

**The Understanding of God in African theology:  
Contributions of John Samuel Mbiti  
and Mercy Amba Oduyoye**

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**Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for  
the degree of  
PHILOSOPHIAE DOCTOR**

**In the Faculty of Theology  
Department of Science of Religion and Missiology  
University of Pretoria**

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**April 2013**

## DECLARATION

I declare that the thesis, which I hereby submit for the degree of Philosophiae Doctor at the University of Pretoria, is my own work and has not previously been submitted by me for a degree at this or any other tertiary institution.

Signature:

Date:

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The waswahili of Tanzania say ‘*haraka haraka haina baraka*,’ which literally means ‘hurry hurry has no blessing.’ This proverb is often accompanied by the ‘*pole pole ndio mwendo*,’ which means ‘slow slow is the way to go.’ These proverbs really comforted me when I was disappointed and got irritated while writing my thesis which did not go well and was too slow in progress.

As of today, I cannot help but confess that, even though my work was so *pole pole*, God’s *baraka* has always been great in all ways.

First of all, I am most grateful to God for His boundless love and grace upon my life, and for enabling me to begin and complete this study. Without His constant guidance, I would not have been able to finish this thesis. God has been the provider and sustainer of my entire life.

That the *pole pole* was God’s *baraka* to me is true. However, I suppose that my writing thesis *pole pole* might not have been *baraka* to my wife, because I had to spend a lot of time conversing with books rather than with her. I want to acknowledge the support and understanding of my lovely wife and best friend, Sook Kyung Park Han. While I was struggling with my research, she encouraged me with prayer which did not allow me to give way to despair and discouragement.

I would like to thank my daughter, Melanie Hyo In, for her prayer, which, I believe, has helped sustain me this whole time.

I would like to express my gratitude to my promoter, Dr. Jaco Beyers, who devoted many hours of his valuable time for sharing his enthusiasm for African theology, providing evaluations of my study with valuable criticism and encouragement.

I also want to thank to my external examiners, Prof. Martha Frederiks (Utrecht University, the Netherlands), Prof. Johan Strijdom (University of South Africa, South Africa), and Prof. S.T Kgatla (University of Pretoria, South Africa), who provided detailed evaluations of my thesis with valuable criticism and comments.

I am thankful to Rev. Dr. Nam Yong Sung, senior pastor of Sam Kwang Presbyterian Church in Seoul, Korea, for allowing me to do this study during my sabbatical year and also in the mission field.

In particular, there are many church members who have continuously supported and prayed for my family and ministry. I remain grateful to all of them for their company and warmth.

I remember with gratitude my father-in-law and mother-in-law for their closeness and prayers. Their support has been more valuable than they perhaps realize themselves.

During my time of study in Pretoria, there are many people who deserve my heartfelt thanks.

I would like to thank Prof. Francois S. Malan and Mrs. Ruth Wollenkroft for their effort in correcting and polishing my English writing and in making my thesis readable.

I cannot forget the kindness and hospitality shown to me by Rev. Dr. Kyung Hwan Oh and Mrs. Dr. Hee Kyung Yoon Oh. When my wife and I visited Pretoria, they invited us and served a nice dish, including Braai. I offer my deep appreciation to their warm hospitality.

I also want to recognize the encouragement and support of my fellow missionaries of Korea Church Mission in Tanzania as well as the students of Calvin Theological College, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, where I have taught for fifteen years. They have been both a challenge and an inspiration to me.

Finally, once again I praise and honor our Lord Jesus Christ, who has graciously called us to participate in His mission.

*Bwana Yesu asifiwe!*

May the Lord Jesus be exalted!



## ABSTRACT

This study investigates how Mbiti and Oduyoye articulate their understanding of God in connection with the African traditional religio-cultural heritage to make the concept of God to become relevant to African Christians and to help African Christians feel at home in the Christian faith.

**Chapter 1** briefly describes the background of the study, the problem statement, the purpose of the study, the research hypothesis, methodology, delimitation, and structure of the study.

**Chapter 2** provides a historical sketch of origins and development of African theology and diverse types of African theology. This chapter maintains that African theology emerged not only as a theological reaction to the dominant Western interpretation of the gospel in Africa, but also as a theological attempt to secure the African cultural identity by reaffirming the African past.

**Chapter 3** describes the basic beliefs in African traditional religions, several African ethnic groups' concepts of God, and the African theologians' Christianization of the African God by employing Christian theological terms. This chapter concludes that it is not possible to presume a homogenous or one unified concept of God in Africa. One and the same God whom all Africans have worshipped is not real.

**In chapter 4**, Mbiti's understanding of God is scrutinized in relation to his methodology, the African concept of time, his understanding of revelation and of salvation.

Mbiti has maintained African monotheism and ATR(s) as a *praeparatio evangelica* and has arrived at his conclusion that the God revealed in the Bible is the same as the God worshipped in ATR(s). This chapter criticizes Mbiti's way of Christian theological interpretation of anthropological data of the African concepts of God.

**Chapter 5** presents Oduyoye's understanding of God, her methodology, the status of African women in ATR(s) and the African church, her appreciation of salvation, of the Bible, and of the locus of experience.

In Oduyoye's theology, women's experience becomes a crucial factor for doing theology, and

salvation is understood as liberation from all oppressive conditions. Her understanding of God is closely connected with the theme of liberation.

**Chapter 6** examines the similarities and differences between the two theologians' understanding of God, critically compares their way of understanding the interplay of the gospel and African culture, and categorizes the two theologians' ways with their models of contextualization: Mbiti's gospel-culture oriented model of contextualization and Oduyoye's gospel-liberation oriented model of contextualization.

By a comparative-dialogical study of the two theologians' models of contextualization, this chapter attempts to make a dialogue possible between the two, and suggests the intercultural model of contextualization in which each theology keeps its own theological characteristic and has an open mind to learn from the other through mutual understanding.

It aims to overcome the absolutism of contextualization, syncretism, cultural relativism, and provincialism, to keep a balance between locality and catholicity, and to affirm cultural identity and Christian identity.

On the basis of the intercultural model of contextualization, this chapter proposes some criteria for African Evangelical theology in order to do a biblically faithful and practically relevant theology in Africa. This study also suggests some guidelines to articulate the understanding of God so that it has theological relevance and legitimacy to African Christians as well as to Christians worldwide.

**Chapter 7**, as the final chapter, gives a general summary and concluding suggestions for further research related to the subject of African theology.

## OPSOMMING

Hierdie studie ondersoek hoe Mbiti en Oduyoye hulle opvattinge oor God beskryf vanuit Afrika se tradisionele godsdienstig-kulturele erfenis, om sodoende die begrip van God relevant te maak vir Afrika Christene en om Afrika Christene tuis te laat voel in die Christelike geloof.

**Hoofstuk 1** beskryf kortliks die agtergrond van die studie, stel die probleem, die doel van die studie, die navorsing se hipotese, metodologie, afbakening, en die struktuur van die studie.

**Hoofstuk 2** skets die oorsprong en ontwikkeling van Afrika teologie en verskillende tipes Afrika teologieë. In die hoofstuk word beweer dat Afrika teologie nie slegs as 'n teologiese reaksie op die oorheersende Westerse interpretasie van die evangelie in Afrika ontwikkel het nie, maar ook as 'n teologiese poging om Afrika se kulturele identiteit te verseker deur die Afrika verlede te herbevestig.

**Hoofstuk 3** beskryf grondliggende gelowe in die Afrika godsdienste, verskeie Afrika etniese groepe se opvatting oor God, en Afrika teoloë se verchristeliking van Afrika se godsbegrip met Christelike teologiese terme. In die hoofstuk word tot die gevolgtrekking gekom dat dit nie moontlik is om 'n homogene of een verenigde begrip van God in Afrika te veronderstel nie. Dat alle Afrikane een en dieselfde God aanbid het is nie realisties nie.

**In hoofstuk 4** word Mbiti se godsbegrip noukeurig ondersoek in verhouding tot sy metodologie, die Afrika begrip van tyd, sy begrip van openbaring en van verlossing.

Mbiti het beweer dat Afrika monoteïsme en Afrika Tradisionele Godsdienst(te) 'n *praeparatio evangelica* is, en dat die God wat in die Bybel geopenbaar word dieselfde God is wat in die Afrika Tradisionele Godsdienste aanbid is. In die hoofstuk word Mbiti se Christelik-teologiese vertolking van antropologiese data oor Afrika se godsbegrippe gekritiseer.

**Hoofstuk 5** bespreek Oduyoye se godsbegrip en metodologie, die status van die Afrika vrou in die Afrika Tradisionele Godsdienste en in die Afrika kerke, haar beskouing van verlossing, die Bybel en lokus van ervaring.

In Oduoye se teologie word die vrou se belewenis 'n beslissende faktor om teologie te bedryf, en verlossing word verstaan as verlossing uit alle onderdrukkende omstandighede. Haar godsbegrip is nou verbind aan die tema van bevryding.

**Hoofstuk 6** ondersoek die ooreenkomste en verskille tussen die twee teoloë se godsbegrippe, vergelyk die wyses waarop hulle die wisselwerking tussen die evangelie en die Afrika kulture verstaan, en onderskei tussen die twee teoloë se behandeling van hulle voorbeelde van kontekstualisering: Mbiti se evangelies-kultureel georiënteerde model van kontekstualisering, en Oduoye se evangelies-bevrydings georiënteerde model van kontekstualisering.

Met behulp van 'n vergelykende-dialogiese studie van die twee teoloë se modelle van kontekstualisering word in hierdie hoofstuk gepoog om 'n dialoog tussen die twee moontlik te maak, en word die interkulturerings model van kontekstualisering voorgestel, waarin elke teologie sy eie teologiese karaktertrek behou, met 'n oop gemoed om van die ander te leer deur onderlinge begrip.

So word gepoog om die absolutisme van kontekstualisering, sinkretisme, kulturele relativisme en provinsialisme te oorkom, om balans te behou tussen plaaslikgebonde en algemeenheid, en om kulturele identiteit en Christelik identiteit te bekragtig.

Op grond van die interkulturerings model van kontekstualisering word in hierdie hoofstuk enkele maatstawwe vir 'n Afrika Evangeliese teologie voorgestel om 'n teologie in Afrika te bedryf wat Bybels getrou en praktiese relevant is. Hierdie studie stel ook sekere riglyne voor om die godsbegrip duidelik uit te druk om teologies relevant en legitiem te wees vir Afrika Christene en Christene wêreldwyd.

**Hoofstuk 7**, die finale hoofstuk, bied 'n algemene opsomming aan en slot opmerkings vir verdere navorsing wat verwant is aan dieselfde onderwerp, naamlik Afrika teologie.

## KEY TERMS

African Evangelical theology

African Inculturation theology

African monotheism

African nationalism

African theology

African Traditional Religions

African Women's theology

Christian identity

Contextualization

Interculturation

Mbiti

Oduyoye

*Praeparatio evangelica*

The African Concepts of God

The understanding of God

## ABBREVIATIONS

AACC: All African Conference for Churches

AEA: Association of Evangelicals in Africa

AEAM: Association of Evangelicals of Africa and Madagascar

AG: Ad gentes

AICs: African Independent Churches

AIM: African Inland Mission

AIT: African Inculturation theology

ATR(s): African Traditional Religions

AWT: African Women's theology

EAAT: Ecumenical Association of African Theologians

EATWOT: Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians

EN: Evangelii Nuntiandi

GS: Gaudium et spes

ICT: Institute of Contextual Theology

LG: Lumen gentium

NA: Nostra aetate

SECAM: Symposium of Episcopal Conference of Africa and Madagascar

The Circle: The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians

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## CHAPTER 7

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 THE BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Tennent (2010:18) says that Western Christians are facing a serious crisis<sup>1</sup> concerning ‘missions and Christian identity within the large global Christian movement.’ However, a half century ago, those who lived in Africa were facing a serious crisis concerning their African identity within Western Christianity planted on the African continent.

African theologians acknowledged that the religio-cultural context of doing theology in Africa was different from that of the West, and they began to prepare a deliberate transgression of or discontinuity with the traditional European method of approach to theology. In the process of the theological break with Western theological methodology, since the 1960s, African theologians have been attempting to produce a theology that ‘incarnates the gospel message in the African culture on the theological level’ (Nyamiti 2001:3).

Most African theologians have emphasized the African traditional religio-cultural heritage and have claimed that theological reflection is to be done in relationship to the cultural context in which African people live (Dickson 1984:15; Parratt 1987:147-149).

However, the plurality of contexts within the African continent has resulted in a plurality of methodologies of theologizing. Consequently, the plurality of methodologies has produced diverse theological trends in Africa.

Theology in Africa can broadly be distinguished between a ‘Theology of Inculturation,’ which

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<sup>1</sup> Tennent (2010:17-51) examines a ‘crisis’ under seven megatrends that should be viewed as ‘seven major shifts that are all related to, intertwined with, and built upon the others.’ (1) The collapse of Christendom, which refers to ‘a political and ecclesiastical arrangement that reinforces a special relationship between the church and the state’, and the Western world is no longer be considered as a Christian society. (2) The rise of Postmodernism, of relativistic pluralism, the loss of faith in the progress of the human race, and an increasing uncertainty about normative truth produced a cultural, theological and ecclesiastical crisis. (3) The collapse of the ‘West-Reaches-the-Rest’ Paradigm. Instead, a new mission-sending paradigm is emerging as a form of multidirectional and multicontinental missionary movement. (4) The changing face of global Christianity: the collapse of the old center and the emergence of multiple new centers of Christian vitality change the existing structures of mission societies based on the Western format. (5) The emergence of a fourth branch of Christianity that cannot exclusively be classified in Roman Catholic, Protestant, or Eastern Orthodox. (6) Globalization that has been summarized as a ‘complex connectivity’ has influenced every sphere of life including religion: immigration, urbanization, and new technologies. (7) A deeper ecumenism that has its roots in historic Christian confessions requires a new kind of unity that transcends traditional denominational and confessional identities.

stresses Africa's religious cultural matters, and a 'Theology of Liberation,' which emphasizes Africa's politico-socio economic matters (Martey 1993:69; Nyamiti 2001:3). Martey classifies the two major theological directions into four theological trends based on four different points of departure: African Inculturation theology, which pays much attention to African traditional beliefs and culture; African liberation theology, which is centered on the problems of poverty, injustice, and exploitation; South African Black theology, which emphasizes the racial issue; and African Women's theology, which stresses the oppressive gender relations in both church and society.

This study is intended as an investigation of how the African theologians, John Samuel Mbiti and Mercy Amba Oduyoye reflect theologically on the understanding of God and of how they approach theology in the African context from the African male and female perspective respectively. In exploring the questions of the subject, this study will be limited to the consideration of African Inculturation theology (hereafter referred to as AIT) and African Women's theology (hereafter referred to as AWT).

AIT and AWT have broad similarities but differ in particular emphasis. African Inculturation theologians endeavour to bring the African culture and traditional religiosity to bear on African theology in order to make the theology relevant and intelligible in the life and thought of African people. They attempt to find its conceptual framework within the African traditional religio-cultural heritage and regard African traditional religions as a source of formulating theology in African context.

AWT focuses on the reinterpretation of the gospel in accordance with the requirements of the black women in Africa. AWT was born of women's experience of oppression not only in the socio-economic and political structure but also by religio-cultural factors. As Oduyoye maintains that women's experience should be 'an integral part of definition of being human' and 'part of the data for theological reflection' (1986a:121-135), the most crucial source of AWT is the women's experience of oppression.

Most male Inculturation theologians do pay much of their attention to the problem of cultural and religious identity and are reluctant to address the religio-cultural aspects that are oppressive to women in Africa, while African women theologians criticize the oppressive socio-cultural elements that dehumanize and marginalize women in both society and church (Martey 1993:83). This phenomenon indicates that the two theologies have a different perspective and motive in theologizing.

Over the past few decades, a considerable number of studies have been conducted on the relationship between the gospel and its theological reflections articulated in the African context (Dickson 1984; Mbiti [1969]1975, 1970a, 1971, 1975b; Pobee 1979, 1992; Nyamiti 1984; Kato 1987; Tienou 1984; Oduyoye 1986, 1995, to mention only a few). However, although the relationship between the gospel and its expressions in the African context has been an object of study for long time, there are still many controversies.

One of the most controversial and crucial issues on the subject is who God is to Africans and how God is articulated by African theologians.

African theologians maintain that God is to be articulated in keeping with the African mentality and African need with special reference to their tradition, culture, religion, history and current life experience (Motlhabi 1994:123). Motlhabi (1994:123) says that the God articulated in African theology must be an African God who is incarnated in each distinct context of the African continent.

This brings up the issue of the Christian identity and the cultural identity in the context of cultural plurality.

How can the cultural identity that requires to be expressed in a particular cultural context and the Christian identity that claims to be presented universally be balanced? A theological articulation of the understanding of God in African theology is linked with the issues of the Christian identity and of the cultural identity.

Another important consideration about AIT's and AWT's understanding of God is the theological way of understanding the interplay of the gospel and African culture. It seems reasonable to assume that the theological reflections on the understanding of God would be influenced by the way of understanding the interplay of the gospel and African culture.

Therefore theologians' way of understanding the interplay of the gospel and African culture needs to be discussed with reference to the process of contextualization. By comparative and dialogical study of the theological reflection on God in AIT and AWT, Mbiti's and Oduyoye's models of contextualization will be discussed, and it can be the ground on which to discuss the possible dialogue between the two theologies.

In the last few decades, many theologians like Young III (1992a), Motlhabi (1994), Martey (1993), and Munga (1998) have investigated the relationship among different theological trends in African theology and a possibility of dialogue among the different trends of African theology. Although great

attention has been given to the question of the relationship between AIT and African liberation theology or South African Black theology, there has not been a relatively major study undertaken on the dialogue between AIT and AWT.

Therefore, there is an urgent need for investigation into the understanding of God in AIT and AWT. That is why this research attempts to identify how AIT and AWT articulate the understanding of God.

Another motivation to study this subject has been stimulated at two different levels; my experience of theological training in Korea and my missionary experience in Tanzania.

I come from Korea, a country with a centuries-old cultural background in Buddhism and Confucianism along with a folk belief mixed with Shamanism and Taoism. Homer B. Hulbert, a missionary to Korea from the U.S.A, observed that ‘a Korean will be a Confucian when he is in society, a Buddhist when he philosophizes, and a spirit-worshipper when he is in trouble’ (quoted by Hwang 2003:90). Because of the mixed aspects of beliefs, the issue of the relationship between the gospel and culture has been debated in Korean churches from the initial stage of mission to the present day. Economic growth since the beginning of the 1960s has led to Korea’s rapid industrialization, urbanization, and westernization. A cultural change and a mixture of diverse cultural values caused many Korean people to experience an identity crisis.

In the 1960s, Korean theologians began to articulate the indigenization of theology in Korea. Since then, various attempts have been made to discover the essential identity of Korean people and culture. Therefore, the issue of the gospel and indigenization or contextualization has been one of the most important topics in theological debates.

As mentioned above, there has been a struggle for the church to inculturate the gospel into the Korean culture without compromising the gospel message. I have always felt that there is a need to carefully examine a relationship between the gospel and Korean traditional religions and culture.

In Africa, I have found a very similar phenomenon. Since 1997, I have been working as a missionary in Tanzania and serving as a teacher at a theological college. In the midst of the teaching I have also been involved in pastoral ministry at a local church in a small rural village. While I carried out my ministry at the theological college and at the local church, I experienced some difficulties in teaching the Bible and realized that my theological training had not fully prepared me for teaching the Bible in a cross-cultural situation.

The difficulties were caused by differences: different worldview, different culture, different ways of understanding the Bible text and different ways of interpreting and applying the Bible in the African context.

The most interesting difference was the way of understanding God. Almost everywhere in Tanzania I heard ‘*Mungu ni moja*’ (‘God is One’ in Kiswahili) from Christians as well as non-Christians including Muslims and traditional religionists.

I tried to learn how Tanzanians understand the God of Christianity in connection with their traditional concepts of God. When the Bible was translated into a vernacular language, the word ‘God’ in English or ‘Gott’ in German was translated into the vernacular word that designates the traditional African God. The word ‘*Mungu*’ in Kiswahili is the word designating the traditional African God for the Waswahili (Swahili people).

When Tanzanian Christians confess God with the word, ‘*Mungu*’, do they confess the same God whom Western Christians confess? Or, do they confess God according to their traditional African concepts of God? Are they still traditional in the content, but Christian in form? Or Christian content in traditional form?

In addition to this matter, I have found that many Tanzanian women are living in a cultural, political, and economic situation that does not enable them to achieve their God-given gifts and potential in both society and church because of Tanzania’s oppressive patriarchal system.

In regard to this situation, there is a need to examine women’s theological reflections from African women’s perspectives in order to be applicable to mission work in Tanzania.

Therefore, by gaining a comprehensive understanding of theological reflections on God through a dialogue between AIT and AWT, I will be able to contribute to the African theological situation in which I do mission work.

These circumstances motivated me to study the understanding of God with special reference to the methodologies of AIT and AWT.

## **1.2 PROBLEM STATEMENT**

African Inculturation theologians and African women theologians have attempted to incarnate the gospel message in their specific context. If each theology formulates its own theology in general and articulates the understanding of God in particular, arguing its own theological relevance in the African context, the theological issues are how one theological articulation can secure its relevance

and legitimacy with regard to the other that comes from different context, and how each theology can ensure its cultural identity and contextuality for the African church and Christian identity and catholicity for world Christianity at the same time.

In this sense, the understanding of God in AIT and AWT is not merely a theological description of God, but an issue of a theological response based on the interplay between cultural identity-contextuality and Christian identity-catholicity.

This study, therefore, attempts to address how African Inculturation theologian and African woman theologian articulate the understanding of God in their own context respectively, and how theological contextuality and theological catholicity can be maintained simultaneously.

The following questions will serve as guidelines for the study:

(1) How the African Inculturation theologian and the African woman theologian articulate the theological reflections on the understanding of God in their context?

(2) If each theology argues for its relevance in the context, is one theology more African than the other? If each theology has its own starting point to articulate and develop theology, are the concerns of the two theologies incompatible and exclusive of each other? Or, is dialogue possible between the two different theologies?

(3) Can AIT and AWT be integrated into a new theology? Or, do they remain as two particular perspectives?

(4) If the understanding of God would be relevant and intelligible to the African people only when God is articulated within the African traditional religio-cultural heritage and contemporary social context, is there any room for God not only to be articulated in the African context, but also be sought in a universal message for world Christians in such a theology?

(5) Is there a possibility of finding a new model of contextualization on which the understanding of God would be meaningful to the African people contextually and relevant to the world Christians ecumenically?



### 1.3 THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

By attempting an analytical-comparative and dialogical study of the theological reflections on the understanding of God in AIT and AWT, this study intends to achieve a fivefold purpose.

First of all, this study examines whether African theologians actually achieve their theological aim that they primarily intended to formulate ‘a theology cooked in an African pot’ (Ukpong 1984:19) in which the Africans ‘feel at home’ in the Christian faith (Sawyer 1987:26).

The second purpose is to study how African theologians articulate their theology in connection with their African traditional religio-cultural heritage. Since African theologians have started their discussion of the concept of God with reference to the relationship between the Christian concept of God and the African concepts of God, this study will investigate the basic elements of African traditional religions in general and the various African concepts of God in particular, and will clarify the relationship between African concepts of God and African theologians’ articulation of their understanding of God.

The third purpose is to investigate how the African Inculturation theologian, Mbiti, and the African woman theologian, Oduyoye, respectively articulate their understanding of God. By studying these two theologians’ articulation of God, this study wants to know whether Mbiti and Oduyoye succeeded in communicating the gospel and the understanding of God to the African people so that the gospel message became intelligible to Africans.

