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# Justin Martyr and Kwame Bediako Reflections on the Cultural Context of Christianity

Wendy Elgersma Helleman

The emergence of a massive Christian presence in Africa through the modern missionary movement from the Western churches constitutes one of the most spectacular success-stories in the history of the expansion of Christianity through twenty centuries.<sup>1</sup>

Africa is today a world leader in the expansion of Christianity. Missionary efforts of the past century enjoyed only slim rewards at first, but eventually whole villages and tribes came to Christ. The church has continued to multiply, and its growth is now the envy of many parts of the world where Christianity still suffers from the onslaught of secularization. Such growth has not occurred without incisive critique. In his *Theology and Identity*, the noted Ghanaian Christian scholar, Kwame Bediako, has taken on the challenge of contemporary African theologians who accent the negatives in missionary motivation for coming to Africa as the 'dark continent', bringing the light of civilization along with the light of the gospel.

Bediako's work was first written about twenty years ago, but issues of imperialism and Westernism as aspects of the spread of Christianity in Africa are still with us. The present article focuses on Justin Martyr, one of the early

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<sup>1</sup> K. Bediako *Theology and Identity*, 250-51.

Christian authors examined by Bediako in his study of the cultural context in which the faith has come to expression in Africa.<sup>2</sup>

### **Christianity and Culture**

The issue of Christianity and culture has received considerable attention since the seminal work of H.R. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, which has achieved the stature of a classic, translated into numerous languages. Niebuhr proposed a number of models: Christ in opposition/ perfecting/ transforming/ having an equal/ or parallel status in relationship to culture. For each he provided clear historical examples, promoting the model of Christ *transforming* or restoring culture to what it was meant to be. When we turn to Bediako we find that he acknowledges the approach of Niebuhr, but his interest in the issue of Christ and culture arises from a set of questions which are somewhat different. His work is specifically directed toward clarifying "how the abiding Gospel of Jesus Christ related to the inescapable issues and questions which arise from the Christian's *cultural* existence in the world" (Bediako xi).

The question is challenging enough as such. Bediako's particular historical approach adds significantly to that challenge, since his thesis seeks to establish parallels between four second century Christian thinkers: Tatian, Tertullian, Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria, and four contemporary African theologians: Bolaji Idowu of Nigeria, John Mbiti of Kenya, Mulago gwa Cikala Musharhamina of Congo (Zaire) and Byang Kato of Nigeria. From his discussion of these African theologians we note that Bediako's interest is focused on the relationship between traditional African religion, culture and worldviews and the acceptance of Christianity. In the transitional chapter, "Christianity as 'Civilisation'" Bediako quotes historians and anthropologists who recognized the Eurocentric approach of the earliest missionaries, characterizing Africa as a backward continent, its people savage and primitive (227-234). As a result, early Christian mission efforts were bedeviled with Western-looking paternalism and cultural imperialism.

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<sup>2</sup> This paper is contributed in honour of Professor G.O.M. Tasié of the University of Jos, Nigeria, who has devoted much effort to the issue of contextualization of Christianity.

### Conversion and Cultural Discontinuity

Implications for early Christian congregations were serious, for they learned to identify with the missionaries, and thus looked down on their own culture as backward, ignorant, and generally inferior. Christians took their conversion as a radical departure, both from traditional African religions and from traditional culture. The theological problems resulting from the correlation between Western civilisation and Christian religion as it entered Africa were only signalled in later years, when African Christians began to realize that they had been cut off from their own past, denied their own history and a legitimate continuity with their respective African ethnic identities (237). Bediako recognizes that few missionaries had attempted to look for cultural or religious precedents in African thought and religion, as a preparatory and transitional step toward conversion to Christianity, as points of contact between these 'backward' ways and the religion of Europe and the West. The result was a crisis of identity, accompanying a radical discontinuity in the cultural context of Christian converts.

With independence and the end of the colonial era, the pendulum inevitably swung in the opposite direction, also on the identification of the Christian church with its Western roots. In an attempt to re-appropriate African traditions, pre-Christian African religion received a great deal of attention. African independent churches arising at this time integrated features of traditional religion, especially dancing, use of drums and polygamy.<sup>3</sup> In this connection Bediako bemoans the absence in early African Christianity of a figure like Paul who could preach a universal Christ as the great fulfilment of the deepest aspirations of all nations.<sup>4</sup> He agrees with Andrew Walls that even within African culture it would not have been unreasonable to recognize and utilize such a preparation for the acceptance of Christ (245-48). As a cultural bridge, this would have assured the newly emerging Christianity a much better sense of identity, and freedom from cultural ties with a foreign culture.

