churches will, at the end of the day, have a single history, also means that the global Christian fraternity will increasingly see the African church as one, as well as that it will expect from the African church a united and a significant contribution.

There are many contributions that a united African Christianity can make to the global church. An example of where a united African Christianity can contribute is in enabling Western theologies, for instance, to re-evaluate their understanding of God. The Western theologies have problems with what to make of God. According to Professor GM Setiloane, "... the whole discussion in the West – focussed in 'Honest to God' and the 'Death of God' theology – suggests that the West itself has lost the image of God as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, and deals, at the best, with a 'creator absconditus', a god of the gaps, or a saviour of individual souls destined for a pie in the sky".⁷ The situation is different in the African scene. The African people, as Placide Tempels once said, live more by 'Being' than by following their own ideas. This 'Being', Tempels further explains, is, in the conception of the traditional African peoples, the "great, powerful, Life Force".⁸ The 'Being' is none other than God, the first cause of all things. Professor Bolaji Idowu argues that as far as the African people are concerned, if God does not exist, then the reality outside man also does not exist.⁹

⁷ G.M. Setiloane. *The Image of God Among the Sotho-Tswana*. Rotterdam: A.A. Balkema, 1976, p. 229.

⁸ P. Tempels. *Bantu Philosophy*, Paris, 1959, pp. 23, 28.

⁹ B. Idowu. *African Traditional Religion: A Definition*. London, SCM Press, 1973, p. 104.

The AICs and the African historical churches are starting from an advantage in this regard. They do not have to prove the existence of God and, therefore, they do not have the problem of how to talk about God. With the shift of the centre of gravity of the Christian faith from Europe and North America to Africa,¹⁰ it might not be far fetched or even presumptuous to say that in the decades to come, the African church, including the AICs, will re-educate the global Christianity not only on the God language, but also on such concepts as spirituality, sin, salvation, personhood, and so on.

But the African church that will make a united contribution to the global Christianity is also a church that will learn to work together in addressing African problems. John Stott, speaking in the context of his own change of mind on the issue of evangelism and social responsibility, said that he was now in a position to "... see more clearly that not only the consequences of the commission but the actual commission itself must be understood to include social as well as evangelistic responsibility, unless we are to be guilty of distorting the words of Jesus".¹¹ A similar position is noted in the 1982 Mission and Evangelism document of the WCC. Among other things, this document states that,

There is no evangelism without solidarity; there is no Christian solidarity that does not involve sharing the knowledge of the kingdom... There is here a double credibility test: A proclamation that does not hold forth the promises of the justice of the kingdom to the poor of the earth is a caricature of the Gospel; but Christian participation in the struggles for justice which does not point towards the promises of the kingdom also makes a caricature of a Christian understanding of justice.¹²

¹⁰ See A.F. Walls, "Towards Understanding Africa's Place in Christian History" in *Religion in a Pluralistic Society*, Leiden, 1976, p. 180.

¹¹ J.R. W. Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World*, London: Falson, 1975, p. 23.

¹² World Council of Churches, Mission and Evangelism document, 1982, para 34. Cited in D. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p. 408.

It is interesting to note that the African churches of colonial times were very close to JRW Stott and the WCC Mission and Evangelism document quoted above. These older churches, and there were several AICs amongst them, did not distinguish between evangelism and social responsibility as two separate mandates. In the Kenyan context, the older AICs and the historical churches preached the Gospel, but they also established schools, health institutions and agricultural projects for their followers and the surrounding communities. Today, the situation seems to have changed, at least in the context of Kenya. Churches seem to be shy about questions of construction, preferring to limit their programs to the implication of evangelism on the religious and the cultural. This change is outspoken.

Apart from the grace of God, the African Christianity does not have the promise that spiritual forces, ignorance, fear, evil, death and everything that is mean will be eliminated from the African scene in the decades to come. There is thus no easy answer to the questions plaguing Africa. Even in the decades to come, the God we have come to know in the Lord Jesus Christ will still surround the African people on every side. He will not leave us alone. The African people, however, will still have to face the reality of spiritual forces, diseases, ignorance, evil and fear. The task of the African church will be to guide the African audiences to acknowledge and to actively participate in what it means to be followers of Christ in the midst of the forces and vices of Africa. The African church, through obedience to the demands of the Gospel, will witness to Africa and the world that it has indeed won for herself the victory of the Lord Jesus Christ. Spiritual forces, ignorance, disease, and all manners of evil will be there, but the African church will proclaim the message that the followers of Christ ought to live in a state of shalom, that is well being.¹³