The fourth is to look for a possibility of dialogue between the two different theologies, through the analysis of each theologian’s understanding of God, the evaluation of their contributions, and a critical comparison between each theologian’s way of understanding the interplay of the gospel and African culture.

The fifth is, by means of a critical-comparative and dialogical study between Mbiti’s and Oduyoye’s understanding of God, to present a new model of contextualization in which a dialogue between the two theologies can take place, and to suggest some important criteria. In the framework of the criteria suggested, African theology will be able to articulate the understanding of God that has theological relevance and legitimacy to the African Christians as well as for world Christians.

## 1.4 THE RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS

The following hypotheses form the basis of this study:

1 An analytical-comparative and dialogical study of the understanding of God of the two different theologies will provide considerable insight into the possibility of a new model of contextualization that could play a constructive role for acquiring both ‘the African quest for preserving one’s own authenticity’ and ‘the universal message’ (Vähäkangas 1999:10).

2. The way of finding a new model of contextualization will be discussed in dialogue and mutual understanding between the two theologies in connection with the process of interculturalization.

3. On the basis of the new model of contextualization, the understanding of God will be articulated having theological relevance in both African Christianity contextually and world Christianity ecumenically.

## 1.5 METHODOLOGY

A literature study of the writings of the two theologians, Mbiti and Oduyoye, will be done within the broader perspective of the theological discussions in the African religio-cultural and socio-political and economic contexts.

On the basis of the findings of the descriptive and comparative analysis of the major theological works of Mbiti and Oduyoye, the theological assessment will be done with regard to their theological methodology, understanding of God, and model of contextualization.

This study, however, will not undertake a biblical exegesis and a systematic theological approach to the concept of God. It will rather deal with a descriptive and comparative analysis of specific themes of Mbiti’ and Oduyoye’s theology.

This analysis will be applied both on a micro level and a macro level.

On the micro level, this analysis will be a descriptive presentation and comparative analysis of the concepts of God in ATR(s) and of the two theologians’ theological reflections on the understanding of God. The aim of this micro level study is to identify how an African Inculturation theologian and an African woman theologian reflect on God theologically and contextually.

Theological articulation of the understanding of God in African context is closely linked with the theologian's way of understanding the interplay of the gospel and African culture.

On the macro level, therefore, Mbiti's and Oduyoye's methodology and model of contextualization will be investigated. This study will examine the distinctive features of their thoughts, their different patterns of theological reflection, and their patterns of understanding the complexity of the African religio-cultural context and socio-political and economic situation.

By taking a descriptive approach to each theologian's articulation of his/her understanding of God and a comparative analysis of the distinctive features of the theologians' model of contextualization, this study attempts to find a possible dialogue between the different theologies and to suggest some important principles for doing a biblically faithful and practically relevant theology in Africa.

Therefore, the methodology of this study will be descriptive-analytical, and comparative-dialogical.

## 1.6 DELIMITATIONS

There have been many discussions concerning the relationship between AIT and African liberation theology or South African Black theology (Young III 1986, 1992a; Martey 1993; Motlhabi 1994; Munga 1998), whereas relatively little attention has been paid to an analytic, detailed examination of interaction and dialogue between AIT and AWT.

Therefore, this study will be centered on AIT that focuses on African religio-cultural matters and AWT that seeks 'the empowerment of women against women unfriendly traditional social economic and political system' (Oduyoye 1986a:137-140).

However, all specific themes in AIT and AWT will not be dealt with in depth. Instead, attention will primarily be paid to investigate how an African Inculturation theologian and an African woman theologian articulate the understanding of God and their theological method of approach to theology. The two theologians need to be examined in detail: John Samuel Mbiti and Mercy Amba Oduyoye.

**John Samuel Mbiti,**<sup>2</sup> a Kenyan Anglican priest, has shown a continuing interest in relating

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<sup>2</sup> Born in Kituli district of the Akamba people of East Central Kenya in 1931, Mbiti was admitted to the University College of Makerere, Uganda in 1950. In 1954 Mbiti went to Barrington College, USA to earn B.A and B.Th in theology, and returned to Kenya to work at the Teacher Training College for two years, before heading off to Cambridge University where he completed studies for a doctor of theology in 1963. He was ordained in the Anglican Church in England and served as a clergyman in St. Albans Parish for two years. In 1964 he returned to Makerere University and taught New

Christianity to the African cultural context. He (1970a) stages a rather direct confrontation of the African concepts of God and the Christian concept of God.

With his three books *African Religions and Philosophy* ([1969]1975), *Concepts of God in Africa* (1970a), and *The Prayer of African Religion* (1975b), - Bediako (1993:365-378) names the three books as the 'great African trilogy' - he has attempted to show that Christianity may be seen as a fulfilment of ATR(s). In the encounter between ATR(s) and Christianity, Mbiti regards ATR(s) as a *praeparatio evangelica* and claims that the African concept of God and the Christian concept of God are basically to be identified.

**Mercy Amba Oduyoye**,<sup>3</sup> a Ghanaian Methodist lay preacher as well as one of the leading African women theologians, has stressed the dialogue between the gospel and the African traditional religio-cultural heritage on the one hand, and on the problem of oppressive socio-cultural elements of African culture to women in Africa on the other.

The first set of reasons of choosing the two theologians is (1) to trace how each theologian has reached a different understanding of God due to a different methodology and model of contextualization on which each theologian formulates his/her theology and (2) to find a possible dialogue between the two different theologies through an analytical, comparative, and dialogical study.

The second reason of choosing these theologians has been guided by the strength of their academic background. The two theologians have engaged in a broad theological discussion and have developed distinctive methods for the contextualization of the gospel within the African context.

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Testament studies, theology, African and world religions in the Department of Religious Studies and Philosophy until 1974. In 1974 he was invited to work at the Ecumenical Institute of WCC at Bossey, Switzerland, and was subsequently director from 1976 to 1980. Mbiti served as a parish minister in Burgdorf with the Reformed Church of Bern from 1981 until he retired in 1996. He has held visiting professorship at universities across the world, and as of 2005, Mbiti has lectured as an Emeritus professor at the University of Bern, Switzerland (Olupona & Nyang 1993:1-3; Mbiti 2004:404; Perkinson 2007:455-457).

<sup>3</sup> She was born in 1934 and earned a bachelor's degree from the University of Ghana in 1963, and a second bachelor's degree from Cambridge University in 1965, and a master's degree from Cambridge in 1969. She married Adedoyia Modupe Oduyoye in 1968, and in 1974 they moved to his homeland, Nigeria, and she became the first woman lecturer in the Religious Studies Department of the University of Ibadan, where she taught church history and Christian doctrine. She served as Education Secretary in the Youth Department of WCC (1967-1979), and on the Central Committee and the Faith and Order Commission, culminating in seven years as Deputy General Secretary of WCC (1987-1994). She served as the Secretary for the Youth Department of the AACCC (1970), and was elected as General Secretary of the EATWOT (1997), and also was president of the World Student Christian Federation. She has taught at Princeton Theological Seminary, Harvard University, and Union Theological Seminary. Oduyoye has been awarded honorary degrees by the University of the Western Cape in 2002 and Yale University in 2008. She established the Institute of African Women in Religion and Culture at Trinity Theological Seminary, Legon, Ghana, where she serves as its director (Pemberton 2003:60-63; Kwok 2007:471-472; Oduyoye 2008:82).

Third, Oduyoye's perspective on ATR(s) and African culture, which is different from the male Inculturation theologians, has been considered. African women theologians (Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Isabella Phiri, Denise Ackermann, Elizabeth Amoah, Nyambura Njoroge, Musimbi Kanyoro and Theresia Hinga, to mention only a few) try to address the specific situation of women in Africa. Oduyoye attempts to redefine the nature of theology in terms of African women's experience. Oduyoye brings the experience of women into the inculturation process of theological thinking in Africa. She critically evaluates the elements of ATR(s) and African culture that are oppressive to and dehumanize women in Africa.

She tries to transform the oppressive elements and to find 'methodologies and strategies' that recover 'mutuality between men and women' in both church and society (Martey 1993:75). It will be significant to investigate how Oduyoye articulates the understanding of God from women's experience within the African religio-cultural context that involves the 'objectification and marginalization of women' (Oduyoye 1994a:173).

By examining and evaluating their theological reflections on God, this study presents examples of how African theologians articulate the understanding of God in African context.

Those are the reasons why they have been chosen.

## 1.7 STRUCTURE

**Chapter 1**, as an introduction, comprises the background of the study, problem statement, purpose of the study, the research hypothesis, methodology, the reasons for the selection of the two theologians, delimitation, and structure of the study.

**In Chapter 2**, an overview of the historical context in which African theology emerged, types of African theology, and a brief sketch of its origins and development will be presented.

The main factors that contributed to the origins of African theology will be investigated in the following two parts: the political-cultural factors and the theological-ecclesiastical factors.

**Chapter 3** will provide the basic beliefs in African traditional religions and the investigation of several African ethnic groups' concepts of God, aiming to pave a way for discussing how African theologians articulate the understanding of God with regard to the African concept of God.

In order to avoid an overgeneralization of the concepts of God in Africa, the concept of God will be explored in the sampled ethnic groups that are found in West Africa, the Nilotic areas, Central and Eastern Africa, and Southern Africa.

This chapter will depend on anthropological data and sources that have been investigated by various scholars who did their research in the different fields. This chapter will also indicate how African theologians have attempted to Christianize the concepts of God of African traditional religions with inspiration and influence of theological cultural nationalism, and will propose an alternative way of interpreting the African concepts of God.

In light of the preceding observation of the concepts of God in Africa and descriptive and critical analysis of the major theological writings of Mbiti and Oduyoye, Mbiti's and Oduyoye's understanding of God will be scrutinized in chapters 4 and 5 respectively.

**In chapter 4**, Mbiti's understanding of God will be investigated in relation to his methodology, the African concept of time, his understanding of revelation and his attempt to achieve integration between the gospel and African religiosity.

**Chapter 5** will present AWT's historical background, aims, and methodology in general. Oduyoye's theological articulation of God from an African woman's perspective will be assessed with reference to her methodology, the status of African women in ATR(s) and African Christianity, her appreciation of salvation, of the Bible, and of the locus of experience.

By means of a comparative and dialogical study of Mbiti's and Oduyoye's theological articulation of God and by the critical evaluation of the theologians' model of contextualization, **chapter 6** will discuss a new possible model of understanding the interplay of the gospel and African culture. This work will be done with a process of mutual understanding and interplay of different theologies.

On the basis of the new model, this chapter will propose an African Evangelical theology and its criteria that make a Christian theology hold to theological relevance contextually as well as ecumenically. Finally, this chapter will suggest some principles to be applied in order that the understanding of God will be articulated as having the African cultural identity and the Christian theological identity in the context of a cultural plurality.

**Chapter 7**, as the final chapter, will present a summary, reflections, and remarks for further research related to the same subject of African theology.

## CHAPTER 2

# THE ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT OF AFRICAN THEOLOGY

### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

The Christian and missionary presence in Africa predates the colonial occupation of the continent for nearly a century.<sup>1</sup> However, the remarkable phenomenon of church growth with a great influx of Western missionaries in Africa practically coincided with the colonial era that can be dated from 1884, the year of the Berlin Conference<sup>2</sup> to 1960, ‘the year of Africa’ (Hastings 1979:175; Baur 1994:263; Shaw 1996:207).

Baur (1994:280) maintains that the colonial mentality, ‘the white man’s complex of racial superiority’ based *inter alia* on Levi-Bruhl’s notion of a pre-logical mentality of primitive people, came to the continent in *tandem* with the colonial occupation of the territory. The missionaries shared the European ethnocentric presupposition of Africans, that is, ‘the savage and the uncivilized’<sup>3</sup> that was based on the Darwinian evolutionary assumption (Bediako 1992:230-233). For missionaries who were preoccupied with African ‘savagery and primitivism’ and ‘the superiority of Western

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<sup>1</sup> Christianity in Africa goes back to the very early stage of Christian history. In North Africa, Christian intellectuals and apologists played an active part in the early church (Baur 1994:17; Isichei 1995:1). The gospel message arrived in Nubia and Abyssinia in the fourth century (Groves 1948:46-54; Hildebrandt 1990:21; Isichei 1995:30; Sundkler & Steed 2000:30). Even though the flourishing churches of North Africa and Nubia gave way to Islam, there has been the continuing life of the Coptic and Ethiopian churches (Isichei 1995:2). Without undermining or denying the presence of Christianity in sub-Saharan Africa that can be traced back to the 4<sup>th</sup> century, this study will deal with Christianity and missionary activity in sub-Saharan Africa in the modern period.

<sup>2</sup> The Berlin conference, held between November 1884 and February 1885, laid down the ‘rule to be observed in future with regard to the occupation of territory on the coast of Africa.’ The Conference agreed: (1) to utilize the principle that title to colonial territory rested on ‘effective occupation and management,’ (2) to recognize the claims of Britain and France to areas of West Africa inland from their coastal possessions, and (3) to acknowledge the Congo Free State as the King of Belgium, Leopold II’s private estate (Phillips 1984:38).

Baur (1994:280-281) criticizes the ambivalence or antimony of European nationalism: ‘It was all a matter of European Imperialism. Empire building had become the peak of nationalism. It was a strange perversion: this nationalism had grown out of the nineteenth century European Liberalism that proclaimed the right of all ethnic groups to self-determination: but this conviction stopped at the shores of Europe, it never went overseas...this was flagrant injustice’

Blyden says that ‘colonialism was for Africa a greater evil than slavery, for “the slavery of the mind is far worse than the slavery of the body”’ (quoted by Baur 1994:281).

<sup>3</sup> As a pioneering anthropologist and historian of religion, Sir James Frazer (1851-1941) insisted that primitive peoples were closely attached to magical thought (Seymour-Smith 1986:124). Tylor (1832-1917) divided human beings into three categories: savage, barbarian and civilized. He introduced the contemporary theory of evolution into anthropological research. He conceived three stages of the evolution of religion: from animism through polytheism to monotheism (Seymour-Smith 1986:282).



civilization and value system,' the notion of the civilization of Africa could easily be identical with the importation and imposition of Western Christianity into heathen Africa (Bediako 1992:228, 250). In consequence, the missionaries tended to consider themselves as envoys of God as well as representatives of a higher civilization to transform the dark continent (Mudimbe 1988:47).<sup>4</sup> For the missionaries, says Bediako, to effect the salvation of Africa, 'Africans must be given the total package of Christianity and (European) civilization' (Bediako 1992:228). Taylor (1963:5-6) says:

[I]t has also to be admitted...that during these centuries the missionaries of the Christian church have commonly assured that Western civilization and Christianity were two aspects of the same gift which they were commissioned to offer to the rest of mankind.

In the continuum of the notion of European superiority over Africa, the missionaries tended to denigrate the values of African cultural-religious experience and heritage, and to consider the African people as *tabula rasa*, thinking that the Africans lack proper religion and sound morals: their hearts as 'bare soil' were blank pages, on which Christianity as 'a whole new religious psychology' was to be implanted (Bediako 1992:225; Tempels 1959:169).

Bediako (1992:251) says that 'missionary Christianity seemed, to all intents and purposes, bound to uproot the African from his "heathen" past...in order to give him a new identity, constructed on the basis of the new, total package of Christianity and European civilization.' As a result, Christianity was not integrated into African soil; African Christians were faced with the dilemma of having inherited two different worlds, Western Christianity and traditional Africa. Tutu (1978:366) maintains that this phenomenon caused African Christians to suffer 'a form of religious schizophrenia.'

Both in accordance with the political-cultural change that was accelerated by African nationalist movements and the new intellectual climate that was facilitated by some anthropologists' positive and sympathetic studies of African culture and religions, early African theologians were inspired to endeavour an epistemological break with Western traditions and to start a dialogue between African culture and the Christian gospel (Mudimbe 1997:73).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> George (1970) affirms that missionaries came to Africa with some assumptions: moral superiority, the duty of introducing enlightenment, reparation of some of the wrongs done to the people in pagan lands, and the equation of Christianity and Western civilization.

<sup>5</sup> According to Mudimbe, a new intellectual climate took place since the 1940s and 1950s in African studies. The new climate that was introduced by epistemological reconversion meant the shift from Lévy-Bruhl and evolutionism to Malinowski and functionalism.

In the 1940s and 1950s African social and religious studies, each experience, individuality or culture can be understood



In the new political and intellectual climate, early African theologians questioned the place and role of African traditional religions in Christianity, and tried to find a positive theological interpretation of the African cultural-religious experience and heritage through a comprehensive study of African traditional religions or a dialogue with African traditional religions. Accordingly, African theologians attempted to integrate what they found in African culture and religions into African Christian theology (Bediako 2000:6).

The attempt to come to a theological meaning of African cultural-religious experience and heritage and its integration into African theology was, for early African theologians, ‘a strong and unstoppable one’ (Maluleke 2001:27). What motivated early African theologians to consider African cultural-religious experience and heritage as the basis of theological reflection? According to Bediako, the issue of the quest for identity was rooted in the innermost of theologians’ motive to reflect on their past religious tradition (1992; 2000:7; Maluleke 2001:27). Bediako (1992:237) argues:

For theological memory is integral to identity; without memory we have no past, and having no past, our identity itself is lost, for the ‘past is also our present.’ The theological problem which has arisen from the missionary tie-up between Christianity and ‘civilization’ (that is, European culture), consists therefore in this, that it threatened to deny African Christians their own past and sought instead to give them a past which could not in any real sense become fully theirs.

With regard to the quest for identity, African theologians maintain that ‘conversion to Christianity must be coupled with cultural continuity’ (Fashole-Luke 1975b:87). For this particular reason, the rehabilitation of African cultural-religious heritage has been essential for the question of identity (Tutu 1978:366). By rehabilitation of African religious experience and heritage, which is ‘the vehicle for conveying the gospel to Africa’ (Tutu 1978:366), African theologians have attempted to articulate a theology that bears ‘the distinctive stamp of mature African thinking and reflection’ (Fashole-Luke 1975b:87) in order that the gospel could be effectively communicated to the African people and African Christians could ‘feel at home in the new faith’ (Sawyer 1987:26).

Bediako (1994:14) affirms that, in a broad sense, the aim of African theology has been to achieve

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from its own structural organization as presented by its own norms, internal rules, and within the logic of their own systems (Mudimbe 1997:159-161). This epistemological reverse made African scholars do a radical re-evaluation of the past discourses on primitiveness and paganism (Mudimbe 1997:72): ‘the move had a direct impact on the practice of missiology, making possible an evolution from ethics of civilizing to ethics of inculturation. To recognize the subjectivity and normativity of each society was not to return to the old ideas’ (Mudimbe 1997:161).

some integration between the African traditional religious experience and African Christian faith ‘in ways that would ensure the integrity of African Christian identity and selfhood.’ Bediako, therefore, states that a key for ‘understanding the concerns of Christian theology in modern Africa’ is ‘the question of identity’ (1992:1), and that modern African theology emerged as a theology of African Christian identity (1992:xvii).

This chapter will present a brief overview of the historical context, in which African theology emerged and developed. The investigation of the historical background concerning the origins of African theology will be done in terms of the two main parts: the politico-cultural factors and the theological-ecclesiastical factors. The two parts, however, can not be considered separately or isolated from each other because these two main factors that contributed to the origins of African theology are interrelated, and thus the two must be seen as a whole. The division is just a functional one.

The aims of investigation of the factors that lead to the origins and development of African theology are to identify what mistakes were made by the then Western missionaries and Christianity, to re-examine the current development of African theology, and to get valuable insight for the future development of African theology.

Before this study embarks upon the main factors influencing the origins and development of African theology, a general profile of African theology with regard to its terminology and definition will be provided.

## **2.2 A PROFILE OF AFRICAN THEOLOGY**

### **2.2.1 The debate on terminology**

Mbiti (1998:146-148) classifies theological streams in Africa into oral theology, symbolic theology, and written theology. In his paper presented at one theological conference, Mbiti (2003) says that oral theology is ‘the first born of theological output.’ Without undermining or doubting the value of unwritten forms of African Christian expression prior to the 1950s, this study will focus on African theology in written form since the 1950s.

Over the past few decades, a considerable number of studies have been conducted on African

theology. Among those studies, there has been an argument of which words to use to describe 'theology' in Africa as well as its definition. Should it be called 'African theology', 'Theology in Africa', 'African Christian theology', 'Theologia Africana', 'Adaptation theology' or any other name?

Kato ([1975]1987:55) seems to dislike the term itself because African theology, to him, seems to be a 'funeral march of Biblical Christianity' and a forerunner of 'syncretism and universalism.'

According to Agbeti (1975:6), African theology is 'the systematic presentation of the religious beliefs, ideas, and practices of African traditional religions and the interpretation of the pre-Christian and pre-Muslim African people's experience of their God.' He suggests a clear demarcation between African theology and African Christian theology. Whereas the former concerns African traditional religious belief and practice, the latter deals with the interpretation of the Christian gospel in Africa.

McVeigh argues that African theology should not be pre-occupied with this kind of a 'pedantic distinction', and African theology can be used interchangeably with African Christian theology (Muzorewa 1985:77; Fashole-Luke 1975a:406).

Tienou (1982c:8) maintains that the term 'African theology' is an 'ambiguous' one, and does not connote a specific and exclusive Christian identity. African theology is not exclusively allowed to Christianity to use. Fashole-Luke (1975a, 1975b), Tienou (1982c, 1984), Shorter (1975), Mugambi (1989, 1995) use the expression, 'African Christian theology.'

On the matter of entitling a theology in Africa, Mbiti (2003) comments that theologians have consumed time and energy to define the term rather than to contribute to its content.

Unlike those theologians, Mbiti (1998:146; 2003) says that the most common term nowadays is simply African theology, even though the multiplication of names for it has been, and continues to be.

Muzorewa (1985:78) differentiates 'a theology of African traditional religion' or 'African traditional theology' that is based on the African traditional religions from 'African theology' that is done by Christians and based on the Bible.

For Nyamiti (1994:63), 'African theology' that is based on the Bible and Jesus Christ differs from 'African traditional theology' that articulates the reflection on God expressed in African traditional religions.

Mbiti (1978, 1998, 2003), Setiloane (1979, 1986), Pobee (1979, 1987), Nyamiti (1973, 1976), Muzorewa (1985, 1990) use the simple expression, 'African theology' and Sawyerr (1987) uses African theology and *Theologia Africana* interchangeably.

Another matter that needs to be considered is of the form of the term: African theology or African

theologies?

Most African theologians agree that African theology is contextual because theologians try to relate their Christian faith to the African context. But the rich diversity of socio-religious and cultural systems within the African continent and the different ideologies on which theologians depend in order to articulate theological reflections on certain themes have resulted in a plurality of methodologies in doing theology. Consequently, the plurality of methodologies has caused a lack of theological consensus, and has resulted in very divergent theological trends.

According to Fashole-Luke (1975b:74-75), the task of theologians is to relate the Christian gospel to their particular cultural, social, and political situations. Therefore African theology has not been, and never will be 'a unified movement'. Instead, it will take 'different colours' depending on the local situation (Fashole-Luke 1975a:405).

Tienou (1984:20) argues that it seems preferable to use African theologies because of the 'diversity of situations' in African Christianity and of 'the plurality of theological approaches' in Africa.

For these reasons, Fashole-Luke and Tienou maintain that there should be 'African theologies', more precisely, 'African Christian theologies', in the plural form rather than 'African theology' in the singular form (Fashole-Luke 1975a:403; Tienou 1984:20).