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<sup>3</sup> These are the more superficial aspects; there was also outright rejection of the Christian faith. Bediako alerts us to Okot p'Bitek, the non-Christian African representing a modern Celsus; his critique of Christianity has not yet been answered with a full theological response (438-39).

<sup>4</sup> He points to Acts 13.26ff.; 14.15ff; 17.22ff.,

### **Analogies from Greco-Roman 2<sup>nd</sup> century and 20<sup>th</sup> century Africa**

Bediako's point is raised specifically in terms of his study of modern African theologians, but is clinched as he turns to earlier periods of Christianity which exemplify such a cultural bridge to the faith. He realizes that the specific contexts are not interchangeable. Nor are the issues formulated in the same terms (427). His interest focuses on analogies for issues of cultural continuity, and the incarnation of the faith in African life. Although Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria, unlike Tatian and Tertullian, are typically interpreted as having a more positive appraisal of their context, Bediako considers all four 2<sup>nd</sup> Century authors as examples in communicating the faith within a context where they share its socio-cultural heritage.<sup>5</sup> All four recognize the 'barbarian' character of the gospel, yet affirm fidelity to Scripture, reject the Hellenising solution of Marcionites and Gnostics, and recognize *cultural continuity* (429). This is important for Bediako's conclusion that "positive evaluation of the pre-Christian tradition, and an attempt to derive insights from it for the declaration of Christian convictions, need not imply a theological syncretism" (431).

On Justin Martyr and Clement, more specifically, Bediako recognizes that they accepted the pre-incarnate Word at work also in non-Christian traditions; the pre-Christian tradition also responds to the reality of the Transcendent, and is therefore sensitive to truth and falsehood (436). On this matter Bediako recognizes analogies with the positions of Idowu, Mbiti and Mulago, who affirm an African identity, rejecting discontinuity between African Christian experience and its pre-Christian heritage. The strength of such an approach lies in the answer it provides to derogatory *Eurocentric* criticism of African culture and African traditional religion. There is one major drawback, however, and Bediako is honest enough to admit that it tends to ignore some real difficulties of the pre-Christian past, the elements which really did need purging.

### **Justin Martyr**

Such a bird's-eye overview of Bediako's position gives a necessary prelude to a more specific examination of the place of Justin Martyr within the general argument. Among the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century fathers cited, Justin takes a special place.

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<sup>5</sup> According to Bediako the important factors separating Tatian and Tertullian from Justin and Clement are aspects of temperament, education, and background, not a variant perception of culture (428).

While Tertullian and Tatian are known for an oppositionist stance, Justin is recognized as more accommodating to contemporary Greco-Roman culture. Such an evaluation has not been unanimous, as Bediako himself recognizes from the varying approaches of Harnack, Andresen, Holte and Chadwick. As we turn to Justin Martyr, we hope to use our analysis to test the general analogies proposed by Bediako's overall argument.

Bediako correctly signals the important role of Justin's views on philosophy and faith in his apologetics for the 'universal mission of the church', though he realizes that the common over-evaluation of Justin's positive assessment of pagan philosophy has led to some distortion (138). While agreeing with Chadwick that Justin feels no need to mitigate beliefs to meet criticism from philosophy (141), Bediako does challenge Chadwick's evaluation of Justin's 'programme for harmony and cooperation between faith and reason' (141). He recognizes that Justin, himself a Gentile, never 'tires of pointing to the non-racial, universal character of Christian allegiance' (139), and claims that Justin had only one source of truth: the gospel as the 'only safe and profitable philosophy' (141-142). If there is common ground between the Christian and the philosopher, it is in devotion to something more important than life itself. Socrates' willingness to die for his beliefs played a significant role in Justin's exceptional admiration for him (143-44). If Socrates said anything true and admirable it was because the Christian Saviour had actively vindicated truth among men. Limitations in the apprehension of truth were due to demonic powers always intent on deception (145).