¹³ For a detailed treatment of 'well being' and how it is to be applied to the African situation, see DT Adamo, "Peace in the Old Testament and in the African Heritage" in *The Bible in African Christianity, Essays in Biblical Theology*, eds. HW Kinoti and JM Waliggo. Nairobi: Acton

Whereas the African church will seek to give glory to God by preaching shalom, and as God works in our inner beings living in a state of shalom, both the AICs and the historical churches will together have to address the triumphalistic Christianity that is becoming increasingly fashionable in Africa. One would affirm the kind of shalom and the consequent victory suggested by triumphalistic Christianity if a one-sided transcendental view of God was normative. The Christian faith, however, understands God and his ways differently. The God of the Christian faith brings shalom and happiness, victory and defeat, power and powerlessness together in a profound way.¹⁴ According to Hendrikus Berkhof, God who is present as almighty is also experienced as,

... the one who is hidden or angry or provoked or unrecognized. ... That is how we see him present in Israel. ... God's history with Israel is to a large degree the history of a God who sees his plans fail and who repeatedly must react to hostile or at least disobedient initiative of his partner, without apparently having (or wanting to have) the power to force that partner to his will.¹⁵

The New Testament also depicts God as a man who has gone on a journey and is therefore absent (see Matt 24:50; 25:14; and Mk 12:1). The Son refuses to establish the Kingdom by force (Mat 26:51f.; Lk 22:38; Jn 6:15; 18:36) and instead renounces power and becomes powerless in order to bring succour to humankind and the entire creation (Phil 2:6-8). On the cross, we see the climax of the divine defenselessness. Here God is unable to save himself, the Father is depicted as being in complete silence and man, by nailing Christ to the cross, triumphs over God (Mk 15:31f., 34). Yet in the powerlessness of God there is power par excellence (I Cor 1:25). Here, then, is an important paradigm shift that the African church

Publishers, 1997 (99-111) and HW Kinoti. "Well Being in African Society and the Bible" in Kinoti and Waliggo (112-122).

¹⁴ See H. Berkhof. *Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Study of the Faith*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: W.M.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co. , pp. 133-140.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

will have to look into seriously as she brings the message of shalom and victory to the African audiences. In the midst of the spiritual forces and vices of our own time, the African people need to rest assured that God, who surrounds them on all sides and who is the ground of their shalom and victory, is powerful. God is powerful, but in a different way, in a hidden yet active sense.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE READJUSTMENTS FOR AICs

The AICs Will Need to Uphold

The Uniqueness and the Catholicity of the Christian Faith

With regard to what to make of God, the incarnation is the point of departure of the Christian faith. The Scriptures and the subjective faith of the Christian present us with a situation that logically leads us to affirm that God became incarnate, suffered on the cross, and redeemed mankind by dying and rising again. In the history of the church, the church fathers were faced with a situation that required them to choose to retain or dispose of the incarnation. On the strength of the scriptural testimony and guided by Scriptural testimony, the Church fathers chose the incarnation, even though it was offensive to the Talmudic faith.¹⁶ Consequently in the

¹⁶ Distinction must be made between the Talmudic faith and the faith of the Old Testament. H Berkhof has explained this difference as follows: Judaism "... began with the group who returned from Babylonian captivity in the 5th and 4th centuries before Christ, but did not get its specific structure until after the fall of Jerusalem (AD 70) in the exegetical methods applied to the OT by the Jewish scribes, an exegesis and application that is embodied in the Talmud, which received its definite shape about AD 500. The Talmud may be regarded as parallel of the NT, since both integrate the OT in a new faith perspective" (H Berkof.

Talmudic polemic, against the Christians, the latter were called 'Babylonians', 'deceivers', and 'a heresy of two powers'.¹⁷

The view that God endured to be born, suffered on the cross, and redeemed mankind by dying and rising again is not available in any other faith. According to Fulton, "... nowhere is the union of God and man so concrete and definite, and so universal in its import as in the Christian religion".¹⁸ In modern times, CS Lewis has made the same point regarding the story of the incarnation. According to him,

(The story) is not transparent to reason: we could not have invented it ourselves. It has not the suspicious *a priori* lucidity of Pantheism or of Newtonian physics. It has the seemingly arbitrary and idiosyncratic character which modern sciences are slowly teaching us to put up with in this universe. ... If any message from the core of reality ever were to reach us, we should expect to find in it just that unexpectedness, that willful, dramatic anfractuosity which we find in the Christian faith. It has the master touch – the rough, male taste of reality, not made by us, or, indeed, for us, but rather hitting us in the face.¹⁹

The message of the incarnation is not just a message for the historical churches. On the contrary, it is the ground of the catholicity of the church. The more than 370 million African Christians²⁰ in the African continent today belong to various

Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Study of the Faith. Grand Rapids, Michigan: WB Eerdmans, 1979, p 22).