Other scholars assert that in spite of the diversity of situations in Africa and of the plurality of theological approaches in Africa, there is broad commonness among African theologians, that is, they have the same bases in doing theology: the Bible and Christian traditions, African traditional cultural heritage, and the contemporary situation (Parratt 1995:18). Those scholars (Parratt 1995:18; Oborji 1998:4) insist that this 'basic unity' permits the use of the expression, 'African theology' in the singular, but with the recognition of 'several divergent trends'.

Ukpong (1984:15) differentiates the two terms in a more simple way: when a distinction is made between those theologies originating from and sharing African cultural background and other theologies such as Western theology, Asian theology, Latin American theology, and more others, 'African theology' is used in the singular. 'African theologies' in the plural form is used to distinguish between different trends of African theology, such as African Inculturation theology, African Liberation theology, African Women's theology, South African Black theology and more other trends. Ukpong maintains that both terms, 'African theology' and 'African theologies', are valid, depending on the context in which they are used.

Based on the above discussion, 'African theologies' in the plural form can be used to distinguish

between different trends of African theology, and ‘African theology’ in the singular can be used as an umbrella term that encompasses a diversity of theological trends in Africa.

A detailed critical discussion of the terminology is not necessary because the matter of terminology seems to be a secondary effect that accompanies the primary one. Therefore, the discussion of the terminology is beyond the scope of this research. That is the reason for this brief discussion on the term, African theology.

The simple expression ‘African theology’ has been decided on to describe the subject of this research because two theologians, Mbiti and Oduyoye, with whom this research is dealing, prefer to use the term ‘African theology’. Oduyoye uses the term ‘African Women’s theology’. The expression ‘African theology’ will be used throughout this research in the sense of African Christian theology, not Islamic theology, theology of African traditional religions or African traditional theology.

### 2.2.2 A definition of African theology

The term ‘African theology’ that appeared in written form in 1956<sup>6</sup> has been used among African theologians, especially since the 1960s. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, African theologians attempted to define what African theology is (Mbiti 2003). However, there was no a conclusive definition of African theology.

At the All African Conference of Churches Abidjan Assembly (1969), a tentative definition of African theology was offered: ‘a theology that is based on the biblical faith and speaks to the African soul in the categories of thought which arise out of the philosophy of African people’ (Muzorewa 1985:96).

**Mbiti** (1978:72) defines African theology as ‘theological reflection and expression by African Christians.’ **Nyamiti** (1994:63) clarifies African theology as ‘the understanding and expression of the Christian faith in accordance with African needs and mentality’ in the broad sense and as ‘the systematic and scientific presentation or elaboration of the Christian faith according to needs and mentality of the African peoples’ in its strict sense. For **Sawyer** (1987:26) African theology is an attempt to ‘interpret Christ to the African in such a way that he feels at home in his faith.’ **Fashole-**

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<sup>6</sup> The expression ‘African theology’ appeared both in *Des Prêtres noirs s’interrogent*, a collection of essays of a group of African and Haitian Roman Catholic priests and in ‘Theological Education in Africa’, written by P. Feuter in the *International Review of Missions* 1956(45).

**Luke** (1975b:77) says that the essence of African theology is ‘to translate the one faith of Jesus Christ to suit the tongue, style, genius, character, and culture of African people.’ According to **Pobee** (1979:22), African theology is to ‘interpret essential Christian faith in authentic African language in the flux and turmoil of our time so that there may be genuine dialogue between the Christian faith and African culture.’ In order to achieve this goal, African theologians use African concepts and African ethos as vehicles for the communication of the gospel in an African context (Pobee 1979:39). **Moyo** (1983:97) defines African theology as ‘an attempt by Christians in Africa to reflect systematically on God’s revelation in Jesus Christ and to articulate the results of that reflection through categories of thought which arise out of the philosophy of the African people.’ For **Kurewa** (1975:36) African theology is ‘the study that seeks to reflect upon and express the Christian faith in African thought form and idiom as it is experienced in African Christian communities, and always in dialogue with the rest of Christendom.’ The **Final Statement** of the Conference of Ecumenical Dialogue of Third World Theologians, Dar es Salaam in 1976 rejects ‘an academic type of theology that is divorced from action’ (Torres & Fabella 1978:269) and urges theologians to be with ‘the poor in their struggle for liberation’ (Torres & Fabella 1978:270). The **Final Communiqué** of the Pan-African Conference of Third World Theologians, Accra, Ghana in 1977 claims that African theology must be contextual and liberation theology (Appiah-Kubi & Torres 1979:193-194). **Ukpong** (1984:30) has developed a well elaborated definition of African theology and its task:

[The] African theologian’s task consists in re-thinking and re-expressing the original Christian message in an African cultural milieu...In the process there is inter-penetration of both. Christian faith enlightens African culture and the basic data of revelation as contained in Scriptures and tradition are critically re-examined for the purpose of giving them African cultural expression. Thus there is integration of faith and culture, and from it is born a new theological reflection that is African and Christian...African theology means Christian faith attaining African cultural expressions.

Some African theologians emphasize the aspect of systematic presentation of the Christian faith in African religio-cultural term, some stress bridge building between the Christian gospel and African beliefs, others focus on the language of liberation. Different tasks and various ideological interests are indicated.

There is, however, a point to be specially considered. In such a variety of definitions, all the definitions attempt to bring the African culture and traditional religiosity or African situations to bear on African theology in order to make the Christian gospel and theology relevant and meaningful

to African people. These definitions indicate that African theologians strongly reject Western theology and its theological methodology because, for African theologians, it does not comply with the African needs and mentality.

The principal concern of African theology is clearly to communicate the Christian gospel to the African people in the African culture and traditional religiosity, and to express theology in a way that becomes intelligible to Africans. Consequently, the aim of African theology is to help Africans ‘feel at home’ in the Christian faith (Sawyer 1987:26) and thus identify themselves as authentic Christians who are genuine Africans at the same time. The theology that African theologians have sought to produce is ‘a theology cooked in an African pot,’ that is ‘truly African and authentically Christian’ (Ukpong 1984:19).

Before turning to the next issue, several remarks have to be made.

That African theologians present a definition of African theology and its aim does not mean African theology has succeeded in achieving the aim of African theology. Their definition and aim of African theology can not guarantee that the stated aim will be reached. The aim of theology as stated by theologians is one thing; the actual theological articulation is another. Normally there is a gap between the theoretical ‘what it should be’ and the practical ‘what is done.’ This is also true of African theology. The description of the definition and aim of African theology is merely a starting pointing.

It must also be emphasized that theologians’ affirmations of the definition and aim of African theology can only be justified by evaluating whether the aim of African theology is concretely embodied in the actual theological articulations. It is essential to ascertain the congruity between the theological aim set by theologians and the actual way in which the aim is articulated theologically. If the aim is not reflected and embodied in the theological expression, discussion about and reflection on the aim of African theology remains an idle theological and rhetorical exercise.

Thirdly, the evaluation of whether African theology has succeeded in achieving its aim may provide a basis for reflection upon the future direction of African theology and may contribute to the deepening of its methodology.

### **2.2.3 Position of the researcher: an outsider or an insider?**

It might be presumptuous for a non-African to investigate African theology. One of the most



sensitive issues facing outsiders is whether they have any right to enter another culture. Can a person who does not share the full experience of another culture do authentic theology within that culture? In other words, is it acceptable and creditable for a non-African to reflect upon and evaluate African theology?

Fashole-Luke (1975a:388-389) strongly argues that the agenda and motive for African theology ‘must come from and be set by Africans’, and African theology can come only from the ‘spontaneous reflections of authentic African Christian communities’, not from outsiders.

It is not easy for non-Africans to know how Africans feel, or perceive reality. Non-Africans are always outsiders to the African worldview and its traditional cultural-religious experiences. Outsiders apply their own perceptions, perspectives, and experiences to a foreign culture and this foreignness may lead to a distorted theology as it would arise from a different context (Bevans 1992:14). In this sense, it can be argued that outsiders, such as foreign missionaries and theologians, cannot properly articulate African theology (Mugambi 1989:11).

To a certain extent, however, an outsider may be more in tune with a particular culture than many of those who were born in it. By pointing out aspects an insider has never noticed, the outsider can be more aware of a culture’s weak, negative, or inconsistent aspects as well as its strong, positive and consistent aspects (Bevans 1992:15).

African theology can not be qualified by the fact that it has been done by an African or in Africa. African theology can not be defined simply by race or geography (Muzorewa 1985:95; Oborji 1998:4). One of the criteria of being African theology is that it should be the product of theologians, who question African problems from an African viewpoint (Muzorewa 1985:95; Molyneux 1993:14; Ikenga-Metuh 1996:1-2).

Ukpong (1984:17) says that ‘African theology not being a closed but an open system is capable of entering into dialogue with other cultures and theologies, and of being understood universally.’ Therefore outsiders who have studied African culture and become ‘marginal African’ (Ukpong 1984:15) can be expected to contribute something to African theology. Bevans (1992:16) states persuasively:

...in several significant but limited ways, a person can contribute to the contextualization of theology that is not his or her own. Only through honest sharing can he or she hope to contribute anything at all to people’s understanding of their faith in terms of their cultural and social context...a genuine contextual theology can indeed grow out of genuine dialogue between the participants in a particular culture and the stranger, the guest, the



other...theologies can interact in a reciprocal way that will enrich, evaluate, ventilate, and share with one another.

African theology should not be alienated from its context, but should also have ‘an ability to speak beyond its own context, and an openness to hear voices from beyond its own boundaries’ (Schreier 1997:4). Especially, on the matter of cultural identity and Christian identity of African theology, an insider is always in danger of demeaning the Christian identity because of the overemphasis on the cultural identity. The advantages that the outsiders have may help insiders to revisit what they have overlooked.

For the reasons given above, the researcher is not ‘an outsider’ but as fellow Christian believer in the Triune God, ‘an insider’ in the encounter between the gospel and culture. In this particular sense, it can be argued that the researcher is able to study and articulate African theology.

## **2.3 PRELUDE TO AFRICAN THEOLOGY**

The articulation and formation of modern African theology emerged in the 1950s and gained momentum in the 1960s (Mbiti 1998:146). African theology, however, did not emerge in a historical or social vacuum. There had been various factors which prepared and accelerated the emergence of modern African theology before the 1950s. The prelude to African theology can be traced back to the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century (Marte 1993:7; Maluleke 2001:36-37).

It is important to investigate some of the historical factors which contributed to the origins and character of modern African theology. The historical factors that were conducive to the formation of a new theology that was born ‘with an African face’ can be divided into two main groups: politico-cultural factors and theological-ecclesiastical factors. They will be treated separately, but they should not be interpreted as if they are not interrelated.

### **2.3.1 Politico-cultural factors**

The colonial powers began to decline in the wake of World War II (Young III 1993:13). After World War II various political movements emerged in the colonies with a view to gain political independence (Parratt 1987:2). During the period of agitation for independence early African

intellectuals<sup>7</sup> were concerned not only with political matters, but also with the promotion of the African cultural-religious heritage. Although the main goal was to regain political self-control in Africa, cultural liberation was not excluded.

African intellectuals and nationalists recognized that there would not be genuine political liberation without cultural liberation (Bujo 1992:51). The negation of African culture, to the African people, meant to deprive African people of their very identity; the revitalization of African culture meant to recover African identity (Munga 1998:41). The cultural self-affirmation by revitalizing the African cultural-religious heritage became a ‘matter of priority’ to regain political-self determination in Africa (Van der Merwe 1989:256). The cultural liberation of Africa from the destructive influence of Western culture seemed to be the first step toward the political liberation from Western colonialism in Africa.

For this reason, they used African culture and religious symbols as a means to awaken the African people’s spirit of struggle, and their rights and duties towards political liberation (Oosthuizen 1968:6; Munga 1998:41). The rise of nationalism led to the resurgence of the traditional culture and religions. As a result, the movements for regaining national independence were manifested in both political and cultural spheres simultaneously.

Two major categories of movements can be mentioned: Pan-Africanism and African nationalism, and the Négritude movement and the African personality.

### **2.3.1.1 Pan-Africanism and African nationalism**

Pan-Africanism<sup>8</sup> was born and prepared by the early intellectuals of the African diasporas in both the USA and the West Indies who shared the common experience of discrimination based on skin colour. The recognition of racial solidarity due to racial discrimination led African diasporas to an awareness of their blackness and common cultural heritage (Ajala 1973:4). The discovery of black solidarity under the pressure of colonialism and racial discrimination resulted in part in the

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<sup>7</sup> Mazrui (2005:56) defines ‘an intellectual’ as ‘a person who has the capacity to be fascinated by ideas and has acquired the skill to handle many of them effectively.’ According to Kesteloot (1972:25) black intellectuals recognized their responsibility in three complementary aspects: educating black people, being the spokesmen for black people, and endeavouring to help set their people free from colonialism.

<sup>8</sup> Pan-Africanism is an assembly of related ideas expressed over the years by Africans in Africa and the African diasporas (Martey 1993:9-10). This movement represents the political independence movement for Africa and the unification of the Africa continent (in the narrower sense) and the culture and intellectual movement for the revival and preservation of traditional African culture (in a broader sense) (Geiss 1968:1-7). In depth Pan-Africanism did not desire to be as ‘scientific’ as Marxism and modern socialism. But in breadth Pan-Africanism covered a wide agenda, including politics, economics, African culture, poetry and philosophy (Mazrui 2005:57).

emergence of Pan-Africanism.

The spirit of Pan-Africanism can be traced back to the nineteenth century (Geiss 1968:8), and was furthered by various thinkers in the African diasporas, such as W. E. B DuBois, M. Garvey, G. Padmore, and African nationalists. Garvey founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), and stressed the unity and political emancipation of the African continent through black separatism and the 'back to Africa' movement in the 1920s (Geiss 1968:263; Ajala 1973:6). Azikiwe and Nkrumah were widely influenced by Garvey's consistent Pan-Africanist rhetoric (Geiss 1968:278).

However, the practical foundation of the Pan-Africanist movement was laid by W. E. B DuBois, the father of Pan-Africanism, African-American by birth and Ghanaian by adoption in Nkrumah's Ghana (Maluleke 2001:34). DuBois spoke of 'Pan-Negroism' in 1897 (Geiss 1968:176). The modified term 'Pan-Africanism' was introduced at the first Pan-African conference held in London in 1900 (Geiss 1968:176).<sup>9</sup>

The basic goal of Pan-Africanism was to make Africans have self-determination in formulating and reaching their own destiny (Rigsby 1968:127). 'Africa for the Africans' became the slogan for Pan-Africanism at the second Pan-African congress held in Paris in 1919. In the series of Pan-African congresses of 1921, 1923, and 1927, crucial matters, such as an urgency to attain self-determination, the situation of colonialism in Africa, and the racial problem were addressed (Munga 1998:47-49). However, the request for political self-government was not yet made clearly and loudly (Rigsby 1968:131). The Pan-African congress which assembled at Manchester in October 1945 made an explicit demand 'for Black African autonomy and independence' (Rigsby 1968:131; Ajala 1973:11). Kwame Nkrumah, J. S. Annan, Nnandi Azikiwe and Jomo Kenyatta were present at the congress (Munga 1998:49).

The series of Pan-African congresses reached a new phase when African states began to gain their independence one after the other. The first congress of independent African states was held at Accra in 1958 after the British Gold Coast became the independent country of Ghana in March 1957, marking the formal launching of the Pan-Africa movement on African soil (Ajala 1973:12). Pan-Africanism reached its zenith with the establishment of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in

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<sup>9</sup> The first Pan-African conference (held in London in 1900) was organized by H. Sylvester William, a West Indian who practiced at the bar in London (Ajala 1973:4; Geiss 1968:163). July maintains, however, that the first congress was held in Paris in 1919 (Muzorewa 1985:117). According to Muzorewa (1985:117), this difference can be explained as follows: before 1919 Pan-African meetings were considered to be an association, but on 1919 the meeting became a congress. It can not be denied that the first Pan-African conference in London in 1900 was a major turning point of the Pan-African movements (Geiss 1968:163).

May 1963, aiming at the achievement of genuine African unity (Ajala 1973:3).<sup>10</sup>

After World War II, Pan-Africanism was nationalized by the individual territories in Africa and took the form of various territorial nationalist movements (Ajala 1973:3). The focus shifted from Pan-Africanism to African nationalism on the African continent (Muzorewa 1985:47). Pan-Africanism and African nationalism became interconnected (Geiss 1968:7), even though the former is not identical with the latter.<sup>11</sup> As the first Pan-African conference of London placed ‘the liberation of black people from ... aggressiveness’, ‘the consolidation of all black people’, ‘the promotion and protection of all black people’s business’ and ‘dedication to the empowerment of black people’ as its aims (Ajala 1973:4; Martey 1993:10), African nationalism laid stress on three major issues: ‘racial equality’, ‘political independence’ and ‘the preservation of African culture’ (Muzorewa 1985:46). Pan-Africanism and African nationalism emerged not only as nationalist movements, but also as a political-cultural ideological instrument of African nationalists, stressing the political independence and cultural rehabilitation of Africans (Geiss 1968:1-7; Ajala 1973:11; Mazrui & Tidy 1984:xiii).

The influence of Pan-Africanism and African nationalism is seen in early African theologians and their writings like Idowu, Dickson, and *Des Prêtres noirs s’interrogent* that represented ‘a solidly nationalist reflection on Christianity’ (Mudimbe 1986:56). Idowu (1965:11) strongly accentuated that ‘the Church in Nigeria should be the church which affords Nigerians the means of worshipping God as Nigerians.’ Dickson (1984:85) also insisted that

Selfhood is...essential to this study of Christian theology...Selfhood has not been realized by the Church in Africa, which is not surprising, for without the achievement of national selfhood in the sense of the practice of that kind of life-style which exhibits a keen awareness of the values in African religio-cultural traditions, selfhood in the Church could hardly become a reality.

It can be said that the spirit of Pan-Africanism and African nationalism, that is, the emphasis of political self-determination, the preservation of the African cultural-religious heritage and cultural self-affirmation, inspired the African theologians who were influenced by the political history of the African continent (Muzorewa 1985:46, 49-50). Muzorewa (1985:51) contends that ‘African

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<sup>10</sup> The preamble to the charter of the OAU expressed determination to safeguard and consolidate the independence, the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the African states, and also to fight neo-colonialism in all its forms: the promotion of unity and solidarity among African states takes precedence over all others (Ajala 1973:12).

<sup>11</sup> Muzorewa (1985:48) defines ‘African nationalism’ as ‘the struggle against domination by overseas imperialists’ and ‘Pan-Africanism,’ citing Akintoye’s definition, as ‘the desire to Africans to be pull together for mutual support, for their full liberation, and a more effective voice in the affairs of the world.’

nationalism provides a general context within which theology is being done' by inspiring African theologians with the spirit of nationalism in the 1950s. In this sense, Pan-Africanism and African nationalism are the most important factors that contributed to the emergence of African theology.

### **2.3.1.2 The Négritude movement and African personality**

#### **2.3.1.2.1 The Négritude movement**

The rediscovery of the values of traditional African culture as a reaction against Western cultural domination received great impetus from the cultural-political movement in Francophone Africa known as the Négritude movement (Parratt 1987:2).

The Négritude movement has its historical roots in the nineteenth century with Negro slaves in the USA and the West Indies (Bujo 1992:50). Négritude was foreshadowed in the Pan-Negro idea of men like E. W. Blyden and DuBois (Bujo 1992:50). The real founding fathers of Négritude, however, were Leopold Sédar Senghor, Aimé Césaire, and Leon Damas (Bujo 1992:50).

The term, Négritude, was first introduced by Aimé Césaire in 1939 (English 1996:57). Aimé Césaire defines Négritude as the underlying unity of Negro culture and values that are common to all Negroes (Rigsby 1968:74). According to Senghor (1996:49-50), Négritude is 'the awareness, defense and development of African cultural values' and 'the whole complex of civilized values - cultural, economic, social and political - which characterize the black people, or more precisely the Negro-African world.'<sup>12</sup>

Hastings (1979:11) states that Négritude is 'a powerful and emotional assertion of black culture over against European culture.' The Négritude movement as a 'form of cultural nationalism' (Young III 1993:13) refused Western values to be exclusive and to have universal priority (Kohn & Sokolsky 1965:72). With the emphasis on revitalization of the indigenous culture, the Négritude movement called for an intensive cultural struggle in order to lift the consciousness and pride of being black, the initialization of the resistance against Western cultural domination in Africa, and the acceleration of 'the move toward cultural autonomy' (Young III 1993:xi), aiming at political autonomy.<sup>13</sup> With the emphasis on the reaffirmation of Africanness and the negation of Western values, the Négritude

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<sup>12</sup> Whereas Aimé Césaire and Leopold Sédar Senghor postulate the idea of a common African culture, Leon Damas and Mphahlele reject the idea of one culture for Africa (Rigsby 1968:74).

<sup>13</sup> Alex Quaison-Sackey maintains that the Négritude movement was not concerned with political issues, and that the political matters are the domain of African Personality (Rigsby 1968:125). The chief leaders of the Négritude movement, however, were also political leaders. Kesteloot (1972:33) says that 'political action followed logically from the idea of the cultural commitment of the leaders of the Négritude movement.'

movement stirred African theologians to rediscover the values of their African cultural-religious heritage and to reflect on the Christian gospel not in terms of Western traditions, but in terms of African cultural-religious forms.

### **2.3.1.2.2 African Personality**

Senghor acclaims Blyden as the ‘foremost precursor of both the Négritude and the African personality’ (Mudimbe 1988:98). Mudimbe, however, argues that Blyden’s real influence may be clearly seen in Anglophone West Africa, such as ‘Casely Hayford’s idea of West African Unity, Azikiwe’s Pan-Negro Nationalism, and possible in Nkrumah’s Pan-Africanism’ (Mudimbe 1988:131; Fyfe 1967:xii). According to Ajayi (1965:267), Blyden’s pamphlets and books of essays, lectures and correspondence were broadly circulated in West Africa. Members of the Négritude movement, such as Aimé Césaire and Leon Damas had not paid much attention to Blyden (Mudimbe 1988:131).

If this claim is correct, it seems quite probable that Blyden’s influence was limited to Anglophone West Africa, possibly due to the language barrier. In this sense, it can be said that only the African personality owes much to Blyden, including the concepts of ‘blackness’ and the ‘Negro personality’ (Munga 1998:51).

Blyden’s experience of the racial discrimination and humiliation of the Negro in the USA made him negative toward Western culture. He also began to see Western Christianity as a form of Christianity distorted by Western people (Blyden [1887]1967:31). Blyden affirms that Western people’s sense of dignity of human nature is superficial, and can not provide a basis for establishing ‘the sense of dignity of the human nature.’ The way the Negro would achieve their sense of dignity of human nature is to make a separation from Western people. He maintains racial exclusiveness (Bediako 1995:9).

Blyden not only opposed Western racist mythologies, but also wanted to develop a new view about black people against Western racist mythologies (Mudimbe 1988:131). In order to establish a new view about black people, he endeavoured to rehabilitate Africa’s past by his research in African history, and stressed a cultural opposition emphasizing the African indigenous values and attitudes (Mudimbe 1988:129).

He promoted the concepts of ‘blackness’ and ‘Negro personality’ based on the virtues of black civilization. On the basis of ‘the virtue of black civilization’ that constitutes the distinctiveness of black people, Blyden maintained that black people could make a definite contribution to the whole

human race (Rigsby 1968:176-181; Mudimbe 1988:131).

Blyden ([1887]1967:65) argued that any attempt to Europeanize the African people would be a fruitless task. Blyden criticized not only European's training for black people because it was unfit to express the African soul, but also black people who wanted to imitate white people (Rigsby 1968:181).