### **Christ, the Pre-existing Logos**

Bediako takes some care in elaborating the pre-Christian work of Christ, for this point is crucial to his thesis on bridges within a culture mediating reception of the gospel. Specifically, how can we understand Paul's affirmation that God has not left himself without a witness (Romans 1.18-20)? This Bediako recognizes as the urgent 'contextual' question, leading right into the question of how God had provided a witness of himself in the Hellenistic past (146). The answer is: Christ, the divine *logos spermatikos* (seminal Word) sowing seeds of truth in human minds. He understands the 'seminal Word' not in terms of logical, or theological formulation on Trinitarian and Christological positions, but as a simple description of how Christ functions, in practice, among human beings (147).

Christ was active first in creation. His incarnation meant a continued active role which is fully appreciated only by Christians, who know him as the 'whole *logos*', even though every race 'partakes' of him and accordingly has 'partial' knowledge. In this sense Socrates or Heraclitus knew the truth partially, and in knowing the truth also knew Christ, who is the truth (149-150). Partial knowing is evident from inconsistencies in their views, but what they did know was based on direct inner working of the Word (151-152). Justin claimed that those who were living according to the truth, and willing to confront falsehood, even at the expense of their lives, may be regarded as companions of Christ, even if they were regarded as 'atheists' (as Christians of his own time, 156). So Bediako concludes that Justin was not Hellenising Christianity, but rather that he was Christianising the Hellenistic traditions (159)!

### **Bediako's Justin Martyr as 'Bridge' Figure .**

It is clear that Bediako is keen on presenting Justin as a 'bridge' figure, providing the case for Christianity as the fulfilment of the universal hopes of mankind. We can agree on such a role, for in his apologetical strategy we recognize Justin constructing bridges between Christianity and culture, Romans and barbarians, philosophers and believers. Justin was a Samaritan, and thus a Gentile convert to Christianity; he was also a philosopher who continued wearing the philosopher's cloak after his conversion. In his writings we find him engaged in vigorous debate with Jews, Gnostics, Platonists and pagans.<sup>6</sup> As might be expected, philosophical issues provide an important focus in that engagement. And as Bediako acknowledges, philosophical aspects have attracted much scholarly attention in recent decades, particularly following on Harnack's interest in Justin as key to the Hellenization of Christianity.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> A convenient translation of Justin's works can be found in M. Dods et al., *The Writings of Justin Martyr and Athenagoras*, in the *Ante-Nicene Christian Library (ANCL)*, vol. 1, Edinburgh, 1867. For a more contemporary, complete translation, see Thos. B. Falls, *Writings of Saint Justin Martyr*, New York: Christian Heritage, 1948. For a new translation of the Apologies, see L. W. Barnard, *St. Justin Martyr, The First and Second Apologies*, Ancient Christian Writers series 56, New York: Paulist Press, 1997.

<sup>7</sup> The critical role of Adolf Harnack's portrayal of Justin Martyr for scholarly work on second century Christian fathers has been noted in the article of Ch. Nahm, "The Debate on the 'Platonism' of Justin Martyr" *Second Century* 9 (1992) 129-52, particularly 131-2. For a balanced historical perspective on the question of 'Harnack and Hellenization' see Robert C. Crouse, "The Hellenization of Christianity: A Historiographical Study" *The Canadian Journal of Theology* 8 (1962) 22-33. I have dealt with the question at some

Chadwick may be taken as representative among recent authors who pursue the position laid out by Harnack.<sup>8</sup> Such an approach has elicited a reaction, and Holte is outstanding among those who accept Justin as a sincere Christian, not simply accommodating his faith to the cultural environment, but actively defending the faith while appealing for understanding and recognition of the truth.<sup>9</sup>

Justin's discussion of Christ as *Logos* is an important part of that appeal. This is not the occasion for an extensive examination of Justin's use of the term *logos*, with all the difficulties of determining which of its varied meanings: mind, reason, expression, word, etc., are to be chosen in any specific context.<sup>10</sup> But even a brief analysis of Justin's presentation of Christ as 'whole logos', while individuals have a 'partial apprehension', or 'seed of *logos*' will demonstrate that *knowledge* (in part or in full) is the real issue. According to Justin, Christ became incarnate as the whole rational principle (*logos*), and can be known as the full revelation of the Father. By grace Christians participate fully in the *logos*, and have full and true knowledge of the Father. Those who know the *logos* in part have at least a share in the *logos* (even if that is characterized by

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length in the epilogue of my *Hellenization Revisited: Shaping a Christian Response within the Greco-Roman World*, Lanham: University Press of America, 1994: 429-511.