¹⁷ See L. Teugels. "The Background of the Anti-Christian Polemics in Aggat Bereshit". *Journal for the Study of Judaism*, XXX, 2, pp. 178-208.

¹⁸ W. Fulton. "Trinity". In *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*. ed. J. Hastings. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1921, p. 458.

¹⁹ C.S. Lewis. *The Problem of Pain* (font pocket edition). London: Centenary Press, 1940, p. 13.

²⁰ See DB Barrett. "AD 2000: 350 Million Christians in Africa". In *International Review of Mission*, 59 (1970), pp 39 – 54. Barrett revised his figure of 350 million in his *World Christian Encyclopedia* (WCE), Nairobi, 1982. He further revised his WCE statistics, publishing them first of all in the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* (IBMR), January 1997 and a further revision in *IBMR*, January, 1998. The figure of 370 million is

Christian traditions. However, one thing is common to them. They have made a decision that their reality, from the time of their conversion, will be articulated in light of the Christ event. On account of this it is important that these Christians have the right understanding, not only of how God, to whom they have said yes, endured to be born, to become man and to suffer, but also of the full implication of that message to their existence. According to Professor JS Mbiti, "... the final test for the validity and usefulness of any theological contribution is Jesus Christ".²¹ Referring to the African context in particular, Professor Mbiti observes that "... if the African theology starts with or even concentrates upon anthropology, it loses its perspective and can no longer be regarded as theology".²²

Professor Mbiti's warning is important to a class of AICs that have not fared well in relation to what to make of Christ. At this stage it is important to note that the AICs fall into different classes namely: Messianic, Ethiopian and Zionist. The Messianic AICs are the ones in trouble with orthodox Christology. They have explicitly accorded the title 'Messiah' to their leaders. As far as the Christian faith is concerned, this is unacceptable. Christ 'from before' is the Christ that the Bible is concerned with (that is Christ 'from behind'). He is God (Christ 'from above'). He became man (Christ 'from below') and completed his ministry according to Scriptures. As far as the Christian faith is concerned, Christ 'from before', Christ 'from behind', Christ 'from above' and Christ 'from below' all constitute Jesus Christ God incarnate. Proper understanding of, and relationship with Christ, is important as it affects all areas of Christian thought.

a calculation by JS Mbiti ("Is the Bible in African Religion and African Religion in the Bible?" Paper delivered at EFSA and University of Stellenbosch, Department of Old and New Testaments International Workshop, 14-15. May 1999, p 1) based on the 1998 and the earlier statistics of Barrett.

²¹ J.S. Mbiti. *New Testament Eschatology in an African Background*. London: Oxford University Press, 1971, p. 190.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 186.

It is in view of such a Christocentric approach to the Christian faith and thought that we can emphasise that Christian theologians should not mislead a class of AICs that the icons of some people could represent Christ.²³ Already, sections of African theology believe the concept of the 'African Messiah' is a theological innovation 'more genuine', 'more home grown' and 'more grass-roots based'. The Christian faith has neither the interest nor the theoretical basis for the view that the idea of the 'African Messiah' could represent Christ. In any case, as RJ Schreiter has explained,

... the professional theologian serves as an important resource, helping the community to clarify its own experience and to relate it to the experience of other communities past and present. Thus the professional theologian has an indispensable but limited role. The theologian cannot create a theology in isolation from the community's experience; but the community has need of the theologian's knowledge to ground its own experience within the Christian traditions of faith. In so doing the theologian helps to create the bonds of mutual accountability between local and world church.²⁴

African theologians would have been more helpful to the AICs, and indeed to theology in general, if the former saw their role not as looking for and grounding 'African Messiahs' but, as Kwame Bediako indicates, searching for the equivalents of biblical titles for Jesus in local languages and demonstrating the resonance.²⁵ AF Walls has demonstrated that Christian faith right from the time of the New Testament, to the time of the Church Fathers, Augustine,

²³ See TM Hinga. "An African Confession of Christ: The Christology of Legio Maria Church in Kenya" in *Exploring Afro-Christology*. Ed JS Pobee. Paris: Peter Lang, 1992 (137-144). See also JS Pobee. "Confessing Christ a la African Instituted Churches" in *Exploring Afro-Christology*. Ed JS Pobee. Paris: Peter Lang, 1992 (145-151).