Blyden's threefold opposition, that is, racial opposition, cultural opposition and religious opposition, inspired the Anglophone West Africa's nationalists and intellectuals to consider the revitalization of their traditional religion that was considered as the authentic repository of the African personality (Bediako 1995:14; Mudimbe 1988:129).

African personality aimed at, according to Nkrumah, 'the cultural and spiritual unity of African people, and to promote research into every aspects of the African heritage' (Martey 1993:15).

According to Alex Quaison-Sackey (quoted by Young III 1993:15), African personality signifies:

the African's attempt to understand who he is, where he came; and since he knew that no personality can be fully and effectively realized except in the open air of freedom and independence, he wishes not only to obtain these conditions for himself but to recover what his ancestor once had achieved before they finally succumbed...to European.

Sithole describes the African personality as 'a desire on the part of the African people to be and to remain themselves...and the desire to control their own destiny' (quoted by Kohn & Sokolsky 1965:72). African personality in Anglophone Africa has been understood as a will to be and to remain African.

The politico-cultural movements that claimed the right to political autonomy and the call for religious and cultural emancipation inspired African theologians to rediscover the value of African culture, and stimulated them to relate the Christian gospel to African culture.

## **2.3.2 Theological-ecclesiastical factors**

### **2.3.2.1 The African response to ecclesiastical-cultural imperialism**

The missionary enterprise during the colonial era later came in for criticism due mainly to three



reasons (Parratt 1995:8; Shaw 1996:208-235; Muzorewa 1985:24-26; Pobee 1992:8-10; Mudimbe 1988:45-47; p'Bitek 1970:54-55): (1) missionaries' and mission societies' collaboration with the colonial powers; (2) the cultural and religious imperialism: denigration of African cultural-religious heritage; and (3) the attitude of the superiority of the Western value system and paternalism in the church affairs.

### 2.3.2.1.1 Collaboration with colonial powers

As Hastings (1976:5) notes that 'the church had spread as much as the empire,' the exceptional growth of Christianity in Africa coincided with the colonial era.<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, there was an awareness that Christianity had been brought into the African continent during the colonial era and had been favoured by the colonial powers. In the view of African people, the missionary enterprise was closely connected with Western colonial expansion (Fashole-Luk 1978:357).<sup>15</sup>

Even though there were a number of missionaries in the early colonial era, who functioned as 'an opposition party to the administration' (Hastings 1994:434), nevertheless, it cannot be denied that on the whole there was close collaboration between the various missionary enterprises and the colonial administration.<sup>16</sup>

Some missionaries cooperated with their colonial administrators in order that the territories where they worked were protected by their representative metropolitan governments (Baur 1994:279;

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<sup>14</sup> There were an estimated 4 million Christians on the continent in 1900 (then there were about 60 million Muslims). By 1914 and 1930 the numbers of Christians were 7 million and 16 million respectively. The numbers of Christians were 34 million in 1950 (Shaw 1996:207).

<sup>15</sup> Sir H. H. Johnston, one of the builders of British Nigeria, told the British public in 1911: 'In fact, the CMS, for good or for ill, has done more to create British Nigeria than the British government' (Ayandele 1979:68). In 1873, when Sir Garnet Wolseley wanted to attack the Asante, he specially requested the Wesleyan Missionary Society for consent to utilize Freeman's services for information that would assist victory over the Asante (Ayandele 1979:69). Scottish missionaries in Malawi planned to advance Christianity and legitimate commerce (the ivory trade). But their plan was blocked by Arab slave-traders and land-greedy Portuguese. So they openly requested a British protectorate to remove the obstacle. With the support of Cecil Rhodes, Malawi became a protectorate in 1891 (Shaw 1996:213-214).

<sup>16</sup> There was, of course, another side to the story. In Angola, due to the injustices of the Portuguese regime, the number of professing Christians dropped sharply from an estimated 250,000 to 29,200 between 1885 and 1914. The character of the colonial regime made a difference to missionary successes (Shaw 1996:213). The presence of a colonial power as such did not guarantee church growth.

In Kenya AIM missionary John Stauffacher opposed Lord Delamere's treatment of the Maasai (Shaw 1996:215). Bishop Tucker of Uganda complained about German administration policies in Tanzania (Shaw 1996:213). In Togo, Rev. Zahn protested against the occupation of the country by his native Germany, fearing that 'the people's confidence... can easily be lost, when the missionaries belong to the ruling nation.' He warned his fellow missionaries 'to remain neutral' (Shaw 1996:215). The missionaries' protest against King Leopold's misadministration in the Congo State initiated international dissatisfaction with the way the Congo was run. Thus Britain, America, and Germany forced the Belgian government to end the 'Congo Independent State' by annexing it in 1908, and reformed its administration (Hastings 1994:434-437).

Shaw (1996:215) argues that missionaries and colonial governments collaborated not because they worked for the same goal but because their different goals coincidentally profited through their 'unofficial partnership.'



Mugambi 2004:156), and even they became defenders of the use of force in their hope of preparing a good environment for disseminating the gospel.<sup>17</sup>

The missionaries did not take the lead in propagating the idea of the superiority of whites over Africans. However, they, as children of their time, were already influenced by the then stereotyped attitude of the Western society towards the Africans and African culture (Bediako 1995:6; de Jong 2001:49).

The missionaries assumed that they represented a ‘higher’ civilization (p’Bitek 1970:54), and considered the Africans as primitive (Bediako 1992:225). They were preoccupied with the notion of the equation of Christianity and Western civilization, and tended to identify the goals of both the proclamation of the gospel and the civilization of Africa. In their role of ‘civilizers’, they were in partnership with the colonial powers. Thus European colonialism and exploitation of Africa were justified (p’Bitek 1970:54). Mudimbe (1988:145) observed that Christian evangelization was caught up in ‘a paradoxical paradigm’, that is, ‘the exploitation of goods meant by God for all humanity and the proclamation of the gospel of the universal brotherhood and equality.’ In this sense, Mudimbe (1997:149) argues that ‘colonialism and missionary Christian belong to the same cultural conquest.’ They were at one in ‘a context of mutual interdependence, referring to the same signs, symbols, and justifications’ (Mudimbe 1997:149).

In spite of their great devotion in coming to Africa, especially in the early time, and their fervent, and enthusiastic preaching of the gospel, it is difficult to deny that the missionaries did not react sensitively against colonial exploitation, and, to some extent, they did not want to seem to be any different from the colonial administrators (Baur 1994:282).

For this reason, in the eyes of most African scholars, the collaboration between missionaries and colonial governments has been seen as an ‘unfortunate unholy alliance’ (Tutu 1978:364), ‘Siamese twins’ (Fashole-Luke 1975a:385), and a ‘tragic alliance’ (Ankrah 1979:155). The missionaries as ‘part of the national colonial destiny’ (Hastings 1994:417) have been regarded as ‘an important vehicle of Western imperialism’ (p’Bitek 1970:54). In this sense, it is not possible to untangle the history of Christianity in Africa from the history and influence of colonialism (Hastings 1994:400).

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<sup>17</sup> The missionaries thought that their enterprise could flourish and be protected under the flag of their mother countries. To a certain extent, they felt that military expedition and the use of force would generate good. The British bombardment of Lagos in 1851 was hailed by a missionary as a providential blessing that would open a way for the evangelization of other parts of Yorubaland. The expedition against the Asante in 1896 was described as ‘a righteous war.’ ‘War is a means of opening a door for the gospel to enter a country. A sword of steel often goes before a sword of the Spirit’ (C. C. Newton to Tupper, 12 April 1892, in *Foreign Mission Journal of the Southern American Baptist Mission*, 23(July), quoted by Ayandele 1979:66-67).

### 2.3.2.1.2 Cultural and religious imperialism

Many Europeans, including missionaries, came with ‘an almost impregnable confidence in the overwhelming superiority of the European West’ (Hastings 1976:38). Western values and customs were, to them, identical with Christianity. Through the equation of the expansion of Western civilization with the dissemination of Christianity, the aim of mission was the implanting of Western civilization among the African ‘heathen’ culture that was seen as a thing that had to be uprooted (Pobee 1992:10).

According to African theologians, the missionaries underestimated African religious beliefs and practices without making a serious attempt to facilitate an encounter between the gospel and African culture. Consequently the discontinuity between the gospel and African traditional religions was asserted (Fashole-Luke 1978:357; Kaliombe 1989:201). Conversion to Christianity often required a radical break with the African past and culture to favour the adaptation to the culture of the missionary (Fashole-Luke 1975b:73). The church was to be implanted in Africa in accordance with Western Christian ways of thinking and behaving. Accordingly, Christianity was unable to be integrated into African life and culture.

According to Tutu (1978:366), the missionaries’ attitude of denigration of the African cultural-religious heritage caused ‘a dilemma in the lives of African Christians, who ended up moving in two different and, to some extent, irreconcilable worlds: Western Christianity and the traditional culture.’ Bujo (1992:49-50) argues that ‘to attack the African religious system is to...deprive them...of their very identity...[T]his is the worst of all sin.’ The African Christians, therefore, have suffered from ‘a form of religious schizophrenia’ because of the struggle between their Christianity and their Africanness (Tutu 1978:366). The culturally alienating element in the church became ‘Christianity’s Achilles heel in Africa’ (Hastings 1976:43).

In reaction to the missionaries’ underestimation of the values of the African cultural-religious heritage, African theologians have attempted to demonstrate that the African religious experience resonates the Bible, and that the African cultural-religious heritage is the best vehicle to convey the gospel to Africa. Tutu (1978:367) asserts that one of the main contributions of African theology is an attempt to remove ‘religious schizophrenia’ by revitalizing ‘Africa’s rich cultural heritage and religious consciousness’. In this sense, African theology is the outcome of ‘a reaction against cultural and ecclesiastical colonialism’ (Tutu 1978:364; Bujo 1992:49).

### 2.3.2.1.3 The early pioneers' calls for an African Christianity

In reaction to Western Christianity, the early African church leaders stressed the need to indigenize Christianity on African soil. The need for the emancipation of African churches was already stated in the nineteenth century.<sup>18</sup>

**Samuel Ajai Crowther (1807-1891)**, the first African Bishop south of the Sahara in a mainline mission-founded church in the modern period, recognized the depth of the structure of traditional religion and thought. He, as translator, contemplated the Yoruba equivalents of biblical terms, such as God, devil, priest, and, as head of the mission, tried to develop the Church into a national institute (Ajayi 1965:223-224). In his speech made to the clergy in his charge in 1869, he made his stand on the issue of nationalism:

Christianity has come into the world to abolish and supersede all false religion, ...But it should be borne in mind that Christianity does not undertake to destroy national assimilation; where there are any degrading and superstitious defects, it corrects them...Their native Mutual Aid Club should not be despised, but where there is any superstitious connections, it should be corrected and improved after a Christian model...Their religious terms and ceremonies should be carefully observed; the wrong use made of such terms does not depreciate their real value, but renders them more valid when we adopt them in expressing Scriptural terms in their right sense and places from which they have been misapplied for want of better knowledge.

(quoted by Ajayi 1965:224).

He emphasized the positive value of the old society and the cultivation of these values in keeping pace with the emphasis on the value of civilization and foreign ideas (Ajayi 1965:223). He acknowledged not only the danger of 'degrading superstitious defects' of traditional religious terms, but also the importance of 'adapting' African idioms in order to express scriptural values.

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<sup>18</sup> Some scholars mention Kimpa Vita (Donna Beatrice), a Congolese woman Christian during the period of the Portuguese colonialism, as 'the first bud on the tree of Black theology' (Barrett 1968:25; Parratt 1995:4; Bosch 1974:1-11), or 'the actual root of the African Independent Churches movement' (Daneel 1987:46-47). According to her message, Christ was an African, and he had black apostles. And the black Christ who identified himself with the oppressed against their colonial masters would return to establish a paradise on earth and to restore the old Congolese kingdom (Parratt 1995:4). In 1706 she was condemned to be burnt at the stake as a heretic by the Portuguese authority (Daneel 1987:47). It is possible to argue that Donna Beatrice's teachings can be 'the first manifestation of black theology' (Bosch 1974:2), and 'the first inkling of Black theology' (Daneel 1987:46).

**Holy James Johnson (1836-1917)**, a leading cultural nationalist in the history of the West African church (Young III 1993:10), sought information on Yoruba beliefs from a local Ifa priest who had converted to Christianity in order to find out effective ways of presenting the Christian gospel to pagans (Ajayi 1965:235). He was convinced of the need to bring about a Christian faith with an African face. He affirmed:

Christianity is a religion intended for and suitable for every race on the face of the globe. Acceptance of it was never intended by its founder to denationalize any people, and it is indeed the glory that every race and people may profess and practice it and imprint upon it its own national characteristic, giving it a peculiar type of its virtue. And why should not there be an African Christianity as there has been a European and an Asiatic Christianity?

(quoted by Young III 1993:10).

James Johnson strongly supported a Christianity that had a national characteristic, and urged a reform of the liturgy to fit local situations (Ajayi 1965:235).

As ‘an insuppressibly propagandist for a non-missionary version of African Christianity’ (Hastings 1994:494), **Mojola Agbebi (1860-1917)** formulated the philosophy of the ideal African Church. According to Agbebi, the ideal African Church was to be ‘a symbol and an expression of the African personality’, obtaining characteristics of the African milieu without losing the eternal principles of the Christian faith. He insisted that this ideal African Church must be a Church controlled by Africans, worked by Africans, and financed by Africans, without any yoke or bondage, complexion and foreign control (Ayandele 1979:116, 119).<sup>19</sup> In 1889, he asserted that:

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<sup>19</sup> Mojola Agbebi distanced himself from the White American missionaries, and joined the Native Baptist church in Lagos in 1888. By 1894 he changed his name from David B. Vincent to Mojola Agbebi, and rejected Western dress. In 1913 he became the first president of the African Communion of Independent Churches (Shaw 1994:243). In spite of the defects and weaknesses of individual missionaries and the mistakes of the evangelization ways, Mojola expressed his deep gratitude to the missionaries because they introduced Christianity into the continent (Ayandele 1979:111).

It is interesting to note Mojola Agbebi’s view of missionaries presented in a debate in Lagos in 1885: ‘Missionaries, and Missionaries alone, are the real pioneers of African civilization. It was commercial Europe that invented slave trade...but it was evangelical Europe that promulgated the edict of universal emancipation...it was Missionary Europe that proved us men...But Missionary Europe holds education as one of the important levers towards the amelioration of the people...Whatever these pioneers of civilization are...tell them we shall ever hail them with delight, and God shall bless them’ (quoted by Ayandele 1979:112).

After years, however, Mojola Agbebi differentiated European Christianity from the Christianity of the Bible. In 1902, he criticized European Christianity: ‘European Christianity is a dangerous thing...a religion which holds a bottle of gin in one hand and a Common Prayerbook in the other?...A religion which points with one hand to the skies, bidding you “lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven,” and while you are looking up, grasps all your worldly goods with the other hand, seizes your ancestral lands, labels your forests...’ (quoted by Ayandele 1979:113).

... to render Christianity indigenous to Africa, it must be watered by native hands, pruned with the native hatchet, and tended with native earth. A grave responsibility rests upon the shoulders of Native Churches in Africa for the propagation... It is a curse if we intend for ever to hold at the apron-strings of foreign teachers, doing the baby for aye.

(quoted by Ayandele 1979:122).

He called for a positive response to African religions, and emphasized that the African cultural heritage was compatible with the Christian gospel and should, therefore, be preserved. Certain elements foreign to the African milieu, such as foreign hymn books, should be abandoned (Ayandele 1979:116). The Christianity of the Bible, to him, should be incarnated into the African culture and values (Ayandele 1979:116).

**E. Blyden**, the ‘archetypal African nationalist’ (Bediako 2000:5), expected Christianity to take root in African soil quickly. In his inaugural address as president of Liberia College, delivered at Monrovia, 5 January 1881, he claimed that ‘in this country [Africa] it will acquire wider power, deeper influence, and become instinct with a higher validity than anywhere else’ (Blyden [1887]1967:89). He believed that Christianity was not a local religion, and that its application was universal.

For him, however, after Christianity became the exclusive property of the Europeans (Blyden [1887]1967:241), Western Christianity deviated from the original idea of Christianity. He argued that there were ‘the amazing dissimilitude and disproportion between the original idea of Christianity, as expressed by Christ, and the practice of it by his professed followers’ (Blyden [1887]1967:89). Christianity that was introduced into Africa by the Western people, therefore, could not establish African people’s sense of dignity, because it was distorted by the Europeans and was not Christianity in its essence. The only way to achieve the dignity of African people was to be separated from the Europeans (Bediako 1995:9). For Blyden, an African church wrapped in Western style could not flourish and become reproductive (Blyden [1887]1967:64).

For this reason, he resisted attempts to impose Western cultural values upon African Christians. He emphasized the importance of the Bible as text book in the schools, but the Bible should be without note or comment (Blyden [1887]1967:89). He stressed African emancipation from physical and mental subordination to Europeans (Ajayi 1965:266), and defended the African traditions against those Africans educated abroad, who despised their heritage and copied foreign ideals and values (Parratt 1995:5).

According to Bediako, Blyden was the person who ‘perceived most clearly and expressed most

acutely the reality of an African identity problem as a result of the European impact on Africa' and stressed the rehabilitation of traditional religion, that was regarded as 'the authentic repository of the African personality' (Bediako 1995:14), even though Blyden himself regarded African traditional religion as 'paganism, with all its horrors and abominations, having been forever abolished' (Blyden [1887]1967:vi). He wanted an African church that was not distorted by Europeans, and, in 1891, he proposed the establishment of a West African Church, which should be an African, not an English product (Bediako 1995:13).

### 2.3.2.2 The African Independent Churches movement

Venn's policy of a self governing church was displaced by a new paternalism and authoritarianism in the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, especially after the establishment of colonial rule in Africa with the Scramble for Africa.

When Crowther, the first African Anglican bishop who was consecrated in 1864, died in 1891, he was not replaced by another black bishop. The young enthusiastic missionaries of the colonial era, who came with a new attitude of authoritarianism, reaffirmed a policy of white control within the mission church. The reassertion of European leadership in the church inevitably resulted in the decline of African leadership in church affairs (Baur 1994:350; Shaw 1996:235).

In the eyes of European people, the Africans were 'savages' to be civilized, 'cursed sons of Ham' to be saved, and 'big children' to be educated (Baur 1994:280; Tempels 1959:169). The authority of the church in Africa almost always had to be in the hands of Europeans.<sup>20</sup>

There was tension between white control and African initiatives, and the tension grew up to one of the leading factors influencing the formation of African Independent Churches (Hastings 1976:9).

#### 2.3.2.2.1 A definition of African Independent Churches

The term, African Independent Churches (hereafter referred to as AICs) is a general designation

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<sup>20</sup> After the Berlin conference in 1885, missionaries graduated from fellow Christians and brothers to become part of the ruling class (Ajayi 1965:235). During the new colonial dispensation new missionaries came to Africa with the notion of European superiority. They wanted to put all church affairs under European leadership. In 1925 there was no African diocesan bishop in any mission church (Hastings 1976:7). The missionaries' authoritarian attitude towards the Africans became vivid. In his *The future of Africa* (1911), Donald Fraser says that 'the African is most efficient as an evangelist when guided and controlled.' Handley Hooper, African Secretary of the CMS, also said in 1929 that 'if they were to be released from tutelage there would be a general lowering of standards' (quoted by Hastings 1994:554).



for varied movements that cannot readily be referred to with any single term.<sup>21</sup>

Turner (1967:xvi) defines an ‘AIC’ as ‘a church which has been founded in Africa, by Africans and primarily for Africans and which lack the substantial association with Western Christianity.’

Daneel (1987:32) gives a sociological oriented definition: ‘an AIC is a new movement arising from the interaction between a tribal community and its religion on one hand, and a heterogeneous foreign culture intruding with its (Christian) religion on the other.’ In this sense, the AICs, to some extent, diverged from both the Christian tradition and the African religious tradition, and renewed, modified, and synthesized the two different religio-cultural traditions into a new religious system (Daneel 1987:32).

The term, ‘Independent Churches’ refers to churches that are independent in organization, leadership and religious expression from Western oriented mission churches that had initially introduced the Christian gospel to the continent (Daneel 1987:17, 31).

#### 2.3.2.2.2 Types of AICs

The African Independent Churches movement emerged between 1890 and 1910, the earliest years of colonialism (Shaw 1996:242).

The first foundation of AICs was the result of schisms, that is, movements of protest. In South Africa they reacted against the colour bar in the church. In Nigeria missionary domination was a factor influencing the emergence of AICs, and in Kenya cultural alienation was a leading factor (Baur 1994:350).

The second wave of AICs, arising from the 1920s onwards, was of prophetic-charismatic character (Baur 1994:350).

Under the general designation ‘African Independent Churches’ as an umbrella term for describing varied movements, there is the great variety of groups with divergent trends. Daneel classifies the AICs into Ethiopian-type churches, Spirit-type churches and Messianic churches, based on Turner’s work, which is partly based on Sundkler’s work (Daneel 1987:34-42).

**Ethiopian-type churches**<sup>22</sup> were initially formed break aways from white-controlled

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<sup>21</sup> There are several other terms used for the churches that are usually classified as African Independent Churches: African Initiated Churches, African Indigenous Churches, African Instituted Churches, and in pejorative expression implying value-judgments, Native Separatist Churches, Syncretist Churches, Sectarian, and several more terms (Turner 1967:xv-xvi; Daneel 1987:29-30; Hayes 1998:159).

<sup>22</sup> According to Daneel (1987:38, 49), the name ‘Ethiopian’ appeared in 1892 for the first time. In that year a Methodist

denominations, as a form of reaction against white-domination of the leadership.

The most outstanding common feature among **the Spirit-type churches**<sup>23</sup> is their special emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit, manifested in speaking in tongues, prophetic activity of diverse kinds and faith healing (Daneel 1987:39). Usually, Spirit-type churches form around a charismatic figure, who performs spiritual leadership.

In **Messianic churches**, the leader is exalted to messianic status. The leader, to an extent, by his mystical powers, prophetic activities, miracles and mediation between God and his followers, usurps Christ's position, either in whole or in part (Daneel 1987:41).<sup>24</sup>

### 2.3.2.2.3 Reasons for the AICs movement

The factors influencing the formation and growth of the AICs have been studied by many scholars.

Sundker (1961:295; 1976:305) postulates the colour bar and Protestant denominationalism as the two main reasons for the rise of the AICs in South Africa. He emphasized the socio-political situation in which the movements were conceived. Thus the AICs movement is understood in terms of socio-political protest against a background of colonial paternalism and African nationalism (Daneel 1987:69).

Turner (1967:xiii) maintains that the movements must be interpreted in terms of the fundamentally religious movement that seeks 'a new spiritual home.' The main causes for the formation of the movements are, says Turner, 'cultural integrity' and 'spiritual autonomy' rather than socio-political, economic or ethnic factors (Turner 1967:xiii; Daneel 1987:70-71).

Oosthuizen (1968:7) contends that it is a mistake to regard the AICs movement as nationalistic activities with a political purpose. He analyzes the main causes of separation from the mission

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minister on the Witwatersrand, Mangena Mokone, protested against what he called racial segregation in the church and, together with his supporters, founded the Ethiopian church (Daneel 1987:49). Africans recognized that God concerns himself with Africa in a special way. Some Bible texts such as Psalm 68:31 that say that 'Ethiopia hastens to stretch out her hands to God,' were understood as an indication of God's special plan of salvation for the oppressed black people. This text was linked to the conversion of the Ethiopian chamberlain (Ac 8:27) and it was claimed that Africans responded to Christ's message of salvation long before the European people did. This led to the rise of 'Ethiopian' ideology with a psychological sense of self-esteem and special role for spreading God's kingdom in Africa (Daneel 1987:38). Especially Mokone interpreted these texts as a promise concerning the evangelization of Africa and as justification for African leadership (Sundkler 1961:39).