<sup>8</sup> See H. Chadwick's chapter on Justin Martyr in A. H. Armstrong ed., *The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy*, Cambridge: University Press, 1967:158-167, especially 161; also H. Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought and the Classical Tradition* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966: 10-11. He refers to Justin's *Apol.* 2. 8, 10, and 13 for the admirable views of Stoics or Platonists, which are due to their sharing in the 'seminal logos' i.e. the divine reason sowing seeds of truth in all men.

<sup>9</sup> See the 1958 article of the Scandinavian Ragnar Holte "Logos Spermatikos", Christianity and Ancient Philosophy according to St. Justin's Apologies" *Studia Theologica* 12 (1958) 109-168 on this reaction. Holte (112-3, and 143-45) has accented passages to argue that a Christian as sincere as Justin could not have gone that far in accepting the cultural and intellectual environment.

<sup>10</sup> The significant passages are *Apol.* 2.8 ; *Apol.* 2.10; *Apol.* 2.13. The contentious statement is clearly articulated in *Apol.* 2. 8, "We know that those who follow Stoic doctrines, because they were honourable at least in their ethical teaching, as were also the poets in some respects, due to the seed (*sperma*) of reason (*logos*) implanted in the entire race of mankind, were hated and put to death." For a summary of earlier discussion of *logos* see L. W. Barnard, "Justin Martyr in Recent Study" *Scottish Journal of Theology* 22 (1969) 152-64, especially 156-161. I have written more extensively on this topic in my article, "Justin Martyr and the *Logos*: an Apologetical Strategy" *Philosophia Reformata* 67.2 (2002):128-147.

contradictions), for the seed implanted in them is an *imitation* of the *logos* as such.

Justin's use of the term *logos* overlaps with that of Middle Platonists and Stoics, and we can also recognize something of Philo's use of the term in Justin's writings. But the attempt of source critical studies to reduce Justin to any particular school misses the point, for his apologetical strategy demanded that he use terms well known to a general ('educated') audience. We can support those (like Eric Osborn) who argue that Justin's apologetical strategy to affirm Christians as 'reasonable' people depends above all on using terminology which is *already familiar on a broad spectrum*.<sup>11</sup> The fact that the term was not univocal in ancient philosophical schools allowed him a flexibility in reaching various groups, who would each read the term according to their own philosophical preconceptions.

On this basis we support Bediako in rejecting both major approaches on Justin's acceptance of ancient culture (Chadwick and Holte). That of Chadwick accents the Stoic background, emphasizing the similarity of part and whole, as in the Stoic analogy of microcosmic and macrocosmic *logos* (particularly its materialistic form). Holte, on the other hand, has accented the Platonic view of the 'part' as much weaker, and subordinate to the whole, a view certainly supported by the final sentence of *Apol.* 2.13.8, where Justin equates the seed with an 'imitation', quite unlike the 'participation' which is given by grace. Both approaches encounter considerable difficulties when examined in terms of Justin's defence of Christianity. Chadwick leans toward presenting the *logos* in an ontological fashion, as constituent of the human (or cosmic) structural make-up. But this implies an elimination of the underlying reasons for apologetics. If Chadwick is right, and the *logos* provides the basis for a natural theology in which all men (as birthright) have access to revealed truth, we end up by ultimately erasing the difference between Justin and the Stoics, although the latter might have a more 'materialistic' understanding of 'seeds of truth'. On the other hand, if Holte is right about an unbridgeable chasm between Christians and non-Christians, what basis would there be for Justin in seeking to win

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<sup>11</sup> Eric F. Osborn, *Justin Martyr*, Tübingen: J.C.B.Mohr, 1973:14, "... Justin says much which is not new. Most of it is chosen because it is not new. Justin uses common ground when speaking to Romans and to Jews. He starts from things which they have already said and uses their premises to show the truth of the gospel. Source criticism can provide little more than a beginning."

opponents over to the truth? Without some common ground, how could he argue that Greeks had just as great a desire for the Saviour as the Jews? After all, Justin is also confident that those who condemn and persecute Christians are without excuse; they could and should have known better, he claims.<sup>12</sup> So we agree neither with Chadwick on an ontological identity of truth known by Christians and pagans alike, nor with Holte for whom there is no basis for a bridge between the knowledge of (pre-Christian) pagans and Christians.