²⁴ R.J. Schreiter. *Constructing Local Theologies*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985, p. 18.

²⁵ See Kwame Bediako. "The Doctrine of Christ and the Significance of Vernacular Terminology" in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, July 1998, p. 110.

Aquinas and John Calvin used the intellectual resources of their contexts to articulate the Christian message.²⁶ Theology would therefore be doing a legitimate service if it sought and turned the mental and moral processes of Africa towards Christ. To engage in such a task is to recognise the special relationship between Christ and God and his unique mission to man and the world. One wonders whether scholarships that ground the idea of the 'African Messiahs' are not simply buttressing the view that the AICs are essentially syncretistic and represent the flip side of genuine Christianity in Africa.

Generally, the Ethiopian and Zionist types of AICs have not had glaring trouble with Christology, although some of them have their respective Ecclesiology built around the person of the leader. The leader, in that case, functions as a traditional African chief. In the traditional Africa, among the roles of a chief were "... judge, commander in chief, legislator, the executive and the administrative head of the community". He also filled "... a sacral role in the sense that he was the link between the living and the spirit world as well as the person who represented the community, their solidarity, their permanence and their continuity".²⁷ Apart from the obvious difficulties this conception raises for Ecclesiology and for the Christian responsibility as salt and light to the surrounding, these AICs are increasingly realising that this notion of leadership is not found anywhere in the Africa of today.

The AICs Will Need to Engage in Formal Theology

The AICs have theologies. These theologies, however, are for the most part "enacted", "oral" or "narrative". Unlike formal theology that is heavily influenced by denominational and theological background, the oral theology spontaneously fills biblical words, expressions and concepts with connotations from the life world of

²⁶ A.F. Walls, "Old Athens and New Jerusalem: Some Signposts for Christian Scholarship in Early History of Mission Studies" in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, October, 1997, pp. 146-153.

²⁷ J.S. Pobee, 1992: 149f.

the reader.²⁸ Oral theology is able to do this because it has spared itself the heavy theological baggage arising from two millennia of western theological developments and controversies. Although oral theology has short-circuited the historical development of theology, a number of African theologians are of the opinion that it is no less valid. Laurent Magesa has understood it as a way of doing theology in which focus is not put on interpreting the Bible, but in which the focus is rather on interpreting life with the instrument of the Bible.²⁹ Nevertheless, as we affirm the place of “enacted”, “oral” or “narrative” theology, it is important to note that the days when Africa had no place on the global stage are gone. Moreover, the Africa of today is not an exclusive oral society. Even in Africa, the digital age has come. Simply stated, the AICs exist in real time and space.

But to say that the days when Africa was both aloof and exclusively oral are gone is not to say that we must dispense with oral theology. We must take the strength of oral theology, namely its capacity to relate to the life realities and worldviews of its readers, and incorporate it into formal theology. This will give both the AICs and the entire global theological fraternity a different kind of formal theology. It will be a formal theology that shall have taken the totality of the Christian story as it has come to us and convey it to the life realities and worldviews of the African peoples using the infrastructure of the African intellectual culture and the best of modern scholarship.

A process like this will mean that the AICs cannot leave their theologies engraved only in stories, songs, dances, worship, ceremonies and rites. Our theologies must be deciphered using the best tools of formal theology and put into a language that has taken into consideration the development of the Christian story over two millennia. Unfortunately, this task cannot move fast enough, since

²⁸ See Daniel C. van Zyl, “ATR and the Interpretation of the Bible”. Unpublished paper, 1999.