<sup>23</sup> Sundkler (1961:38; 1976:306-307) prefers to call them Zionist churches. Daneel (1987:39), however, objects to use this term, because some prophetic movements do not want to be considered Zionist (the Apostle Church of Jahane Maranke, commonly known as the vaPostori is a good example).

<sup>24</sup> Sundkler (1976:308) says that this term could be applied only to 'perhaps one per cent' of the [then, that is, when he published *Bantu Prophets in South Africa*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1961] 1500 Zionist churches. Turner (1967:xviii) argues that the messianic type is not widespread, for it is not common among East or West AICs, or even in South Africa. So he contends that it is a mistake to use this term as a general description of the AICs.



church, and concludes: Missionaries' paternalism and misunderstanding of African Christians' psychology, philosophy and cultural tradition were behind the missionaries' inability to communicate in depth with African Christians; African Christians were disappointed with the mission churches, and thus they formed, via frustration, the AICs as a form of 'religious fanaticism' (Oosthuizen 1968:60-61).

Barrett (1968:xix, 154-158) concludes that the AICs represent a reaction to the mission church because the latter lacked brotherly love and adequate understanding of traditional society. According to Barrett, the AICs movement represents a social reaction to mission, rooted in a certain tribal spirit of the times formed by the African Christians' perception that the mission churches condemned traditional African values (Daneel 1987:18).

Daneel (1987:100) argues against a reduction of the factors contributing to the formation and growth of the AICs because it would amount to a simplistic view which does not give sufficient recognition to the creativity and originality within these churches in their reaction to Western cultural-theological dominance.

The AICs' real contribution is their creative attempts to relate the Christian gospel to the innermost needs of Africa. In doing so, the AICs provide African Christians with a sense of belonging. For this particular reason, Daneel (1987:30) argues that there is some sociological justification for the fast multiplication of the movement notwithstanding theological objections, the continuing process of schism and fragmentation, and the mushrooming of the formation of new church groups.

Even though a reaction against mistakes made by missions or an oppressive colonial situation cannot be ignored, the most important factor contributing to the formation and growth of AICs is, as Daneel strongly affirms, their quest for belonging (Daneel 1987:17) through 'their own genius's creative and authentic response to the gospel' (Daneel 1987:18-19).<sup>25</sup>

#### **2.3.2.2.4 Contributions of the AICs to African theology**

Hastings (1979:117) maintains that AICs are 'essentially religious movements which provide the much longed for spiritual home for African Christians', attempting to shape church life according to

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<sup>25</sup> The continuing process of schism and fragmentation in the AICs should not be ignored. Besides doctrinal differences and leadership defects as basic causes of schism within the AICs, there are various other reasons including human aspirations to power, recognition and status (Daneel 1987:195).

African forms and with African leadership. Appia-Kubi (1979:117-118) argues that ‘spiritual hunger is the main cause’ of the formation of the AICs.

The AICs’ interpretation of the Bible in Africans’ existential situation has been a good example of how Africans understand the Christian gospel in harmony with the African traditional religious-cultural heritage. In this sense, the AICs have provided African theologians with theological motivation and sources with regard to indigenization of the Christian doctrines and liturgies as a real practice of inculturation of the gospel and Africanization of the church (Muzorewa 1985:35).

### 2.3.2.3 Tempels and *Bantu Philosophy*

The emergence of African theology did not happen as an isolated phenomenon. For instance, in academic circles, anthropologists, just before and after World War II, took a deep interest in African traditional religions. Anthropologists<sup>26</sup> produced monographs that displayed a positive and sympathetic attitude to African culture and religions (Mudimbe 1988:56). Early African theologians and Christian intellectuals read these books seeking for ways to use some elements of the traditional cultural-religious systems with the intention of facilitating Christianity’s indigenisation in the African religio-cultural context (Mudimbe 1988:56). It means that some Europeans played an important role in the process of the emergence of African theology.

One of the most prominent figures who influenced early African intellectuals was Placide Tempels, a Belgian missionary in Central Africa from 1933 to 1962. The French translation of Tempels’ book (it was originally written in Flemish) was published in Zaire in 1945 under the title, *La philosophie bantoue*. Its English translation, *Bantu Philosophy*, was published in 1959.

Tempels rejects a certain image and idea of African people such as ‘a notion of primitive prelogical mentality’ that was disseminated by Levi-Bruhl (Irele 1983:15; Hountondji 1983:34). Rather, he attempts to revise ‘fundamental ideas on the subject of “non-civilized peoples”’ (Tempels 1959:167) and to help ‘the Bantu to build their own Bantu civilization’ (Tempels 1959:174).

According to Tempels, some prevailing images of the African world, such as ‘animism,’ ‘dynamism’ and ‘magic,’ are ‘merely blind pointers to a cosmological core-truth’ (Okafor 1982:83). Tempels (1959:33) contends that

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<sup>26</sup> Evans-Prichard, Daryll Forde, Meyer Forters, Godfrey Lienhadt, Victor Turner, Mary Douglas, G. E. Parrinder and Marcel Griaule, to mention only a few.

What has been called magic, animism, ancestor-worship, or dynamism - in short, all the customs of the Bantu - depend upon a single principle, knowledge of the Inmost Nature of beings, that is to say, upon their Ontological Principle.

According to Tempels, the key to the Bantu is the idea of vital force, of which the source is God (Tempels 1959:46, 175; Westerlund 1985:69; Irele 1983:16).

All beings in the universe possess their own vital force (Tempels 1959:46), and acquirement of vital force in order to live strongly is the Bantu people's purpose (Tempels 1959:44). Force or vital energy is the object of prayers and invocations to God who is the 'strong one' who possesses Force in himself as the source of the force of every creature (Tempels 1959:46). The vital force of each being determines its position in the hierarchy of forces. The universe of forces is organically constructed in ontological hierarchy. All creatures are in relationship according to the laws of hierarchy. In the ontological hierarchy, there is interaction of being with being, of force with force. And the interaction of forces and exercise of vital influence occurs according to determined laws. One force will reinforce or weaken another, and higher forces can exercise vital action upon lower (Tempels 1959:58-60, 67). This philosophy of force strictly governs the whole Bantu life. Tempels (1959:175) concludes:

The key principle of Bantu philosophy is that of vital force. The activating and final aim of all Bantu effort is only the intensification of vital force. To protect it or to increase vital force, that is the motive and the profound meaning in all their practices. It is the ideal which animates the life of the 'muntu,' the only thing for which he is ready to suffer and to sacrifice himself.

Tempels' purpose was to arrive at an understanding of the profound activity of the Bantu mind in order to promote the integration of Christian principles within the Bantu cultural basis, and thus he attempted to construct a civilization which will be synthesized with the Bantu ontology (Mudimbe 1988:158). His conceptual approach to the spreading of Christianity in Africa was to establish a relation of identity between Bantu philosophy and Christianity by capturing the thought-categories of the people of Africa (Irele 1983:16).

On this fundamental motive, Tempels (1959:170) urges that missionaries must abandon their

previous views of the Bantu in order to Christianize and civilize the Bantu people.<sup>27</sup> Tempels argues that the European civilization imparted to the Bantu, including the Christian gospel, has no deep impact upon their soul (1959:174) because the European civilization is presented in a totally inassimilable form for the Bantu (1959:175).

Therefore, Tempels (1959:179) affirms that the Christian message should be linked up with the forms of Bantu thought like ‘vital force’ to propagate the Christian truth. Only when the missionaries employ the thought-categories of Bantu people as their interpreter in seeking to Christianize the Bantu people, the Christian message will not remain something entirely foreign to them (Tempels 1959:175). Tempels is positive of establishing a ‘new Christian civilization’ without destroying the Bantu concept of vital force (Mudimbe 1988:53).

Mbiti ([1969]1975:10-11) comments that Tempels’ main contribution, even though it opened the way for a sympathetic study of African religions and philosophy, is ‘more in terms of sympathy and change of attitude than perhaps in the actual content and theory of his book.’

p’Bitek attacks Tempels’ generalization of Bantu ontology. For p’Bitek, Tempels is supposed to attempt to apply the Bantu ontology not only to the Bantu in particular, but also to the African people in general (Mudimbe 1988:140).

Hountondji (1983:34) criticizes the fact that ‘Bantu Philosophy’ is not addressed to Africans but to European colonials and missionaries, and thus the book is a pretext for the learned among the Europeans. In spite of his criticism of Tempels, Hountondji comments positively on Tempels’ attempt to rehabilitate the African and African culture, and to redeem them from Western prejudice.

Even though Tempels did not entirely reject the colonial project itself (Mudimbe 1997:118), he called for a new approach to ‘primitive people’ (Westerlund 1985:79). *Bantu Philosophy* registered ‘a decisive break with the ethnocentric emphasis of classical anthropology’ (Irele 1983:17), making ‘some holes in the monolithic wall of the colonial ideology’ (Mudimbe 1988:141). Tempels’ *Bantu Philosophy* provided a ‘significant literary and missiological precedent’ for some African theologians (Bediako 1992:361).

Alexis Kagame, following the steps of Tempels, had localized a Bantu Rwandaise philosophy (*La philosophie bantou-rwandaise de l’être*, published in Brussels in 1954). As an African response to

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<sup>27</sup> Because of Tempels’ attempt to correct the previous way of mission, his work was hailed as well as objected to by his contemporaries. Alioune Diop described it as the most decisive book he had ever read. Bishop Jean-Felix de Hemptinne, however, exercised his power to halt the circulation of *Bantu Philosophy*, demanding that Rome should condemn the book as heretical and that Tempels be expelled from the country (Mudimbe 1988:157).

Tempels, he started to reflect on the nature of African religion and the proper relationship between Christianity and African traditional religion which would soon become Catholic theology of mission's main theme (Hastings 1979:119).

Mulago, in his doctoral thesis, *L'Union vitale 'Bantu' chez les Bashi, les Banyarwanda, et les Barundi face à l'unité vitale ecclésiastique* in 1955 (published as *Un visage africain de Christianisme: l'Union vitale bantou face à l'unité vitale ecclésiastique* in Paris, 1965) attempted to impose the concept of vital union in the East Congo on theology (Mudimbe 1997:119). Inspired by Tempels and his *Bantu Philosophy*, Mulago attempted to bring a Christian theological perspective on the interpretation of the Bantu religious heritage (Bediako 1992:361).

Tempels' objective was to rethink the equation of conversion to Christianity with Westernization (Mudimbe 1997:155) and to achieve a 'real adaptation that consists in the adaptation of our spirit to the spirit of these people' (Tempels 1959:25). African theologians who were influenced by Tempels looked for African philosophical categories to articulate a systematic way of presenting the Christian gospel to Africans (Oborji 1998:1). In this sense, his book opened up a new way for the emergence of African theology, offering the possibility of integrating the Christian gospel in African culture.

In the politico-cultural context of Africa, the African nationalists and intellectuals, including Christians who were educated in mission schools and then actively engaged in nationalist political and cultural movements, not only criticized the widely perceived collaboration between the African church and the colonial powers and the church's silence on Western cultural-ecclesiastical imperialism in the church in Africa (Stinton 2004:110; Bujo 1992:20), but also challenged the African church to reflect on the relationship between the Christian gospel and African religio-cultural heritage in order that the Christian gospel would permeate the African way of life (Hastings 1979:119).

Viewed from the theological-ecclesiastical context, Africans became aware that the imposition of Western value systems on the church in Africa and the missionary interpretation of the gospel that was 'captive in a European theology' (Baur 1994:289) could not take root in the African soil and be integrated in African peoples' lives. Therefore, early African theologians began not only to consider the place and role of African religio-cultural heritage in African Christianity, but also to reflect on the theological meaning of African religio-cultural heritage in a Christian theology.

## 2.4 EMERGENCE OF AFRICAN THEOLOGY

### 2.4.1 *Des Prêtres noirs s'interrogent* and the Roman Catholic circle

African intellectuals who were studying in Rome around the mid-1950s ventured on a new theological course deviating from the prevailing Western image of Africa. This new intellectual direction was stimulated by anthropological studies on African culture and religions. It made possible a radical re-evaluation of the past discourses on African culture and religions (Mudimbe 1997:73).

With Kagame and Mulago as leading figures, African Catholic theologians started to articulate an African theology.

The term 'African theology' was used first by M. Hebga in a collection of essays written by a group of African and Haitian Roman Catholic priests that was published under the title *Des Prêtres noirs s'interrogent*, in 1956 (Ukpong 1988:67; Mbiti 1998:166).

This publication is considered as the first formal emergence of modern African theology<sup>28</sup> (Mveng 1988:21; Young III 1993:14). The book paid attention to the problem of the indigenization of the faith (Ela 1986:121; Mveng 1988:22) and discussed the matter of relating the Christian message to the life and thought of African people (Ukpong 1988:67).

Young black Catholic priests attempted to respond to the assumption that Africa represented a cultural and religious *tabula rasa* for the imposition of Western Christian civilization (Bediako 1992:349). With an emphasis on the African heritage, the book attempted to emphasize the need to develop a valid theology for Africa that was done in a more genuinely African way (Schreiter 1992:5; Parratt 1995:11).

In this sense, *Des Prêtres noirs s'interrogent* not only indicates the call for a culturally integrated theology but also signifies the passion to fight against theological imperialism (Westerlund 1985:79).

According to Mudimbe (1988:56), *Des Prêtres noirs s'interrogent* is 'the first explicit

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<sup>28</sup> An article written by P. Feuter, 'Theological Education in Africa' was published in the *International Review of Missions* (45) in the same year as *Des Prêtres noirs s'interrogent*. Although Feuter did not articulate what African theology is, he emphasized the importance of 'a truly African theological teaching' (1956:386). In order that the contact between the missionaries and Africans would not be one-sided and fruitless, he suggested a mythical approach to Christian truth. Feuter did venture the suggestion that 'the study of biblical mythology helps towards a clearing away of many misunderstandings on the part of African Christians. And we would claim that it gives us *a background for an African theology* [italics mine], which will express in a language understandable to Africans those truths which we believe to be fundamental to our faith' (1956:388). It indicates that by 1956, as Africa was poised to accelerate political independence, the process of articulating and formulating African theology was under way, in both Protestant and Catholic circles (Molyneux 1993:59).

manifestation of a new radical current’ that represented ‘a solidly nationalist reflection on Christianity.’

This book can be marked as ‘the quest for conscious self-theologizing by Africans’ and African theologians’ ‘cautious steps toward ecclesial and theological emancipation’ (Tienou 2007:216-217).

#### **2.4.2 The Protestant circle**

In the Protestant circle, a conference sponsored by the Christian Council of Gold Coast on ‘Christianity and African culture’ was held in 1955 in the Gold Coast. At the conference Busia and Baëta affirmed continuity between African religion and Christianity (Baur 1994:291). Busia called on the church to ‘come to grips with traditional practice, and with the worldview that these beliefs and practices imply’ (Hastings 1979:119). The 1955 Gold Coast Conference was a significant step toward achieving the search for cultural integrity and spiritual emancipation (Frostin 1988:14).

In 1958, the All African Church Conference sponsored by the Christian Council of Churches in Nigeria, with some financial help of the International Missionary Council, was held at Ibadan, Nigeria. It was the first of several major Pan-African Christian meetings to give impetus to future discussions of the problem of Africanization and the possibility of building on the traditional religious heritage for proclaiming the Christian gospel in Africa (Hastings 1979:120; Parratt 1995:12).

By the mid-1950s and the early 1960s, early African theologians mainly questioned Western theological-ecclesiastical imperialism; they were preoccupied with searching for a way to give Christianity an African colour (Westerlund 1985:79), attempted a critique of missionary theology, and agitated for an African Christianity and theology (Akper & Koopman 2005:7).

### **2.5 DISCUSSION ON THE NECESSITY AND POSSIBILITY OF AFRICAN THEOLOGY**

Developments during this period of discussion on the necessity and possibility of African theology were paved by Vatican II and several papal papers which made a drastic call for the respect for and the dialogue with other religions, and by the All African Conference of Churches which gave impetus to theological development in the Protestant church in Africa.



By the mid-1960s, African theologians had moved away from the critique of the missionary theological method and the agitation for an African theology. They became involved in developing an African theology based on a radical epistemological break with Western theological traditions (Akper & Koopman 2005:12).

Idowu (1965:1) strongly called for the need of such a break and argued the urgency of indigenization of theology in Africa. He intensely argued that ‘the church in Nigeria is losing its relevance by clinging to the Western style and values, and is not responding to the specific tasks of its call to Nigeria.’ Idowu (1965:23) lamented that:

[T]he church in Nigeria has not developed theology which bears the distinctive stamp of Nigerian thinking or meditation. Theologically, she has been spoon-fed by Europeans...what she is told by Europeans, is accepted uncritically and given out undigested preaching and teaching...Christian Nigerians have not yet begun to do their own thinking and to grapple spiritually and intellectually with questions relating to the Christian faith.

His conviction was that ‘the time is not overdue for the church in Nigeria to look at her self; to examine her own soul...to justify her existence in the country; to answer in precise terms the questions as to whether her purpose in Nigeria is not to serve as an effective tool of imperialism’ or as ‘a veritable means to soften Nigerians for the purpose of convenient exploitation by Europeans’ (Idowu 1965:1).

During the late 1960s, ‘the years of a first flowering of African theology’ (Hastings 1979:231), African theologians’ prime concern was to achieve a sympathetic understanding of the traditional religious heritage. The central theme of their writings was the nature of African traditional religions and its relationship of continuity rather than discontinuity with Christian faith (Hastings 1979:231). Hastings (1976:50-51) has rightly noted:

The chief non-Biblical reality which the Christian theologians must struggle is the non-Christian religious tradition of his own people, and African theology in its present stage is shaping as something of a dialogue between the African scholars and the perennial religions and spiritualities of Africa.



### 2.5.1 The ‘Faculté de Théologie Catholique de Kinshasa’ and the Kinshasa debate

An important debate on the possibility of an African theology was organized by the ‘Cercle Théologique’ of the Faculty of Catholic Theology at the Kinshasa branch of the University of Lovanium. The main participants were A. Vanneste (the Dean of the Faculty) and T. Tshibangu (at that time a student of the faculty) on 29 January 1960 (Molyneux 1993:101).

In the debate Tshibangu ([1960]2003:183) argued that the church in Africa must become African and Africanization has to be accomplished in all parts, including ecclesiastical hierarchy and the lay officials. Tshibangu insisted that the Western thought system on which the Western theology builds differs from African thought patterns. He postulated that a theology that was born from the African culture is different from a Western theology based on the Aristotelian-Thomist system of knowledge (Molyneux 1993:101). Tshibangu argued for the feasibility of a theology that was ‘characterized by a Black mentality and logic.’ According to him, a theology with an African colour can be achieved when it takes root in ‘a system and a framework of thought of its own in the African culture’ (Tshibangu [1960]2003:192).

In response to Tshibangu, Vanneste argued that since Christianity has been a universal religion, it must have a theology that has universal validity and be valid for all cultures and races (Vanneste [1960]2003:196). Therefore, theology in Africa, for Vanneste, had to be part of ‘the universal theological endeavor’ (Vanneste [1960]2003:199). He strongly denied the validity of any attempt to integrate elements of African traditional culture and religions into ‘Catholic universal theology’, because certain African ‘primitive conceptions, closer to magic,’ are not useful in the theology as a universal discipline (Vanneste [1960]2003:198-199). Vanneste warned African theologians against over-eagerness to use primitive conceptions in the field of theology, and urged them to take part in a true universal theology. Vanneste ([1960]2003:199) maintained that if African theologians do not collaborate with the progress of Catholic universal theology, they will remain ‘second rate theologians.’

Mudimbe (1988:164) rightly points out the kernel of the matter: ‘Can one reconcile a universal faith (Christianity) and a culture (Africa) within a discipline (theology) that is epistemologically and culturally marked?’

The seminar was organized annually for many years and the debate continued. In 1964 the Faculté de Théologie Catholique de Kinshasa organized its first ‘Semaine Théologique de Kinshasa,’ seeking an open-forum debate on the subject that was important for the church in Africa (Molyneux 1993:107). The fourth ‘Semaine Théologique de Kinshasa’ in 1968 focused on the subject of African

theology. At the seminar, Vanneste, moving away from his earlier position, admitted in part the existence of theological plurality, but that he preferred Christian theology with a universal nature, rather than many localized, specific expressions of theology (Molyneux 1993:105).

Opponents charged Vanneste's position with Hegelianism that integrates diversity, plurality, and multiplicity into a superior synthesis (Molyneux 1993:102). They branded Vanneste as the protagonist of the 'unity-not-plurality position' and also branded others such as Mulago and Tshibangu, as protagonists of the 'plurality-therefore-African' position (Molyneux 1993:103).

The fourth 'Semaine Théologique de Kinshasa' gained a powerful ally in Vatican Council II and post-Vatican II developments that admitted many moral and religious values contained within non-Christian religions, including African traditional religions, to be authentic (Molyneux 1993:104). The fourth 'Semaine Théologique de Kinshasa' (1968) accepted the possibility of an African theology (Molyneux 1993:103). At the same seminar, Mulago rejected the implicit claim of Western theology to be universal and normative, as well as the idea that African theology should be an 'adaptation' of this universal valid theology (Bosch 1984:20)

Through this debate, the possibility and the necessity of African theology had been demonstrated.<sup>29</sup>

## 2.5.2 The Vatican Council II

### 2.5.2.1 The Conciliar documents

Though certain pre-Vatican II documents, such as *Evangelii Praecones* (Pius XII 1951),<sup>30</sup> already displayed a positive outlook on culture and its relationship to the Christian gospel, Vatican II sanctioned a more positive re-evaluation of non-Christian religions and cultures.

The Vatican Council II presented a radical reappraisal of Christian doctrine and practice. The six documents (among sixteen documents emerging from the Council) that had a direct bearing on world mission stressed the role of culture in evangelism (Shorter 1988:186). After the Vatican Council II, the Catholic Church started a process of positive recognition of other religions and cultures, and called for the respect for and dialogue with such religions. Even though African traditional religions, unlike Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, were not mentioned in the Vatican Council II documents, the

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<sup>29</sup> According to Molyneux (1993:105-106), Vanneste gradually moved, in his position, from 'a reluctant skepticism to a cautious affirmation of the possibility and desirability of theology in Africa.' He accepted the term 'African theology'.

<sup>30</sup> '...let not the gospel on being introduced into any new land destroy or extinguish whatever its people possess, that is naturally good, just or beautiful' (Pius XII 1951).

positive attitude of Vatican Council II towards other religions motivated African theologians to rehabilitate African traditional religio-cultural heritage. In consequence, the Catholic Church began to recognize African traditional religions as the legitimate and meaningful religious expression of the African people.

In **Lumen gentium** (the Light of the Nations: the Dogmatic Constitution of the Church, hereafter referred to as LG), the relationship between Church and Culture is not seen in a negative way. All that is good among non-Christians must be regarded as ‘a preparation for the gospel’ (LG 16), and the church have to ‘foster and take...customs of people’ to her in order that ‘she purifies, strengthens, and elevate them’ (LG 13).

According to **Ad gentes** (To All Nations: the Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church, hereafter referred to as AG), Christians should be ‘familiar with their national and religious tradition’ in ‘a spirit of respect and love’ (AG 11) and should discover ‘the seed of the Word’ which lie hidden in non-Christian with joy and reverence (AG 11). The Church can borrow everything - customs, traditions, wisdom and learning which can contribute to praising the glory of the creator - in order to open ways for ‘a more profound adaptation’ in all spheres of Christian life (AG 22).