### Christ as Hope of All the Nations

We can certainly support Bediako also on Justin's appeal to the universal Christ. But the reasons for such an appeal need further investigation. A close look at the context of his apologetic work shows us that Justin was greatly concerned about persecution of Christians in this period. From his epithet 'Martyr' we know that Justin himself suffered the consequences as witness to his faith ending in death. Justin addressed his apology to the devout (*pious*) Emperor Antoninus Pius (138-161) and his (philosophically-minded) sons.<sup>13</sup> From the beginning he appealed to their goodwill, but made no secret of his desire to correct their perception of Christians, who were popularly regarded as impious atheists, criminals and madmen. On the contrary, he claims boldly that they are reasonable people.<sup>14</sup> Knowing the true nature of the Christian faith, these rulers should also know that accusations on which Christians are dragged into the courts have no factual basis.<sup>15</sup> Claiming to be devout and just, the

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<sup>12</sup> *Apol.* 1. 3.

<sup>13</sup> Justin begins the first *Apology* by referring to the full names of the Emperor and his sons, "To the Emperor Titus Aelius Adrianus Antoninus Pius Augustus Caesar, to his son Verissimus the philosopher, to Lucius the philosopher, by birth the son of Caesar and by adoption son of Pius, and admirer of learning..." (Falls tr.), *Apol.* 1. 1. This Justin follows up in *Apol.* 1. 2 by saying that pious men and philosophers should cherish only what is true, and a lover of truth must always choose the right, even at the expense of his own life. Cf. 1. 8 and 2. 2.

<sup>14</sup> *Apol.* 1. 13; the opponents instead, are unreasonable, for they are motivated by gossip and rumour, allowing their emotions to overrule reason: *Apol.* 1. 3, 5: "... you do not investigate the charges made against us. Instead, led by unreasonable passion and at the instigation of wicked demons, you punish us inconsiderately without trial." (Falls tr.) Cf. *Apol.* 1.12.

<sup>15</sup> These *Apologies* were addressed boldly to the emperor Antoninus Pius (138-161 AD) and the Roman Senate. But public prosecution was in turn fueled by accusations originating in various sectors of society; in many of the *Acts of the Martyrs*, from

emperor should be prepared to correct his impressions about beliefs and practices of Christians, and to make a thorough, fair and balanced examination of accusations against them.<sup>16</sup> From this perspective we begin to see the importance of Justin's appeal to the universal character of the *logos*. Justin's argument that non-Christian philosophers like Socrates, Heraclitus or Musonius had access to true knowledge about God (only hindered by deceptive intentions of demonic powers), allows him to conclude that inasmuch as the emperor and his sons claim a philosophic knowledge, they are without excuse. Access to truth was never denied them.

We can compare the way that Justin addresses the Roman emperors with an appeal to a partial, but nonetheless valid insight into truth about God in the address of John Calvin (1509-1564) to the king of France, given in the preface to the *Institutes*. Calvin similarly appeals to a general awareness of divinity, or '*divinitatis sensus*' and the seed of religion, '*semen religionis*'.<sup>17</sup> While our world and human society has been distorted by sin, such seeds of religion are not eroded. This does not mean that they can be identified ontologically as part of our human make-up. Rather, they are like the 'image of God' in man. An identification of this religious core, or 'image', with some aspect of the human make-up (like human rationality) is problematic, and the long Christian tradition which identified that 'image' with reason is now largely superseded. What both Calvin and Justin are referring to, rather, is a basic human accountability before

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Polycarp to Cyprian, we hear of Jews taking a direct or more indirect role in such cases. Heretical groups of Christians, Marcionites and other Gnostic groups did not make things easier, for they managed to evade persecution.

<sup>16</sup> "As far as we (Christians) are concerned, we believe that no evil can befall us unless we be convicted as criminals or be proved to be sinful persons. You indeed may be able to kill us, but you cannot harm us." *Apology* 1.2 (Falls tr.).

<sup>17</sup> *Institutes* I.iii.1: "There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity. This we take to be beyond controversy. To prevent anyone from taking refuge in the pretense of ignorance, God himself has implanted in all men a certain understanding of his divine majesty." *Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion*, (2 vols.) vol. I, J.T. McNeil (ed.), F.L. Battles (tr.), Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960: 43. Cf. iv.1, "Experience teaches that the seed of religion has been divinely planted in all men. ... But to my statement that some erroneously slip into superstition, I do not mean thereby that their ingenuousness should free them from blame (op.cit. 47)." Also Calvin's prefatory address to King Francis I of France, asking him to curb the anger of those disturbing the peace, and filling his ears with false reports (in the above volume, 9ff.).