²⁹ L. Magesa, “From Privatized to Popular Biblical Hermeneutics in Africa”. In *The Bible in African Christianity, Essays in Biblical Theology*. Nairobi: Action Publishers, 1997 (8-24).

the AICs lack personnel with the right capacity for the work. The African scholars who would have helped because they already have the right training and cultural background are clearly depressed by their inability to give direction to theological developments in their own churches.³⁰ Because of this vacuum, the non-African scholars have taken the responsibility of decoding the theologies from the oral matrix and putting them in a formal configuration.³¹

³⁰ Professor JS Mbiti remarked in an address on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) on 26 May, 1985, that “Christians in Africa have a faith but not a theology”. Professor George Kinoti, in his book, *Hope for Africa*, described the current situation of the Christian faith in the following words, “there is a sense in which Christianity in Africa is the White man’s religion. The denominations we belong to, the liturgies we use, the hymns we sing, the theologies that govern our beliefs and conduct, be they liberal or evangelical, are all made in the West” (Nairobi: AISRED, 1994, p 74, 75). It is important to note that in these words, Mbiti and Kinoti are clearly making reference to the mainline churches.

³¹ TS Maluleke, “Half a Century of Christian Theologies”, p 18 has made this observation. This observation is easily corroborated by even a casual look at existing significant bibliography on the AICs. The contributors in this category are E Andersson, (*Messianic Popular Movements in the Lower Congo*, 1958), A Anderson, (Moya, 1991), ML Daneel, (*Old and New in Shona independent Churches*, vols. 1, 2, and 3, 1971, 1974 and 1988 respectively; *Quest for Belonging*, 1987; and *Fambidzano – Ecumenical Movement of Zimbabwean Independent churches*, 1989), ML Martin, (*The Biblical Concept of Messianism*, 1964; *Kimbangu: An African Prophet and His Church*, 1975; and *Prophetic Christianity in the Congo*); GC Oosthuizen, (*The Theology of a South African Messiah*, 1967; *Post-Christianity in Africa*, 1968; and ed. *Religion Alive*, 1986); BGM Sundkler, (*Bantu Prophets in South Africa*, 1961; *Zulu Zion and Some Swazi Zionists*, 1976); HW Turner, *African Independent Church*, vols 1 and 2, 1967; *Religious Innovation in Africa*, 1979); FB Welbourn and BA Ogot (*A Place to Feel at Home*, 1966); M West, (*Bishops and Prophets in a Black City*, 1975), WC Willoughby, (*The Soul of the Bantu*, 1928; *Nature Worship and Taboo*, 1932); and RW Wyllie, (*Spirit Seekers: Spiritism in Ghana*, 1980).

The AICs cannot wait for either the non-African researchers or the non-AIC African scholars to formulate and disseminate for them their apprehension of the Christian faith. Neither may they merely withdraw and blame scholars for the bad accounts. One must point out bad scholarship wherever it is found. However, the AICs themselves have to do something about the perception, fixation and circulation of their theologies. The Luo of Kenya have the following instructive idioms: *luth manie lweti ema inego go thuol* (when a snake comes, one confronts it with the club on their person), *giri ema yweyi chilo* (one uses his/her own scrub to clean himself/herself), *chero man e wang' owadu ok moni nindo* (the cataract in your brother's eye does not render you sleepless). Theology, according to St Anselm, is *fides quarens intellectum*. Only the AICs can tell us their apprehension of the faith they have in God who has come to us in Christ.

But what does it take to tell the Christian story to contemporary local and global audiences? There are several issues of relevance here. In the first place, the AICs must be fluent in the universal Christian story. The AICs are a part of the universal church, they do not have another story, neither do they have to 'reinvent the wheel'. It is this same universal story that has been told for the last two thousand years that the AICs must identify, listen to and clarify for the Africa of our time. Then they have to develop the capacity to clarify the problem the story is likely to encounter in the culture of reception. One cannot adequately deal with a problem if they have not learnt how to clarify the problem itself. Once the problem is clarified and the right questions have been asked, one should suggest theological solutions. These solutions must, however, keep in mind the old themes³² introduced by the Christian story. Finally, the solutions must be tested, evaluated and restructured.³³

³² Professor V Brümmer in his paper 'Metaphorical Thinking and Systematic Theology' read in 1998 at the faculty of Theology, University of Stellenbosch, argues that there are at least two significances of listening to 'old themes' or as he calls it 'consonance with tradition'. First it confines the solution(s) within the boundaries of cumulative tradition thereby allowing the solution(s) to be recognisable for the community of believers,

We do not have to emphasise that one does not gain fluent knowledge of the Christian story by instinct, neither do we need to stress that such skills as interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference and explanation cannot be acquired naturally. Having a fluent knowledge of the Christian story and creativity/critical thinking skills call for training and hard work. The AICs must therefore seek training for those entrusted with the doctrine of their respective churches and build their capacities to facilitate their performance.