**Gaudium et spes** (Joy and Hope: the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, hereafter referred to as GS) stresses that the church is not connected ‘exclusively and inseparably’ to any culture, but can enter into ‘a communion with different forms of culture which enriches both the church and the various cultures’ (GS 58).

**Nostra aetate** (In Our Time: Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, hereafter referred to as NA) states that the Catholic Church does not reject ‘those things which are true and holy’ in other religions. The church recognizes that the ways of acting and living, precepts and teaching ‘frequently reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens everyone’ (NA 2). Therefore, it calls for ‘dialogue and cooperation’ with the people of other religions, recognizing, preserving and promoting ‘the spiritual and moral good things as well as the socio-political values’ founded in the followers of other religions (NA 2).

### 2.5.2.2 The post-Conciliar documents

The post-Conciliar documents on Africa showed that the Church took a constructive attitude to the African cultural-religious heritage for the promoting of Christianity in Africa.

In his Message to the countries of Africa, *Africae Terrarum*, Pope Paul VI (1967:8, 14) appraised

the moral and religious values of the African tradition as ‘the basis for spreading the gospel message’ in Africa. The Pope (Paul VI 1967:14) continued to mention the good things in human traditions: ‘that is why the African, who becomes a Christian, does not disown himself [or herself], but takes up the age-old values of tradition “in spirit and in truth”.’

He made another important speech on the dialogue between faith and culture at the Assembly of the Symposium of the Episcopal Conference of Africa and Madagascar in 1969 (hereafter referred to as SECAM). In his speech at the closing of the inaugural meeting of SECAM in Kampala, the Pope (Paul VI 1969) mentioned the diversities of expression of the manifestation of the one faith, and encouraged them that

[F]rom this point of view, a certain pluralism is not only legitimate, but desirable. An adaptation of the Christian life in the fields of pastoral, ritual, didactic and spiritual activities is not only possible, it is even favoured by the Church...And in this sense, you may, and must have an African Christianity.

The Pope (Paul VI 1969) motivated them to ‘formulate Catholicism in terms congenial’ to African culture.

In *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (hereafter referred to as EN) that was promulgated in 1975, Pope Paul VI paid attention to the process of proclaiming the gospel message. The Pope (Paul VI 1975:63) stated that ‘the individual church...has the task of assimilating the essence of the gospel message and of transposing it...into the language that these particular people understand, then of proclaiming it in this language.’

Pope John Paul II, in his Address to the Zairean Bishops in 1980, encouraged Africans to ‘be at once fully Christian and fully African.’ John Paul II (1980) considered the inculturation of the gospel and Africanization of the church as the indispensable effort for incarnating the Christian message in Africa.

Inspired by the Conciliar and the post-Conciliar documents on the role of the culture in evangelism and the relationship of the church to other religions, African Roman Catholic theologians have attempted to have a constructive dialogue with African traditional culture and religions, and have begun to use the traditional cultural categories to interpret the Christian message in the African context in order to achieve ‘Africanization of the church’ and ‘Inculturation of the gospel’ that were the main concerns of the post-Conciliar documents (Martey 1993:64).

### 2.5.3 The All African Conference of Churches

If Vatican Council II has functioned as the important signpost in the development of African theology in the Roman Catholic circle, the main-spring of inspiration for Protestant theology in Africa has been associated with the All African Conference of Churches (hereafter referred to as the AACC) and the theological consultations organized by the AACC and other institutions (Tienou 2007:218).

The formation of the AACC was a response to a need for Christian solidarity uniting African churches of different denominations (Muzorewa 1985:58; Sundkler & Steed 2000:1025). The AACC has taken a piloting role in providing direction to the growing suggestions for new forms of theology and Christianity in Africa (Maluleke 1997:5).<sup>31</sup>

The AACC which was officially inaugurated in 1963 in Kampala provided the Protestant church in Africa with a ‘symbol of unity’ and ‘something of a common sense of direction’ (Hastings 1979:120). It also facilitated the Africanization of the Christian gospel and the Christianization of certain African religious beliefs (Muzorewa 1985:63).

With regard to the unity and common sense of direction of Church and theology in Africa, Munga’s observation (1998:81) deserves to be noted:

The unity of African theology is one of inspiration and motive, but not a unity of form or theological interpretation. The hermeneutical approaches of African theology ought to take as their point of departure the complexity and plurality of the African situation.

#### 2.5.3.1 The AACC Assemblies

The AACC Kampala Assembly (1963) recognized that African people did not feel at home in their new faith because the Christian faith had been presented in Western form. In response to the Western oriented church and theology, the Assembly called for ‘an adequate and clear theology’ for African people (Martey 1993:64; Muzorewa 1985:58; Munga 1998:70).

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<sup>31</sup> The church in Africa lacked solidarity in the sense of ‘an inter-Africa and inter-denominational relationship’ (Hastings 1979:120) because African churches were closer to the home churches of their particular mission society than with African churches of other denominations (Muzorewa 1985:58). The disunity or lack of solidarity in African churches seemed to be caused by Western denominationalism. In the early 1960s, a prominent Lutheran Church leader said that ‘when you missionaries leave, our Churches will all unite into one body’ (Sundkler & Steed 2000:1025).

The AACC Abidjan Assembly (1969) demanded ‘an expression of Christianity’ which would be meaningful to the African people in their own cultural, historical, political, economic and social context (Fashole-Luke 1975a:394), and offered a tentative definition of African theology: a theology that is expressed in African thought form which comes from the philosophy of the African, based on biblical faith and speaking to the African soul (Muzorewa 1985:64). This tentative definition presented the significant components of African theology, that is, the Bible and the African culture (soul) and worldview (philosophy) (Muzorewa 1985:65).

The AACC Lusaka Assembly (1974) stressed African selfhood in the theology of the incarnation (Muzorewa 1985:63), and called for a moratorium of missions, including personnel as well as finance from outside Africa.<sup>32</sup> The call for a moratorium was to have a period for equipping African churches with self-determination and maturity (Muzorewa 1985:71; Munga 1998:70). Muzorewa (1985:71) says that the call for a missionary moratorium is ‘a call for self-reliance.’

### **2.5.3.2 The Theological Consultations and Conferences**

At the Ibadan theological consultation that was held under the auspices of the AACC in 1966, African theologians attempted to reflect on and interpret biblical revelation in the idioms of African beliefs and thought patterns, and insisted on continuity between biblical revelation and African beliefs. The introductory statement affirmed that, especially with regard to the knowledge of God, African peoples’ knowledge of God in their pre-Christian religious heritage was continuous with the knowledge of God in the Bible (Dickson & Ellingworth 1969:16). At the consultation, African beliefs became the base upon which the biblical revelation was to be re-interpreted for African people.

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<sup>32</sup> After World War II the relationship between Western missions and Third World churches underwent a drastic change. The first indication of change came from Kenyan church leaders. When John Gatu, the president of the Presbyterian Church in Kenya, was invited to the USA, he challenged Western missions, saying that ‘the time has come for the withdrawal of foreign missionaries from many parts of the Third World, that the Churches of the Third World must be allowed to find their own identity and that the continuation of the present missionary movement is a hindrance to the selfhood of the Church.’

Canon Burgess Carr, the general secretary of the AACC, argued that ‘the debate about a moratorium is not about individuals as such. It is a debate about the structure of exploitation, spiritual exploitation at that.’ Of course, there were some local African Churches that rejected the moratorium because of theological reason; the Church is one and should be interdependent. On the whole the attitude of the Catholic leaders in Africa to the moratorium issue in the 1970s was cautious and hesitant, with the exceptional case of the Catholic Yaounde. Fr. Eboussi Boulaga said ‘let Europe and America as a priority evangelize themselves. Let them plan in good order the departure of the missionaries from Africa’ (Sundkler & Steed 2000:1027-1029).

The Ibadan Consultation gave ‘a foretaste of the future of theology in Africa’ (Fashole-Luke 1975a:394) and made an epistemological and methodological break with the Western theological traditions with a recognition of the African traditional religious heritage as one of the important sources for formulating a theology and interpreting the Bible in Africa. The Ibadan Consultation, says Mbiti (2003), marked a major turning point in African theological scholarship, especially in respect of the rejection of the European theological tradition. Mbiti (2003) regarded the Ibadan Consultation as the formal recognition of the existence of modern African theology.

The Dar es Salaam Conference (1971) discussed the issue of black identity and solidarity against white racism. The participants stressed the need of a theology that articulates the issues of the political, economic, social and spiritual domination of blacks by whites. There was a direct contact between African theologians and Black theology of Liberation from USA (Fashole Luke 1975a:394).

At the Makerere University Consultation (1972), African theologians emphasized that African theology should not be divorced from the everyday life of the church in Africa (Muzorewa 1985:88). The consultation can be summarized in Mbiti’s emphasis on Christianity and theology in Africa:

Christianity must be relevant to the life and affairs of our continent...we have to Africanise Christianity, that is, give it an indelible African character...we have to produce a type of Christianity here which will bear the imprint MADE IN AFRICA.

(quoted by Fashole-Luke 1975a:396).

The Accra Consultation (1974) noted that African and Black American theologians can expand their understanding of certain issues by sharing their experience, and the consultation stressed a prophetic voice of theology and participation in the struggle for the total liberation of Africa (Fashole-Luke 1975a:397).

During the mid 1960s and the early 1970s, African theologians went beyond the tentative questions as to the legitimacy of such a theology, and reached a position where the question was no longer the feasibility but the elaboration of that theology (Molyneux 1993:105). Beyond the preoccupied notion of the criticism of the missionary theological method, African theologians took decisive action to break with the Western theological methodology, and attempted to incarnate the Christian gospel and Christianity into the African context, emphasizing its continuity with African cultural-religious heritage and experience.



By the early 1970s, the long discussion about the necessity and possibility of African theology had passed, and African theology had already emerged and taken root on the continent as a vital entity (Hastings 1979:293; Fashole-Luke 1975a:394). Both critics and sceptics kept either silence about African theology, or reluctantly recognized the existence of African theology (Mbiti 2003).

## **2.6 DIVERSIFICATION OF AFRICAN THEOLOGY**

The journey from the 1966 Ibadan theological consultation to the Conference of Ecumenical Dialogue of Third World Theologians at Dar es Salaam in 1976 took ten years. Within these years, there was remarkable progress in African theology. African theologians were required to prove the validity of their affirmations and to consistently intensify the theological and epistemological foundation of their assertions. After the 1976 Dar es Salaam conference, various proposals made in the previous phase began to be embodied in the diversified and varied theological trends.

The Conference of Ecumenical Dialogue of Third World Theologians at Dar es Salaam in 1976 and The Pan-African Conference of Third World Theologians at Accra, Ghana in 1977 provided a platform not only for discussing the varied perspectives on the contemporary African issues, but also for suggesting the diversified way of doing theology in the Africa context (Munga 1998:71).

### **2.6.1 The Conference of Ecumenical Dialogue of Third World Theologians**

The first meeting of the Ecumenical Dialogue of Third World Theologians was held in Dar es Salaam in 1976. The theologians focused not only on the indigenous cultural and religious traditions on the various continents, but also on the issue of socio-political, racial and economic conditions (Torres & Fabella 1978:259-271). In view of the fact that the Third World was suffering from economic exploitation and cultural domination of the First and Second Worlds, the purpose of doing theology was defined as the creation of a new world order and a new humanity, which is founded on justice, brotherhood and freedom (Torres & Fabella 1978:259; Shaw 1998:277). The question of political liberation for black South Africans from white minority domination was seriously addressed in the papers delivered by Buthelezi (Torres & Fabella 1978:56-75) and Boesak (Torres & Fabella 1978:76-95).

The discussion at the conference concluded that Third World theologians must reflect on the



current Third World situation and interpret the Word of God in relation to that situation in order that the gospel of Jesus Christ should be relevant to the people (Torres & Fabella 1978:269). The conference rejected an academic type of theology that was divorced from praxis, stressed the theological task to be with the poor people with their struggle for liberation, and urged theologians to be critically engaged in the reality of the Third World (Torres & Fabella 1978:269-270).

The conference founded an Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (hereafter referred to as EATWOT), aiming at ‘the continuing development of the Third World Christian theologies which will serve the church’s mission in the world and witness to the new humanity in Christ expressed in the struggle for a just society’ (Torres & Fabella 1978:273). The Dar es Salaam conference was, to some extent, dominated by Latin American theologians who prefer a socio-political and cultural analysis, more precisely, Marxist analysis of societies (Fashole-Luke 1975a:399). African theologians’ ideological concerns widened (Akper & Koopman 2005:14).

## **2.6.2 The Pan-African Conference of Third World Theologians**

Whereas the 1966 Ibadan Consultation concentrated on one main issue, i.e. the relationship between Biblical revelation and African beliefs, the Pan-African Conference of Third World Theologians held in Accra, Ghana in 1977 placed itself in the wider framework of ‘the realities of Africa’ (Appiah-Kubi & Torres 1979:193; Mbiti 2003). The Final Communiqué of the Conference (Appiah-Kubi & Torres 1979:193) declared:

African theology must be understood in the context of African life and culture and the creative attempt of the African peoples to shape a new future that is different from the colonial past and the neo-colonial present. The African situation requires a new theological methodology that is different from the approaches of the dominant theologies of the West...Our task as theologians is to create a theology that arises from and is accountable to African people.

The Final Communiqué stressed the need for a new theological methodology that was different from the Western tradition, which would allow African theologians to create a theology that ‘arises from and is accountable to African people’ (Appiah-Kubi & Torres 1979:193). It presented three characteristics of theology, which arose from the commitment to the struggle for the liberation of the

people: (1) African theology, as contextual theology, must be relevant to the African context; (2) African theology, as liberation theology, must stand against ‘all forms of dehumanization,’ such as racism, socio-economic exploitation, and the oppression of Africans by white colonialism as well as by blacks; and (3) African theology should struggle against sexism, taking seriously the role of women in the church and in doing theology (Appia-Kubi & Torres 1979:194).

Toward this goal, the Conference decided to form an Ecumenical Association of African Theologians (hereafter referred to as EAAT), and also decided to publish a theological journal which would serve the entire Africa. The first volume of *Bulletin of African Theology* was published in 1979 (Appia-Kubi & Torres 1979:194).

The 1977 Accra Conference indicated the beginning of diversification in African theology and led to varied theological articulations in a plurality of contexts in Africa (Mbiti 2003).

### **2.6.3 Diversification of African theology**

Whereas in the late 1960s and the early 1970s theologians concentrated on the matter of the encounter between the Christian gospel and African traditional culture and religions, after the mid-1970s African theologians added issues of political injustice and economic inequality to the earlier emphasis on the cultural continuity with African culture (Hastings 1979:233; Shaw 1998:227).

#### **2.6.3.1 African liberation theology**

The entry of liberation theology from Latin America into Africa was triggered by EATWOT (Dar es Salaam, 1976). The focus of this theology was the poor socio-economic conditions in Africa and the struggle for better social conditions. The issue of poverty was emphasized as the main theme. The final statement issued at EATWOT (Torress & Fabella 1978:270) stated that

We call for an active commitment to the promotion of justice and the prevention of exploitation...racism, sexism...[T]his...means being committed to a life style of solidarity with the poor and involvement in action with them...in their struggle for liberation.

African liberation theology seeks genuine human promotion in the context of the poverty and political powerlessness of Africa, and takes the form of Christian reflection within that context. The final communiqué of the Pan African Conference of Third World theologians in Accra, Ghana 1977 (Appiah-Kubi & Torres 1979:194) stated that

African theology must be liberation theology. We see the need to be liberated from socio-economic exploitation...there is the oppression of Africans by white colonialism, but there is also the oppression of black by black.... [The gospel] demands our participation in the struggle to free people from all forms of dehumanization.

Christians are required to participate in the struggle not only with the colonial past but also with the new African ruling class who are exploiting the poor.

Ela (1988:vi) argues that ‘liberation of the oppressed must be the primary condition for any authentic inculturation of the Christian message.’ According to Ela (1988:173), African theology lacks ‘socio-analytic mediation’, and therefore he urges African theology to pay attention to the issues of poverty, injustice and human exploitation in Africa.

### **2.6.3.2 South African Black Theology**

Factors such as the policy of separate development in South Africa, American Black Theology, African nationalism, and the Civil Rights Movement in the USA, influenced the emergence of South African Black Theology in the late 1960s (Parratt 1995:156).<sup>33</sup> Due to its unique historico-political situation, the agenda of theologians in South Africa was the racial problem and politico-economic issues rather than religio-cultural issues that preoccupied theologians in other parts of Africa.

The discussion about South African Black Theology started in 1970 through the seminars held by the University Students Christian Movement that was organized by Basil Moore, and began to take shape during the 1970s as a theological response to the dehumanization of black people (Parratt 1995:159).

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<sup>33</sup> The Black Consciousness Movement, as a collective black negation of white supremacy that aimed to win liberation of black people from all forms of oppression in the South African society, motivated black Christians to reflect on the Christian gospel in the struggle of black South Africans against the dominance by white South Africans (Parratt 1995:159).

Maimela (1998:114-116) identified three trends of South African Black theology: the Black Solidarity trend, the Black Solidarity-Materialist trend and the non-racial trend.

**The Black Solidarity trend**, which covers the period from 1970 to 1980, emerged in South Africa during the first phase of Black Theology (Maimela 1998:114). This trend stressed the promotion of solidarity among black people and black theologians in the struggle for the liberation of the oppressed black people. Goba, Boesak, Tutu, Buthelezi, Motlhabi and Ntwasa were theologians who displayed this trend (Maimela 1998:114; Phiri 2004:148). It highlighted white racism as the root cause of all evils in their social analysis of the oppression of blacks (Maimela 1998:115).

**The Black Solidarity-Materialist trend** emerged in the late 1970s, especially after the banning of black consciousness organizations and was more pronounced in the early 1980s (Phiri 2004:148). It gained prominence after the revival of the Black Theology Project under the Institute of Contextual Theology (hereafter referred to as ICT) (Maimela 1998:115). The Black Theology Task Force of the ICT carried on the work of organizing and transmitting ideas on the biblical perspective from a wide spectrum of South African theologians. The aims of ICT were to ‘develop methods of doing theology in the context of the real life of ordinary people’ (Phiri 2004:144). The emphasis shifted from a race to a class struggle. Black theologians who represented this trend used Marxist and Neo-Marxist analyses to unveil the racial capitalism in South Africa (Martey 1993:25). Maimela, Mofokeng, Mosala, Modoma, Sebidi, and Tlhagele argued that ‘class divisions’ were determined by ‘racial divisions,’ and thus ‘the systematic concentration of material wealth and political powers’ under the white racial divisions justified ‘a rigid racially-based class structure’ (Maimela 1998:115-116).

In the 1980s, **the non-racial trend** softened the traditional consciousness that stood on no alliance with the white ‘democrats’ or ‘progressives’ (Maimela 1998:116). This trend did not limit Black Theology and theologians to the principles of the Black Consciousness Movement. The representatives of this trend, such as Buthelezi, Boesak, Chikane, Govender, Smangaliso, Mkhathshwa and Tutu, cooperated with liberal whites (Phiri 2004:148), and emphasized the need for solidarity with the poor and oppressed (Maimela 1998:116). For them, the definition of the oppressed and liberation is inclusive of race, class and gender (Phiri 2004:148).

During the apartheid era, South African Black theologians focused on the social situation of racism and oppression in South Africa. Whereas the theological exploration of the traditional African culture and religious experience was African theologians’ main interest, for South African Black

theologians the reflection on the condition of inequality and oppression in South Africa and the struggle for liberation from the all forms of oppression became the prime agenda of their theology (Bediako 1994:14). After apartheid, the theological climate in South Africa has changed markedly, and has since been seeking new theological ways relevant to the changed society and context.

### 2.6.3.3 African theology and Black Theology

Mbiti ([1979]1993:380) describes American Black Theology as ‘being full of sorrow, bitterness, anger, and hatred’, and contends that Black theology and African theology have developed in different historical backgrounds and contemporary situations (Mbiti [1979]1993:382). According to Mbiti ([1979]1993:380), African theology arose from the Africans’ ‘joy and experience of the Christian faith’ (Mbiti [1979]1993:380), whereas American Black theology originated from ‘the pain of oppression.’ Mbiti ([1979]1993:381-382) asserts that ‘racial color is not a theological concept in Scripture,’ so that American Black Theology can not and will not become African theology.

Sawyer (1987:25) argues that Christianity is ‘the only hope for unity among all men’, and a *Theologia Africana* which is ‘a mythological term, expressive of love for a continent or commitment to an ideal’, should provide ‘a common medium by which Africans and non-Africans...could begin to think together...’ Therefore, a *Theologia Africana* ‘must not be based on such contemporary factors brought about as in the USA’, which implicitly excludes certain Christian groups.

Fashole-Luke (1975b:75) maintains, based in part on Sawyer, that African theology is a inclusive definition which excluded no one because the gospel is for everyone, but in Black Theology that originated from the situation of oppression of the black people, non-blacks are excluded from participating in the creation of Black Theology. Fashole-Luke (1975b:75) emphasizes that African theologians in South Africa should overcome the racial tensions. Sawyer, Fashole-Luke, and Mbiti stress that Christian theology must exceed the matter of racism and should be ‘conciliatory’ in tone (Schoffeleers 1988:109).

These theologians focus on the particularity of the African traditional culture and religions which explains their critical stance on American and South African Black Theology. Mbiti wants to distance African theology from American Black Theology, and by implication, treats South African Black Theology in an equally negative way as he treats the American Black Theology. Mbiti ([1979]1993:383) evaluates Moore’s *Black theology: the South African voice* is ‘no more than an echo of American Black Theology.’ According to Mbiti, the main weakness of Black Theology is an

‘excessive preoccupation with liberation’ and ‘dangerously idolatrous emphasis on blackness’ ([1979]1993:381). For Mbiti, the relevance of Black Theology for Africa is ‘either non-existence or only accident’ ([1979]1993:383).

The proponents of Black Theology are equally critical of African theology. To black theologians, African theology is not sensitive to certain socio-political affairs, and fails to articulate the situation of dehumanization of the black people on theological level.

Tutu (1978:368-369) contends that African theology has not succeed in dealing with the situation of dehumanization of the black people, and has failed to produced ‘a sufficiently sharp cutting edge.’ Instead of being a prophetic voice, African theology encourages ‘a facile and cheap alliance between culture and Christ’ ignoring the fact that Christ is the judge of human culture (Tutu 1978:368).

Although Buthelezi does not repudiate the past cultural heritage, he (1973:19-21) argues that the exploration of African traditional culture and religions degenerate into a romanticization of the African past. In view of fact that African theology finds its point of departure in the past traditional heritage, for Buthelezi, nostalgia for the past, in African theology, performs a more decisive role than theology (Bosch 1974:7). Buthelezi emphasizes the dehumanization of the black people as the point of departure of South African Black Theology; he even states that ‘to be theologically honest, one need not conduct first the situation in which our grandfathers lived’ (quoted by Bosch 1974:7).

For South African Black theologians, the root of the problem of African theology is its concern with the past and its ignoring of the concrete existential realities of black people.

Nevertheless, there have been attempts to reconcile the two. In spite of his critique on African theology, Tutu ([1979]1993:392) recognizes himself as both an African theologian and a South African Black theologian. He argues that the two theologies co-exist as complementary perspectives, not as antagonists but as soul mates.

To Cone, without the indigenization of theology, the interpretation of the gospel will be separated from people’s life situation. Without liberation, however, a theological expression will be isolated in the particularity of its cultural context. Therefore, Cone ([1979]1993:400) maintains that

the relation between indigenization and liberation does not have to be antagonistic...we need both emphases...I contend therefore that indigenization and liberation belong together.