God, resting on his revelation of Himself in creation. And it was just as important for Calvin to maintain this as it was for Justin, for Calvin once again lived in a period in which Christians were being persecuted, particularly if their strand of Christianity did not coincide with that of the ruler. Calvin too called the ruler to account. With Justin he appealed to the revelation of God given in creation as the basis for his claim that the persecutors were without excuse.

Justin's initial appeal to the goodwill of Roman rulers shows him to be a clever bridge-builder. In an environment in which Christians were regarded as madmen, Justin made every effort to show that they had good reason for their views and practice.<sup>18</sup> Whether in everyday life or in worship, they were reasonable and their views credible. To convince the state not to persecute Christians he made a special point of indicating areas of agreement with Christian thought, between Biblical stories and Christian theological motifs on the one hand, and those of Greeks and Romans on the other.<sup>19</sup> The implication is obvious: if Christian accounts can be shown to be analogous to teachings of Greek poets and philosophers, why are Christians so unjustly hated and pursued, when the former are not? If Greek myths speak of a virgin birth, of the sufferings of the sons of Zeus - and the religious systems which promote such stories are *respected*, why then should Christians be *persecuted*?

### Conclusions and a Constructive Alternative

We have examined three major aspects of Bediako's study of Justin as a 'bridge-building' figure: the issue of faith and philosophy, the importance of 'Christ as pre-existing *logos*', and Christ as the hope of all the nations. It should be clear that we can agree with Bediako on the significance of Justin as a trailblazer in positing the universal significance of Christ, as desired of all nations. Similarly we can agree with him on his rejection of approaches which regard Justin as either Hellenising, or isolating himself from his culture. From the perspective of an apologetic strategy it is important to recognize bridges of understanding within a culture, points of contact between the gospel and the

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<sup>18</sup> *Apol.* 1. 7, 13.

<sup>19</sup> *Apol.* 1. 20-24; for Justin's more all-embracing explanation of analogy in the myths compared to Biblical accounts see *Apol.* 1. 54-56 where he speaks of demons distorting the truth to deceive and lead many astray. In *Apol.* 2. 4 he explains that fallen angels have sown war, murder and adulteries; poets or mythologists have wrongly attributed these to the gods.

conceptual framework or worldview already operative. Where, then, do we part company? Bediako has failed to note a crucial aspect of Justin's argument for Christ as seminal *logos*, namely the existential context of persecution. Universal and pre-Christian knowledge of God is not primarily significant for Justin for establishing a more positive approach to the Greco-Roman cultural heritage, but to indicate that those who persecute Christians are without excuse, even if they have not personally been exposed to the gospel: access to truth was never denied. And this is not just a small point of difference in an approach to Justin's apologetics. It has wider implications for the analogies drawn between the second century of the Roman Empire and 20<sup>th</sup> Century Africa, and brings up a number of questions which are interesting even if they cannot be developed fully at this time.

While later 20<sup>th</sup> Century African theologians from Idowu to Kato developed their work within a context characterized only minimally by persecution, we know that those who were brave enough to respond to the call of the gospel in the initial stages of missionary work were almost without exception subject to ridicule and persecution; they became the outcasts of their respective communities. Bediako and modern African scholars have not accented this aspect of the initial acceptance of the gospel in Africa. They are far more concerned with the presentation of the gospel in terms of a 'cultural superiority' which finally eroded their own culture, their identity, and undermined cultural continuity from the pre-Christian period. Yet it is clear that such cultural upheaval could only occur when more than just a handful of people in any community accepted Christianity. Thus the important question is, what exactly happened, culturally, when whole communities accepted the gospel.

An examination of such change must certainly recognize the complicating factor of British colonial rule within Nigerian culture of this period. With British rule came a variety of other dislocations, changes in traditional roles of emirs and chiefs, introduction of roads and new methods of communication, new laws, and new technology, to name a few. These changes made a considerable impact on Nigerian society and culture. So we need to ask whether the respective roles of the colonial government and of the missionaries have been discerned with sufficient care. Sometimes missionaries benefited from the colonial presence, and at times colonial rulers benefited from mission work, as in the role of Mary of Calabar; but this was by no means universally true. Missionaries were explicitly excluded from Northern Nigeria, and for the pre-independence era the

colonial government in Nigeria has been accused of favouring Muslim rulers at the expense of nascent Christian tribal regions of the south.