Missions in the Context of the Self-Reassessment of African Christianity

Reassessment of the stand of the historical churches and the AICs also means that missions have to readjust in the context of Africa. Traditionally, the resources of the universal Church have gone to the African churches that have retained mission roots.

Taking the case of South Africa, for example, this situation means that only 41% of the South African Christian population, which has maintained mission connections, is the beneficiary of all Christian ministries in the world. The independents, which amount to 36% of the total South African Christian population, are not

and in the second place it helps the theologian to learn from the mistakes of the predecessors.

³³ See J Kombo, "The African Renaissance as a new Context for African Evangelical Theology" in *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology*. Vol 19.1 2000 (3-24). Part of this article dealt with creativity and critical thinking and the cognitive skills that accompany them. I suggested in that article that a critical and a creative theological innovation must apply interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, explanation and self-regulation in at least five steps. The steps are (1) recognising or selecting the problem, (2) clarifying and representing the elements of the problem, (3) proposing solutions to the problem, (4) testing and evaluating or restructuring the solutions, and (5) verification and elaboration. (pp 15-19).

impacted at all. The South African case is a glaring sample of the situation of the relationship between missions and these two traditions of Christianity in the Christian nations of Africa. One can, therefore, conclude from this sample that Christian missions is doing a better job in strengthening the already established Christian traditions in Africa than it is in strengthening the struggling traditions. Missions, in the context of Africa, is, therefore, directed at churches that are comparatively well-established.

The readjustments taking place in both the historical churches and the AICs mean that missions in the context of Africa has to reassess its strategy if it is to maintain its relevance. In order to do this, we suggest this solution: couldn't missions set as a goal the assigning of one theologian couple or pair to every one of the AICs in Africa? According to the statistics of DB Barrett, at a global level, Christians today employ 5,151,000 full-time workers.³⁴ If the AICs numbered 8,000, as DB Barrett and J Padwick indicated in their 1993 statistics,³⁵ we could put the number of AICs today at a conservative 10,000. One theologian couple or pair per AIC means only 20,000 workers out of a total Christian work force of 5,151,000. That is less than 0.38% of the current Christian workforce globally!

The workers could help the AICs in the following areas: 1) In strengthening and implementing their programs (what happens); 2) in clarifying and addressing process concerns (how it happens); 3) in helping the AICs to carefully relate the complex issues of their immediate context to the Gospel; and 4) in linking up the beliefs and practices of the AICs with the historical developments of the larger Christian body. Missions will have failed African Christianity's goal of having a single story if it did not work with the AICs in establishing and strengthening the different aspects of these areas of church life.

³⁴ D.B. Barrett. "Annual Statistical Table on Global Mission: 1997" in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, January 1997, p. 25.

³⁵ See D.B. Barrett and J. Padwick. *Rise Up and Walk*. Nairobi, Oxford University Press, 1989, p. 9.

CONCLUSION

The African church has focussed on the differences of the Christian traditions in Africa for far too long. In the process, the African church has not had the opportunity to meaningfully interact with other traditions of the Christian faith on the continent, with the society in which it exists and with the global community. As is the case with the rest of the church, the African church too has the promise from Christ that he will build his church and that the gates of hell shall not prevail over it. The African church, regardless of ecclesiastical differences, has been entrusted with the Gospel described by the Apostle Paul as the power of God. The nature of this Gospel requires that we must understand it, articulate it in terms accessible to the conceptual framework of our African audiences, plant it in the cultural milieu of the African peoples and, as an expression of the body of Christ in Africa, give it back to the global church. This is proactive involvement.

Placing the Gospel in terms readily accessible to the African audiences means not only that more and more Africans will say 'yes' to Jesus Christ who is the source of the church and the theme of the Christian message. It also means that we will increasingly seek to contribute more constructively and holistically to the well-being of Africa and the world. In his book, *Hope for Africa*, Professor George Kinoti explores the problem of poverty, injustice, bribery, corruption, unemployment, poor attitude towards work and a depressing political climate. In addition to these, he calls our attention also to the equally disheartening issues such as prostitution, street children, broken homes, wars, genocide, refugees and HIV/AIDS.³⁶ These problems have hit the African at the grass-roots harder. The Christian church, regardless of its ecclesiastical tradition will lose its credibility if the church allowed the ecclesiastical differences to dictate, and in some way, to limit its theological reflection as well as implementation of missions.

³⁶ G. Kinoti. *Hope for Africa*. Nairobi: AISRED, 1994.