### 2.6.3.4 African Evangelical theology

Contemporary African evangelical theologians, such as Tokunbo Adeyemo, Osadolor Imasogie, and Tite Tienou, agree that evangelicals are Christians who are committed not only to the Good News of Jesus Christ as the entirety of God's special revelation, which is the whole Bible, but also to the authority of the Word of God as their 'rule of faith and practice' (Tienou 1982:9; 2007:214; Breman 1996:33). African evangelical theology is more conservative in their understanding of the relationship between the Christian gospel and the African cultural-religious heritage. They posit the Bible as the only authoritative source in determining theology. The context may help to set the agenda, but the Bible alone provides the answers to the African situation. Mbiti (2003) mentions some characteristics of evangelical theology: theology based on the Bible, mission oriented theology, Christo-centric theology and evangelical contextual theology.

Although the dominant tradition of the Protestant church in Africa was generally conservative (Parratt 1995:63) and the evangelical circle in Africa had been theologically active before the 1970s,<sup>34</sup> the first African evangelical who entered into the debate on African theology was Byang Henry Kato (1939-1975), 'the founding father of modern African Evangelical theology' (Ferdinando 2005:169). It emerged first as 'an apologetic critic towards African theology in general' in the 1970s (Mbiti 2003).

By the mid-1970s, African conservative Christians felt that the interpretation of the Bible seemed to be endangered, and the liberals were perceived to undermine the authoritative position of the Bible (Sundkler & Steed 2000:1026). Kato started to criticize African theology that threatened, in his view, the future of 'Biblical Christianity in Africa' (Kato [1975]1987:57; Ferdinando 2004:170).

There was a debate between Kato's evangelical biblical theology and Mbiti's alleged 'universalist'

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<sup>34</sup> The African Evangelical Conference was held at Limuru, Kenya in 1966. This meeting was originally called the Pan-African Conference of Evangelicals, later changed officially to the African Evangelical Conference (Breman 1996:14). In a sense of crisis due to the activities of the Ecumenical Movement, the Conference was organized in order to rectify the isolation and lack of united witness of many evangelical churches (Breman 1996:15).

The purpose of the Conference was to study the biblical basis of Christian unity, to bring evangelical leaders into closer contact with one another, to discuss the problems affecting evangelicals in Africa in order to find a renewed vision and new approaches to the problems, and to consider the formation of an All African Fellowship of Evangelicals. Although the conference was initiated by missionaries, it was not for mission societies but for African churches (Breman 1996:16). The conference ended in forming the Association of Evangelicals of Africa and Madagascar (hereafter referred to as the AEAM), since 1993 called the Association of Evangelicals in Africa (hereafter referred to as the AEA).

The objectives of the AEA are the following: (1) to provide a spiritual fellowship and cooperation among evangelical Christians; (2) to manifest the unity of evangelical Christians that is based upon belief in the infallibility of the Bible; (3) to promote evangelism and the strengthening of the spiritual life and ministry of the churches; (4) to alert Christians to spiritual dangers that would weaken the Scriptural foundation of the faith; and (5) to assist one another by giving special services and to provide representation before governments or other agencies (Breman 1996:15).



theology (Bediako 1992: 386-425).<sup>35</sup>

According to Kato, theology in Africa is increasingly turning to African traditional religions rather than to the Bible ([1975]1985:42), thus two theological tendencies, universalism and syncretism seem to emerge in African theology ([1975]1985:42). Kato ([1975]1987:13) diagnoses the situation in Africa: ‘man is searching for personal identity, and this makes the continent fertile soil for syncretism.’ Kato ([1975]1987:11) says that ‘the stage is well set for universalism in Africa.’ He maintains that the uncritical integration of the African religious heritage with African theology is unhelpful. Kato ([1975]1987) identifies universalism and syncretism in the works of Mbiti and Idowu, and in the ecumenical movement as unfolded in the AACC.

As a reaction against both the Western liberal theological tradition and African theology, Kato is bound to certain non-negotiable presuppositions. To Kato, the most important non-negotiable basis of conservative evangelical belief is the divine inspiration of the Bible, its infallibility, and its ultimate source and authority on all matters of faith and conduct and for all legitimate theological expression (Breman 1996:30-31; Ferdinando 2004:172). On this principal basis, Kato insists on the radical discontinuity between the Christian gospel and the African traditional cultural-religious heritage in response to the suggestion of an ‘integral Christianity’ based on an essential continuity between the biblical revelation and the African traditional religious beliefs (Kato [1975]1987:38; Ferdinando 2004:169). Kato ([1975]1987:38) asserts that ‘the beliefs of African traditional religions only locate the problem...Christianity is a radical faith and it must transform sinners radically.’

Bediako, in his *Theology and Identity* (1992), criticizes Kato’s radical discontinuity between the African traditional religious heritage and Christian beliefs. According to Bediako (1992:391), Kato’s claim concerning the African traditional religious heritage is the reproduction of ‘the earlier missionary perception of Africa as *tabula rasa*.’ Bediako (1992:414) maintains that Kato never considered ‘an integrating framework for rooting the Christian faith in African tradition’ because of his ‘negative and unsympathetic posture’ towards the African cultural-religious heritage.

According to Bediako (1992:414), in Kato’s schema of the relationship between the Christian faith and the African tradition, Africans ‘come to the Christian faith religiously and spiritually empty’. In Kato’s view, there was ‘no cultural reading or apprehension of the gospel’ because

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<sup>35</sup> Parratt (1995:63) maintains that Kato stirred controversy superfluously. Parratt says that ‘it would probably be true to say that although the dominant tradition in African Protestant Christianity remains broadly conservative, the lines are much less sharply drawn than in the West. In this perspective, the debate Kato introduced in Africa was largely a foreign controversy.’ However, Ferdinando argues against Parratt’s claim. Ferdinando (2004:170) asserts that some clarification was required, even though there were no sharp lines between the conservatives and the liberals, not in order to introduce a ‘foreign controversy’ but to make the Church realize the issues to come. In this view, Kato played a prophetic role.



cultural factors had no any part in shaping one's understanding of the gospel, and 'the gospel itself was cultureless' (Bediako 1992:413). In this regard, according to Bediako, Kato desired to materialize the very antithesis of the fundamental grounds articulated by the African theologians (Bediako 1992:386).

African evangelical theologians have evaluated Kato's approach to African traditional religions from various angles. Ferdinando (2004:172) vindicates Kato from a charge of being succumbed to 'Western value-setting' (Bediako 1992:391). Ferdinando (2004:172) says that

[F]or Kato, an African Christian self-identity rooted to...a pre Christian and non Christian religious tradition was ultimately self-defeating...Kato believed there had to be a radical break with traditional belief, in favor, not of Western theology, but of the gospel itself.

In fact, Kato takes African contexts seriously. He does not deny the fact that there is a need for expressing theology in an African context. Kato himself recognizes the importance of indigenous theology and its necessity. Kato ([1975]1987:16) claims that 'the noble desire to indigenize Christianity in Africa must not be forsaken. An indigenous theology is a necessity.' To Kato, however, the context is not the source of theology (Tienou 2007:220). Kato's warning is against elevating African cultural-religious heritage to the status of revelation (Molyneux 1993:76).

In spite of his critique of Kato's theological position, Bediako (1992:413) argues that Kato's persistent assertion of the centrality of the Bible for doing theology in Africa should be appreciated as his most important contribution to modern African Christian thought.

The Lausanne Conference, which was held in 1974, inspired African evangelical theology towards new heights. From the Lausanne Conference, a national fellowship of evangelicals has grown. The Lausanne covenant, one of the fruits of the Conference, gave an impetus to African evangelical theologians to put a new emphasis on the positive relationship between the gospel and culture, committed to the uniqueness of Christ and a Christ-centred view of the kingdom of God (Shaw 1998:279).

Kato's successors in the AEA, such as Tokunbo Adeyemo, Tite Tienou, Osadolor Imasogie, Justin-Robert Kenzo, see the issues that Kato addressed negatively in a more positive evangelical light, without denying their commitment to the centrality of the Bible for theology (Tienou 2007:220).

### 2.6.3.5 African Women's theology

African Women's theology focuses on the reinterpretation of the gospel in accordance with the specific situation of women in Africa. Women's issues and the voices of women theologians were not taken into consideration in the early debate about African theology. However, the situation is now rapidly changing.

The establishment of the EATWOT (Dar es Salaam, 1976) has played a significant role in providing African women theologians with a forum to raise their voices and network. The EATWOT conference in 1983 formed a special Women's Commission in which women could share their ideas and theologies of liberation (Frederiks 2003:69-70).

In 1989 the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians emerged through the activities of Mercy Amba Oduyoye, and led African women theologians to articulate the situation of oppressed women in Africa and to develop a liberation theology for African women (Frederiks 2003:70).

African women theologians like Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Isabella Phiri, Denise Ackermann, Elizabeth Amoah, Nyambura Njoroge, Musimbi Kanyoro, and Theresia Hinga have emerged with 'new conceptual tools' that make theologians reflect on theological ideas in a different way of thinking than it used to be two decades ago (Munga 1998:13).

Oduyoye (1986a:121-135) argues that women's experience should be 'an integral part of the definition of being human' and 'part of the data for theological reflection.' The most crucial source of African Women's theology is women's experience of oppression, not only in the socio-economic and political structure, but also in the religio-cultural sphere.

Therefore, African women theologians criticize the oppressive socio-cultural aspects and elements that dehumanize and marginalize women in both society and church (Martey 1993:83). It implies that the African customs and traditions that put women in a state of inferiority and subjugation alongside male are not appreciated by African women theologians.

African women theologians articulate the on-going dialogue between the Christian faith and the African culture on the one hand, and simultaneously pay attention to the problem of the socio-political and economic systems on the other hand.

## 2.7 EMERGING TRENDS OF AFRICAN THEOLOGY

The most recent phase in development of African theology can be characterized by the re-examination of methods, ideas, and proposals for a more relevant theology and Christianity in Africa.

There has been an attempt to suggest a new concept for African theology. Jesse Mugambi (1995) and Charles Villa-Vicencio (1992) propose a paradigm shift in African theology from ‘liberation and inculturation’ to ‘reconstruction’ because those theological concepts are no longer adequate in the changed world, that is, the New World Order or the post-apartheid era.

While Moses as the warrior was the hero of liberation, theology of reconstruction suggests Nehemiah, the post-exilic nation-builder as a model for Africa’s social reconstruction and transformation efforts (Nkansah-Obrempong 2007:146; Carney 2010:551).

The theology of reconstruction originated in the 1990s and the proponents of this theology include Ka Mana and Andre Karamaga.

Reconstruction theology, to some extent, does not directly articulate how former enemies could share life together, and its optimistic vision of church-state collaboration has been shaken by the obstinancy of dictatorship in Africa like Liberia’s Charles Taylor, Zimbabwe’s Robert Mugabe, or Sudan’s Omar Bashir (Carney 2010:552).

While reconstruction theology has not disappeared, but faded from the academic scene in the 2000s, there has been the emergence of a new paradigm of African theology, that shifts its focus from the motif of reconstruction and social transformation to that of reconciliation (Carney 2010:552).

Reconciliation grew out of the long-standing suffering of ethnic and political conflict in areas like Northern Uganda, Nigeria, and Burundi (Carney 2010:553). Therefore, some theologians like Emmanuel Katongole, Desmond Tutu, and John Rucyahana pursue to hold together the vertical and the horizontal reconciliation, recognizing that love of God cannot be separated from love of neighbor (Carney 2010:552) and that theology retains a prophetic or liberative dimension, helping the church maintain critical distance from the state (Carney 2010:554).

The movement of AICs is one of the most prominent theological trends that deserve to be considered. There is an enormous body of literature available on the AICs, but most of those studies have been done by outsiders treating the AICs largely as ‘object’ of study (Mbiti 2003).

Mbiti comments on the Final Communiqué of the 1977 Accra conference that listed the AICs as one of the five sources of African theology: ‘It was a “technical” mistake at Accra, to put AICs into a category of theological sources’ (Mbiti 2003).

Recently, there have been calls to regard the AICs not only as sources of African theology but also as subject of African theology (Maluleke 1996b:50). Mbiti maintains (2003) that the AICs deserve to be the subject in doing theology, i.e. becoming active in doing theology themselves.

## 2.8 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

For the early African theologians, the crucial question to scrutinize was ‘how could the Christian gospel be proclaimed authentically and effectively to the African people in a way that is meaningful and relevant to them?’

In the process of seeking an answer to the question, African theology began to be formulated. As pointed out in this chapter, African theology emerged not *ex nihilo*, but in continuum with the historical context. The origins of African theology have progressively materialized through various factors. It means that the emergence and development of African theology should be discussed as a process of intersection in which the previous theological agenda are used as the base upon which the present theological arguments are built (Akper & Koopman 2005:8).

According to Mudimbe (1988:59-79), a remarkable increase of interest in traditional religions stimulated African scholars to study African traditional religions with the supposition that evolutionary anthropologists’ and missionaries’ work in general are not reliable, even inadmissible. The Africanization of Christianity as a response to the nationalists’ ideological urges for political and cultural emancipation caused a separation between Christianity in Africa and Western Christianity (Mudimbe 1988:59, 79). Consequently, African characteristics were introduced into the church and theology in Africa. Such factors contributed to the progressive construction of African theology.

Muzorewa (1985:55-56) asserts that Pan-Africanism and African nationalism provided the framework within which African theology emerged. According to Muzorewa, African theologians were obliged to respond to the political wind of change and to reinterpret the Christian gospel in terms of Africanization and indigenization articulated by nationalists and Pan-Africanists decades before the very beginning of African theology.

In this sense, African theology in its origin is, to Muzorewa, mainly ‘the result of a response of theologians to African nationalists.’ According to him, African theology in origin is or seems to be a theological version of African nationalism. He asserts that the overlap between the concerns of the African nationalists and the African theologians were illustrated in the coincidence of the All African Churches Conference at Ibadan in 1958 and the All African Peoples’ Conference at Accra in 1958 and the All African Conference of Churches at Kampala in 1963 and the Organization of African Unity at Addis Ababa in 1963. He postulates a causal connection in the emergence of these entities and concludes that these organizations are ‘complementary, at least ideologically’ (Muzorewa 1985:46-56). Muzorewa (1985:55-56) also maintains that the task of African theology is to formulate theological interpretations on issues that the African nationalism articulated. Therefore, the African theological task will not be completed without being involved in the African political world.

It can not to be denied that the early African theologians were inspired by Pan-Africanism and African nationalism. Muzorewa’s argument that some aspects of African theology have their origin in African nationalism is partly correct.<sup>36</sup>

Nevertheless, an indelible impression is that Muzorewa has tried to reduce the complexity of causes to one factor. Muzorewa overemphasizes the political situation and nationalist ideologies as a factor influencing the emergence of African theology. Muzorewa (1985:54-56) argues that African theology has been influenced by both (New World) black nationalism and African nationalism, and thus African theology and South African Black Theology must take a common stance on certain issues, specifically the racial problem, because it was one of the earliest issues of American black activists and later African nationalists.

As this study revealed, however, there were many other factors besides Pan-Africanism and African nationalism. Therefore, Muzorewa’s assertion that the agenda for African theology has been set by African nationalism is to reduce the various factors influencing the origin of African theology and African theologians’ theological motivations in the political sphere. In this regard, Muzorewa’s

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<sup>36</sup> African nationalism that functioned as the most effective ideology for fighting against the colonialism became an ideology that gave legitimacy, to some extent, to the dictatorship model in African leadership. The nationalist ideology that was regarded as a tool effecting revolutionary changes became a tool perpetuating the *status quo*. The oppression of blacks by blacks had not been given attention until the 1977 Accra conference.

It is important to note that African theologians are not eager to criticize their governments or leadership even though a misuse of power is evident. When they feel compelled to criticize political decisions, they usually do not use the same sharp cutting edge that they used to use for Western imperialism. On government level, both capitalist governments and socialist governments oppressed intellectuals who criticized them from a socialistic perspective (against capitalism) or capitalistic perspective (against socialism). As Mazrui points out, this phenomenon resulted in the decline of intellectualism in Africa (Mazrui 2005).

interpretation of the emergence of African theology seems to be biased through his own nationalist political ideology. It amounts to a distorted account of the emergence of African theology.

While some African theologians, such as Idowu, were closely connected with nationalist ideology, it could not be said of all African theologians.

African theology emerged as a reaction to the imposition of Western ecclesiastical-cultural values on the church in Africa. It also emerged as an attempt to reclaim Christianity with an African face by revitalizing Africa's rich cultural-religious heritage and consciousness (Tutu 1978:367; Goba 1998:20). The theological question of how African Christianity and theology could honour African cultural identity by reaffirming the African past without losing its Christian identity became one of the most important issues on the theological agenda. It means that modern African theology emerged as a theology of African Christian Identity (Bediako 1992:xvii).

Bediako (1992:xvii) maintains that modern African theology is a response to missionaries' derogatory attitude towards the African cultural-religious traditions, and a theological response to the matter of how the Christian gospel has to be interpreted authentically and adequately in order to be meaningful for and relevant to African Christians.

In this sense, modern African theology came to be articulated as a theological reaction to the prevailing and dominant Western interpretation of the Christian gospel in Africa, keeping pace with political-cultural ideological critics of the nationalist movements on the one hand, and a process of the quest for African Christian identity in order that its theological articulation becomes relevant to the African cultural context and faithful to the content of the Christian faith on the other hand.

Having investigated the origins and development of African theology and a variety of definitions of African theology, this study will take a look at two African theologians' reflection on the understanding of God.

Before this study moves on to the understanding of God in African theology, it will be useful to investigate briefly the concepts of God in African traditional religions because African theologians begin their discussion with reference to the relationship between the Christian concept of God and the African traditional concepts of God.

## CHAPTER 3

# THE CONCEPTS OF GOD IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGIONS

### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

Africans are ‘notoriously religious’ (Mbiti [1969]1975:1) and know the existence of God almost ‘by instinct’ (Mbiti [1969]1975:29). How are Africans, however, aware of God? What concepts of God have they had?

An element of the culture of the people should be understood in the whole cultural framework, and the whole cultural framework cannot be comprehended until each element of the culture has been understood. In this ‘paradox of anthropological research’ (Middleton 1970), the concept of God of one ethnic group should be discussed in the whole cultural framework of the people. The research, however, limits the discussion to the African concepts of God only as far as it is relevant to the purpose of this research, because the fuller examination of the whole culture of the people lies outside the scope of the present research.

This chapter, therefore, is intended as a comparative study of the African concepts of God,<sup>1</sup> and the aim of investigating the concepts of God is to pave a way for discussing the understanding of God articulated in African theology.

The investigation of the concept of God will be done in sampled cases, not in an exhaustive survey of all African ethnic groups. In order to avoid an overgeneralization of the concepts of God in Africa, first, specific ethnic groups’ understandings of God will be investigated, and then the differences as well as similarities concerning the concepts of God among the various ethnic groups in Africa will be observed.

During the research concerning each ethnic group’s concept of God, the ethnic group will be dealt with in geographical division. It does not mean, however, that the similarities among the ethnic

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<sup>1</sup> The investigation of African concepts of God, in this part, does not contain my own field work data. The sources and data treated herein are drawn from detailed studies of different societies made by various scholars including both African and Western scholars. The field of investigation is limited to Africa south of the Sahara.



groups are always found in the neighbouring people, and the differences always follow the distant geographical areas. The geographical division is just for convenience.

Through this research, the researcher has used the word ‘God’ for the Supreme Being of African traditional religions, and when the researcher needs to designate His own name, the researcher has mentioned God by the name that is used as the local name by each ethnic group. For the lesser gods, especially in West Africa, the researcher has not used their individual names because there are too many different names, so instead the researcher has used the term ‘divinity’ or ‘divinities,’ or called them by their own generic name.

### **3.1.1 The necessity of studying African Traditional Religions**

In order to comprehend the understanding of God articulated in African theology, it is necessary to deal with the religions of Africa in general and the African concepts of God in particular. There are reasons for this claim:

Firstly, African traditional religions have been one of the most important theological sources and determinative factors for articulating the Christian gospel in the African context. As has been pointed out in the previous chapter, African theologians, especially African Inculturation theologians, have sought to interpret the Christian gospel in the traditional African religio-cultural context. They have been concerned with a credible basis and satisfactory conceptual framework to articulate a theology that may come to be accepted as part of the people’s way of life. So they have argued for the use of the African traditional thought systems as a conceptual framework for African theology. Accordingly, African theologians have admitted African religio-cultural traditions to occupy a prominent place in their efforts to articulate African theology. Consequently, African religio-cultural traditions function as a determinative factor for understanding the gospel, interpreting the Bible, and formulating a theology that would be intelligible to African peoples (Du Toit 1998:374-390).

Secondly, in spite of the impact of modernization and the world religions, such as Islam and Christianity, African traditional religions have never declined in strength, instead, they have resurged (Tienou 2000b). Even in the field of African theology, the resurgence of the traditional religious values has been more than an anti-Western stance. It has been an attempt to ‘feel at home’ (Sawyer 1987:26) and an ‘effort aimed at clarifying the nature and meaning of African Christian identity’



(Bediako 1992:4). It means that traditional religio-cultural value systems are still the underlying worldview of African peoples, including quite a number of African Christians (Gehman 1989:18; Oborji 1998:131), and will remain as a significant dimension in the context of African Christian mission for the future (Tienou 2000b).

For these reasons, a brief study of the African traditional religions cannot be ignored or neglected. Rather, it is necessary in order to clarify the issue of the close link of the African concepts of God with the Christian concept of God in African theology.

### 3.1.2 The place of African Traditional Religions in African Theology

As being presented at the 1966 Ibadan Consultation, the biblical revelation and the African beliefs became the ‘two foci’ of doing African theology.

At the 1977 Accra Conference, a list of sources for practicing theology was drawn up: (1) the Bible and Christian heritage; (2) African anthropology; (3) African traditional religions: the beliefs and practices of the traditional religions in Africa can enrich Christian theology and spirituality; (4) the AICs; and (5) Other African realities (Appiah-Kubi & Torres 1979:192-193).

Among African theologians, Pobee (1987:31-33; 1979:20-21) regards the Bible, the tradition of the Church, and the revelation in African religion as the sources of African theology.

Fashole-Luke (1975a:407-410; 1975b:78-83) lists the sources of African Christian theologies: (1) the Bible as the primary and basic source of African theology; (2) African Traditional Religions and Philosophies; (3) the theological heritage of the Western churches; and (4) the experience of various churches in Africa and their oral theologies including the AICs.

According to Muzorewa (1985:89-95), (1) African traditional religions; (2) the Bible; (3) the AICs; and (4) the Christian tradition provide African theology with theological insights.<sup>2</sup>

Judging from the abovementioned points, it can be said with a fair amount of certainty that African traditional religions function as an important source to formulate African theology.

The use of African religio-cultural traditions as a conceptual framework for articulating African theology, however, has provoked a great deal of controversy.

Conservative evangelicals like Kato, Adeyemo, Tienou, Turaki, and Ngewa argue that there is a

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<sup>2</sup> Muzorewa (1985:5-74) lists the sources of African theology: (1) African Traditional Religion; (2) the coming of Christianity to Africa in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; (3) the AICs movement; (4) African nationalism; and (5) the AACC.

critical and radical difference between the biblical revelation and the African beliefs. For those evangelicals, relatively little attention has been paid to the African religio-cultural traditions in doing theology. To them, African theology has become ‘nothing more than a justification of conservative cultural ideology’ (Van der Merwe 1989:277), overlooking or omitting the question of the propriety of African religio-cultural traditions as a determinative factor of doing theology.