A second issue that deserves attention is the role of a Marxist critique of culture, and more particularly its verdict on religion within a culture. Within the context of the Cold War as it extended to Africa, Marxist rhetoric was only too ready to emphasize the Westernizing and imperialistic aspects of the introduction of Christianity by missionaries. Too often missionaries have been accused of using education or medicine to 'lure' people away from African traditional ethnic religion. We need to ask whether this is really borne out by the facts? Did they intentionally regard African traditional communities as backward, barbarian and primitive? Or were they more concerned to condemn the cruelty of traditional gods who demanded human sacrifice? And to preach the kingdom of God by demonstrating its power for healing and changing people, doing this constructively through the means at their disposal, especially new developments in medicine? Although it is difficult to retrace missionary motivation, we can go back to their own writings, their letters; we will probably find that for the most part they reflected attitudes common in their time. Bediako recognizes that missionaries brought their European or Western civilisation with them, as an integral part of their presentation of the gospel. If we do not argue with him on that point as such, we do wish to point out that missionaries shared the Western civilisation of the colonial rulers, and the 'Western' character of Christianity as it was introduced needs to be re-examined in that context. Today Marxists have been joined by Islamists in denouncing the presence of Christianity as a 'Western' religion, and thus not appropriate to Africa. The best response to this charge is a re-examination of Christianity at its roots, which would include Africa right from the beginning. Bediako's presentation of Tertullian and Clement of Alexandria among the early Christians does not stress this aspect of their work.

In this connection we must raise a further question about the nature of the culture which received the gospel. In African traditional culture, religion was closely integrated with all other facets of culture, especially political and family life, agriculture and medicine. This is an aspect of cultural change that cannot be ignored. It meant that the introduction of a new religion was no small matter, and would lead inevitably to change in many other facets of society. This may well explain the very slow rate of conversion in the early years. It certainly contributed to the problematic situation of early Christian converts, who could

no longer be integrated within their home context; as a result they identified themselves far more with the missionaries, and by extension, with the culture of those missionaries. We thus suggest that the 'opposition' between Christ and culture, as reflected by early converts, can be explained (at least in part) by the specific phase of conversion to Christianity within a community, and is related to the ratio of Christians to non-Christians.

Bediako reflects the legitimate concerns of contemporary theologians who wish that early African Christianity had done more to seek points of contact within traditional religion, with its own worldview and understanding of God. This assumes an understanding of the role of religion that ties in closely with Niebuhr's favourite model, that of Christ *transforming* culture. According to this model Christianity neither ignores or destroys a culture but seeks to change it, to reform and restore it to what it should be, as a healthy, positive environment for human life and society. To mention but one example showing that missionaries were not totally oblivious to the need of impacting the culture from within, we should examine the process of translating the Scriptures into languages of emerging congregations. This task demanded careful discernment, not just with respect to language as it was used, but also traditional concepts and their implications.

In conclusion we briefly propose an alternative scenario. Is it not possible that rejection of African culture among early converts, and failure to give a positive evaluation of one's own culture in terms of a bridge for the conversion to Christianity, reflects the actual rejection that occurs when individual members of a tribe -upon conversion to Christianity - are no longer welcome within their own family and social group? As they experience rejection, they in turn typically go even further in separating themselves, and repudiating the values which once tied them, turning rather to those whose advice and insight they have used for a new sense of community. As a larger proportion of a community turns to Christ the dynamics change. With the passage of time, when a tribe is more Christianized, the older gods lose the threat they once posed. The next generation, which has not personally experienced the older gods and practices of traditional religion at first hand, can revisit the past from a safe distance, and recognize what has been lost in terms of culture, along with the change in religion. The sting of that initial rejection is no longer operative. This is the generation reflected in contemporary African theology. It has gained self-

confidence in its new identity, and from that perspective seeks to rebuild bridges to the past, re-establishing cultural continuity.

In the southern parts of Nigeria today conversion to Christianity does not usually lead to persecution. But in areas where Islam is strong, such conversion is far more likely to result in the kind of persecution experienced by earlier converts within their respective tribes and communities. From this perspective Justin Martyr's advice is still useful. In his bridge-building activity Justin made an effective appeal to Socrates, not as a well-known philosopher, but as a pagan who was devoted to a cause more important than life itself. The intention was not simply to point to good qualities to be found in a culture even though it is pagan. Justin wanted to call that culture to account in its resistance to the gospel, especially when such resistance meant persecution which condemned Christians to death.

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