Viewed from the evangelicals’ methodological perspectives, most African theologians have not questioned the principles that govern the appropriation of African traditional religions in African theology and the criteria that discern inclusion or exclusion of certain aspects of African religio-cultural traditions among or from African theology. Therefore, the acceptance of the African traditional religio-culture and thought systems as the conceptual framework has been a crucial issue.

This issue will be discussed further when the study comes to discuss the matter of the methodology of African theology.

## **3.2 A PROFILE OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGIONS**

### **3.2.1 A definition of African Traditional Religions**

Various terms have been used for describing religions of Africa: Animism<sup>3</sup>, Idolatry, Paganism and Heathenism, Dynamism, Totemism, Naturalism, Witchcraft, Magic, Juju,<sup>4</sup> Ancestor worship, Primitive religion, Fetishism<sup>5</sup>, African Traditional Religions and so on (Kato [1975]1987:18-24; Idowu 1973:108-134; Mbiti [1969]1975:6-10).

African scholars regard these terms as ‘inadequate’, ‘derogatory,’ and ‘prejudicial’ (Mbiti [1969]1975:7) and as products of Western travelers’, missionaries’, and scholars’ ‘ignorance and false certainty’ (Idowu 1973:86). In the eyes of African scholars, religions of Africa have been

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<sup>3</sup> Tylor defined animism, which was derived from the Latin, *anima* for the soul, as ‘the belief in spiritual beings’ and as ‘the root of all religious faith’ (Parrinder 1968:20). By this, he meant that peoples believe that animals and even non-living objects have life, personality and soul. Tylor thought that religion began with animism, and evolved into polytheism, and finally into monotheism (Gehman 1989:33).

<sup>4</sup> The word that derived from the French *jou-jou* means ‘toy’, ‘a little doll’ (Idowu 1962:2).

<sup>5</sup> Fetish came from the Portuguese word ‘*fetico*’, which was used to refer to the charms and sacred emblems of West Africa (Idowu 1962:2). In 1760 Charles de Brosses maintained that religion originated in the ‘fetish’ phenomenon: natural objects, such as trees, mountains, waters, pieces of wood, are imbued with sacred, divine and magical powers that humans may invoke (Ray 1976:5). Comte theorized that religion evolved from fetishism as ‘a general theory of religion’ to polytheism and finally monotheism. This was the prevalent naturalistic theory from the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century until the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Gehman 1989:33).

misunderstood, misapprehended and misinterpreted for a long time (Mbiti [1969]1975; 1975a; Idowu 1973; Ikenga-Metuh 1987).<sup>6</sup>

By the 1950s and 1960s, however, the intellectual environment had changed.

Some anthropologists attempted to approach African religions in a sympathetic way, and argued that African religions should be described in their own right (Parrinder [1954]1968; Evans-Pritchard 1956; Taylor 1963; Shaw 1990:183). The term, African Traditional Religions, is used as the most comprehensive term to designate the religions of Africa in current studies.

In Africa, religion is embodied in a social and political organization, material culture, law, custom and physical environment (Smith 1950a:14). For the African, he/she is in a religious drama that starts before his/her birth and continues after his/her death. The African is 'a religious being' and 'religion is in his/her whole system of being' (Mbiti [1969]1975:3). Religion, in Africa, says Mbiti ([1969]1975:15), is 'an ontological phenomenon; it pertains to the question of existence or being.'

Ikenga-Metuh (1987:17) defines 'African Religion' as 'institutionalized patterns of beliefs and worship practiced by various African societies from time immemorial in response to the "supernatural" as manifested in their environment and experience.'

According to Ferdinando (1999:8), African Traditional Religion is 'the expression conventionally employed to refer to the traditional religious practices and beliefs of those peoples of Africa living south of the Sahara.'

The adjective 'traditional' does not imply that the religions of Africa are either dead or dying religions, nor does it mean that the beliefs are either 'past' or believed by 'non-modern' Africans. It signifies that the indigenous religions of Africans have existed from immemorial past and have been handed down from the ancestors, through all generations, to the present African peoples (Dopamu 1991:21).

African Traditional Religions can, therefore, be defined as 'the indigenous religious beliefs and practices that have permeated the whole life of African people.'

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<sup>6</sup> Idowu (1973:86-92) divides the development of the study of African traditional religions into three periods: (1) period of ignorance and false certainty: prior to the nineteenth century, Africa as a dark continent was, for Western peoples, 'barren of culture or any form of social organization'; (2) period of doubt and resisted illumination: Andrew Lang, N. Soderblom and W. Schmidt suggested that the primitive peoples had knowledge of God. Schmidt even maintained that the 'high God' was found in the primitive people, suggesting their religion was monotheism; and (3) period of intellectual dilemma: instead of repudiating the concept of God in Africa, the Western scholars invented 'evasive means' to distinguish the African concept of God from the Western concept of God.

### 3.2.2 African Traditional Religion or African Traditional Religions?

Over the past few decades, a considerable number of studies have been conducted on the African traditional religions in general and on specific themes in particular. There is, however, very little agreement among scholars of religion in Africa on the use of the form for the general designation of the religions of Africa: African Traditional Religion or African Traditional Religions?

The crucial point of the matter of terminology is of the homogeneity or multiplicity of indigenous religious beliefs in Africa (Shorter 1977:38-60; Ikenga-Metuh 1987:5-10).

Taylor (1963:27) prefers to use the singular form of the term because it is ‘a basic world-view which fundamentally is everywhere the same’ over wide areas of the continent, although there is a religious and cultural heterogeneity in Africa.

For Parrinder (1968:11), African societies are very homogeneous, and the resemblances in the religious sphere are far more important than the differences.

Idowu (1973:103-104) argues that ‘African Traditional Religion’ in the singular form can be used because there is ‘a common Africaness about the total culture and religious beliefs and practices of Africa’ and the concept of God that is represented in similarity throughout the continent.

Shorter (1975:1) maintains that the common feature of a ‘separate and self-contained system’ justifies the use of the term ‘African Traditional Religion’ to designate the African religious patterns.

Ikenga-Metuh (1987:20) is convinced that, ‘in spite of some differences in the beliefs and practices of different African communities, they show a substantial agreement and should be discussed as variations of one common religious tradition.’

Scholars who uphold the singular term, African Traditional Religion, put their emphasis on the underlying similarities or a great homogeneity among the various religious systems of the African peoples, even though they recognize the religio-cultural varieties on the continent.

To scholars who warn against the generalization of the diversified religions of Africa, the imposition of a unitary framework on all traditional religions in Africa is highly problematical.

Booth (1977a:3) argues that religious beliefs and practices, such as gods, spirits, ancestor veneration, initiation ceremonies, witchcrafts, and evil spirits demonstrate ‘a considerable variety from place to place’ in Africa, and that the profusion of religious phenomena does not justify the use of ‘African religion,’ but only ‘African religions.’

Mbiti describes the religions of Africa as ‘African Traditional Religions’ in the plural form. Mbiti

([1969]1975:4) maintains that African societies have varied social, political and economic structures, and ‘each society has its own religious system’ that closely interrelates with the social structure. Mbiti ([1969]1975:1, 3-4) writes:

Africans are notoriously religious and each people has its own religious system with a set of beliefs and practices....a great number of beliefs and practices are to be found in any African society. These are not...a systematic set of dogmas which a person is expected to accept...there are no sacred scriptures....Traditional religions are not universal; they are tribal or national. Each religion is bound and limited to the people among whom it has evolved...each society has its own religious system...An outsider cannot enter...fully the religion of another society.

Hastings (1976:51) insists that the profusion and variety of religions of Africa that are closely connected with varied social, political and economic structures can hardly be called one religion. The common elements and similarities shared in religions of Africa can possibly be found beyond the continent, that is, among all the religions of the world (Hastings: 1976:51). It means that the similarities among the religious beliefs of different people cannot demonstrate that all African societies have one and the same religion. The African continent is so diverse and myriad, so that, as Hastings (1976:51) argues, ‘it would be a miracle indeed if all had had substantially the same religion.’

Although there are similarities among the expressions of religious beliefs and practices of different people on the African continent, the similarity of one ethnic group with other groups should not be exaggerated, and furthermore similarities may not be applicable to all African societies. Similarities within religious beliefs are attributed to the universal aspects of religious belief systems that can be found not only in Africa but also in the other religions in the world. The significant differences represent the unique character of a religion, and thus the differences cannot be minimized or overlooked.

‘The so-called Pan-African studies’ (Ferdinando 1999:9) neglects the considerable uniqueness, diversity and complexity within each people. The fact that there is no one codified system of beliefs and practices sharing one historical origin makes us be cautious not to use African Traditional Religion in the singular form for all African religious beliefs and practices.

For these reasons, there is considerable validity in an assertion that each set of religious beliefs in

their social and environmental contexts should be maintained, and thus the profusion and particularity of religious phenomena in Africa needs to be designated not ‘African Traditional Religion’, but ‘African Traditional Religions.’

To sum up the discussion we have considered thus far, it can be argued that ‘African Traditional Religions’ (hereafter referred to as ATR(s)) in the plural form is the proper term to designate ‘the indigenous religious beliefs and practices that have permeated the entire life of African people.’ However, it does not mean that certain similarities of religious beliefs and practices are unimportant or negligible.

### **3.2.3 Basic beliefs of African Traditional Religions**

Throughout Africa there is, to a certain extent, a wide spread belief in the Supreme Being, the spiritual world and mystical powers (Gehman 1989:10). Parrinder (1968:25) portrays African religious beliefs in the spiritual universe with a triangle: at the apex is the Supreme power, on one side of the triangle are the gods or natural forces, and on the other side of triangle are the ancestors, while the earth is at its base. Smith (1950a:16) classifies African beliefs into three categories: theism, spiritism and dynamism.

It should, however, be kept in mind that there is a great variety of beliefs of the ATR(s). The West African peoples have many gods or divinities (Parrinder 1968:43), and they usually recognize five categories of spiritual beings among the ATR(s): (1) the Supreme Being; (2) the divinities; (3) spiritual forces; (4) ancestors; and (5) magical powers (Idowu 1973:139; Ikenga-Metuh 1987:65).

The peoples of Central and Southern Africa have not developed a belief in the divinities or lesser gods (Parrinder 1968:43). Many Bantu peoples pay attention to the ancestral spirits (Gehman 1989:136). In consequence, four categories of spiritual beings are recognized by them: (1) the Supreme Being; (2) nature gods or spiritual forces; (3) ancestors; and (4) magical forces or powers (Ikenga-Metuh 1987:63).

In the case of the Murle of southern Sudan, however, they neither fear the spirits, nor seek their blessing or help from ancestral spirits, though they have a belief in ancestral spirits (Gehman 1993:136).

Although there is a slight difference of emphasis among the Nilotic peoples, the West African

peoples, and the Bantu peoples, the basic religious beliefs in spiritual beings can be classified in four categories: (1) belief in the Supreme Being or God; (2) belief in the divinities or lesser gods; (3) belief in the ancestors; and (4) belief in spiritual forces and the use of magic, charms, amulets and spiritual powers (Turaki 1999:69).

### 3.2.3.1 Belief in God or the Supreme Being

Most African scholars agree with Mbiti's assertion (1975a:45) that the belief in God is 'at the center of African Religion and dominates all its other beliefs.' Although some African peoples have a vague concept of God, according to African scholars, Africans are claimed to have a belief in one God who is commonly conceived of as the Creator of all things (Mbiti [1969]1975:39-41; 1975a:49; Thorpe [1992]1994:31). The Igbo God known as *Chineke* is the Creator (Idowu 1969b:27; Uchendu 1963:95). *Ngewo*, God of the Mende, is recognized as the Creator of the universe (Sawyerr 1970:66-67). Among the Ambo, *Kalunga* is conceived of as maker of heaven and earth (Dymond 1950:140). Ruanda-Urundi peoples believe in one Creator, who is named *Imana* (Guillebaud 1950:181). *Mulungu* is commonly spoken of as Creator (Young 1950:59). God in Africa is often associated with the sky, and is believed to be the giver of morality and the judge of human beings (Nyamiti 1977:1).

However, it does not mean that all African peoples have a homogenous or unified concept and worship system of God.

The monarchical Ashanti worship God and offer sacrifices to God regularly, while the equally centralized Yoruba do not have an organized worship for God. Both the Igbo and the Kikuyu are the much less centralized and more individualistic peoples. The Kikuyu have regular worship of God whereas the Igbo do not (Parrinder 1968:32). Some peoples such as the Ngombe easily approach God whenever they need to (Davidson 1950:165), but other peoples are not allowed to access God unless they approach Him through the intermediaries, such as the divinities or ancestral spirits (Nyamiti 1977:3).

God is usually not approached, except as a last resort in desperate times. The general picture of God in Africa is that there are no regular prayers, cults or specific forms of worship that are usually directed to God, except in a few cases, such as the Dogon, the Ashanti, and the Kikuyu, which have temples, priests and regular worship (Parrinder 1968:37-39).

There is a widespread belief that God once used to dwell on earth, but he retired to the sky because of human faults. This view of early ethnographers and anthropologists described the African



God as a *deus otiosus* or *remotus* (Thorpe 1994:30).

Many African scholars, however, maintain that God is neither a *deus otiosus* nor a *deus absconditus* since he is never far from an African's life and thought (Thorpe 1994:31). He is rather 'urgently real' (Idowu 1962:202).

### 3.2.3.2 The divinities or lesser gods

In the ATR(s), there are a number of superhuman beings, such as divinities or lesser gods, a variety of nature spirits created by the Supreme Being, and ancestral spirits.<sup>7</sup> A belief in spiritual beings falls into three categories: ancestral spirits, nature spirits and divinities or lesser gods.

The spirits are the 'common' spiritual beings beneath the status of divinities, and above the status of men (Mbiti [1969]1975:78). As for the origin of spirits, some spirits are considered to have been created as a 'race' of spirits (Mbiti [1969]1975:79). Most peoples, however, seem to believe that the spirits are discarnate human spirits after physical death (Smith 1950a:23; Mbiti [1969]1975:79). The majority of peoples hold that the spirits dwell in the woods, bush, forest, rivers, lakes, hills, mountains, special stones or just around the villages (Mbiti [1969]1975:80; Thorpe 1994:33). More importantly, they are thought to ontologically to be 'nearer' to God and to communicate directly with God (Mbiti [1969]1975:80).

The divinities are commonly believed by the African peoples to be 'agents' of the Supreme God, with specific functions for people and society (Parrinder 1968:71; Ezeanya 1969:42; Mbiti [1969]1975:81; Mitchell 1977:26). Although sacrifices are rarely offered to God, but frequently to the divinities, God is commonly believed to be the 'ultimate recipient' of sacrifices offered to the divinities, who may be explicitly referred to as 'intermediaries' between God and human beings (Mbiti [1969]1975:58; 1975a:63, 66; Ezeanya 1969:37). The divinities are believed to be charged with a particular function for the particular people or community, and therefore, each particular divinity has a local name that is meaningful in its sphere (Idowu 1973:170). Each divinity has its own shrines, priests, and devotees who regularly worship the divinity (Mitchell 1977: 26; Ikenga-

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<sup>7</sup> According to Mbiti ([1969]1975:75), the spirits in the spiritual world of African peoples belong to the ontological mode of existence between God and man. The spiritual beings can be categorized into the nature spirits, which never were human and the discarnate human spirit which were once human beings (Mbiti [1969]1975:75; Smith 1950a:23). These can be subdivided into divinities, associates of God, and ordinary nature spirits and the living dead (Mbiti [1969]1975:75). Smith (1950a:23) labels the belief in and the practices connected with the belief in the spiritual beings as 'Spiritism.' The nature spirits are prominent among the Sudanic Negroes, and the spirits of human beings, in the Bantu cosmology, are given a greater place than by the Sudanic (Smith 1950a:23).



Metuh 1987:132; Thorpe 1991:91).

Parrinder (1968:44) says that, mainly in West Africa, ‘we find fully-developed polytheism’ that is ‘like the polytheism of Egypt, Greece and India’ because of its large pantheon of the divinities that have their temples and priests.

However, Idowu rigorously rejects the notion that the Yoruba religion is polytheism. Idowu (1962:54) argues that ‘the divinities have executive powers only in so far as he [God] permits them.’ In the social etiquette of the Yoruba, those in superior positions must be accessed through intermediaries. As the reflection of social etiquette, the Yoruba approach *Olódùmarè* through his ministers: ‘once the divinities have been offered their worship, the divinities in their turn will transmit what is necessary to *Olódùmarè*’ (Idowu 1962:142).

Divinities play an important role among the West African peoples, while they are generally rare among the East African peoples (Parrinder 1968:43-44; Mitchell 1977:26; Thorpe 1994:32). The Bantu generally believe in natural or local spirits that may be spirits of the departed (Parrinder 1968:43).

### 3.2.3.3 The ancestors

Ancestral spirits or the ancestors play a very important role in the thought and life of the African people (Parrinder 1968:57; Ezeanya 1969:43) with the possible exception of the Ga, the Nuer, the Tiv (Thorpe 1994:32), and the Murle of southern Sudan (Gehman 1989:136).

Several terms have been suggested to designate the spirits of the departed.

Mbiti ([1969]1975:85) prefers to use the term ‘spirits’ or the ‘living-dead’ to describe the spirits of the departed. The terms ‘ancestral spirits’ and ‘the ancestors’ are, says Mbiti ([1969]1975:85), inadequate terms because the terms ‘imply only those spirits who were once the ancestors of the living,’ and exclude the spirits of the departed like ‘children, brothers, sisters, barren wives and other members of the family who were not in any way the “ancestor”.’ According to Mbiti ([1969]1975:83), the departed of up to five generations are in the state of personal immortality, and their process of dying is not yet complete. Mbiti names them as the living-dead. The living-dead who have not yet become ‘things’, ‘spirits’, or ‘its’ are partly spirit, and partly human (Mbiti [1969]1975:83, 85). They are still part of their human families. Their living descendants still remember them by their names. When they are no longer remembered by name, then the living-dead

complete the process of death and move into the past (*Zamani* in Kiswahili). They become impersonal spirits, mere 'its'. Mbiti ([1969]1975:79, 84) calls them 'a spirit,' or 'a thing,' or 'IT.' They are no longer within the context of genealogical remembrance or in the chain of the intermediaries (Mbiti [1969]1975:84).

Ikenga-Metuh agrees with Mbiti in the use of the term, the 'living-dead' to designate all the departed on the one hand, but argues that the term can not be a substitute term for 'ancestral spirits' or 'the ancestors' on the other hand (Ikenga-Metuh 1987:146). In most African societies, not all people are allowed to be ancestors at their death. The people who die at an old-age having offspring with good moral lives and are buried with proper funeral rites satisfy some of the essential requirements by which the dead are installed as ancestors (Ikenga-Metuh 1987:147). Only the spirits of the departed who are qualified become the ancestors.

For these reasons, Ikenga-Metuh affirms that the term 'the ancestors' or 'ancestral spirits' can be used for the departed who were elevated to the status of ancestors. The term, 'living-dead', can be designated to all those who departed naturally. The term, 'ghosts', can be reserved for the departed who were not buried with a proper ritual or died badly, such as hanging, drowning, bad diseases or death during pregnancy and then turned into wandering malignant spirits between this world and the next (Parrinder 1968:60; Idowu 1973:174; Ikenga-Metuh 1987:147).

The living and the dead live in symbiosis and are interdependent (Smith 1950a:24). The ancestors as heads and part of the families and communities are believed to have an interest in the family and community affairs. They are thought to be able to aid or hinder them or to promote prosperity or cause adversity. The living, therefore, are responsible to remember their own ancestors for a period of three or four generations, by offering gifts consisting of specific pieces of sacrificial food and drink (Thrope 1994:32). The living also try to secure the ancestors' blessing or to appease the ancestors' anger by offering various sacrifices. Any evil, drought, famine, sickness and death are thought to be due to the ancestors (Parrinder 1968:59-61). The ancestors are conceived of as invisible police of the families and communities, and guardians of tradition and ethic, and thus any offence against the tradition is an offence against the ancestors (Mbiti [1969]1975:83).

Although they are partly 'human' and partly 'spirit' (Mbiti [1969]1975:85), the ancestors are, however, no longer living human beings. In some prayers and sacrifices, the ancestors, who are, to some extent, thought of as intermediaries between God and man, are invoked together with the Supreme Being and the deities (Ikenga-Metuh 1987:156).

The ancestors are respected on the one hand, and at the same time they are feared and not really welcomed by the living, on the other hand. Mbiti ([1969]1975:84) mentions an ambivalent attitude toward the ancestors or the living-dead: ‘the food and libation given to the living-dead are paradoxically acts of hospitality and welcome, yet of informing the living-dead to move away.’

The place and role of ancestral spirits differ between different parts of Africa. The ancestral spirits are less developed and less prominent among the Yoruba and the Ga in West Africa, while the role of ancestral spirits seems to be more important than the Supreme Being among the Southern Bantu (Smith 1950c:133; Parrinder 1968:57-58, 69). Parrinder asserts that the reason for this is that the Yoruba people occupied themselves with the divinities (Parrinder 1968:58; Thorpe 1994:34). In general, where a belief in ancestors predominates, fewer divinities are recognized, and where there are divinities with specialized functions and attributes, the ancestral spirits, although they are recognized, carry less importance.

### **3.2.3.4 Spiritual forces**

It is commonly believed among the African peoples that there are mystical powers and people who have the power of access to the mystical powers with both good and evil purposes (Mbiti [1969] 1975:198, 202-203).

Smith calls the belief in the mystical powers ‘dynamism’. With this term Smith (1950a:83) means that ‘belief in mysterious powers which manifest themselves in charms, medicines and curses, and the powers can be employed for both social and anti-social purposes, whether for protection or for destruction.’

African peoples have been affected directly as well as indirectly by the beliefs and practices associated with mystical powers such as magic, sorcery and witchcraft (Mbiti [1969]1975:198).

Magic, which is generally considered to be either ‘good magic’/‘white magic’ or ‘evil magic’ /‘black magic’ (Gehman 1989:69), is the manipulation and use of impersonal power for people’s own purposes and benefits through ritual and ceremony (Gehman 1989:67).

The use of good magic for protection against the evil powers, and for the welfare of the community is accepted by the societies (Mbiti [1969]1975:198; Gehman 1989:69).

The medicine-man, diviner and rainmaker are those specialists who use their knowledge and manipulate the mystical powers for ‘curative, protective, productive and preventive’ purposes (Mbiti

[1969]1975:198, 203). Africans wear or keep charms, amulets, medicines, and a variety of other objects as ‘vehicles of metaphysical energy’ in order to be protected from evil magic and also be blessed with good fortunes (Mbiti [1969]1975:203; Smith 1950a:29).

Evil or black magic is intended primarily to harm people, property and society. It is associated with sorcery and witches, and is feared by people and society (Gehman 1989:69).

Sorcerers and witches<sup>8</sup> use and manipulate ‘medicines’ and ‘mystical and innate powers’ for anti-social and harmful activities (Middleton & Winter [1963]1978:3; Mbiti [1969]1975:199, 203).

### **3.3 APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGIONS**

#### **3.3.1 Difficulties to study African Traditional Religions**

Many and varied studies have been made on the subject in monographs and articles. Some scholars have explored the religious beliefs and practices of a particular African ethnic group and their society in detail (Evans-Pritchard 1956; Lienhardt 1961; Nadel 1954; Uchendu 1963; Middleton 1965).

Others have ventured to investigate a single theme of the ATR(s), covering the whole African continent or a part of sub-Saharan Africa (Danquah 1944; Smith 1950; Idowu 1963; Mbiti 1970a; Nyamiti 1977; Nyamiti 1984; Sawyerr 1970; Uzor 2003).

Other scholars have surveyed the ATR(s) in general and produced introductions to the ATR(s) (Parrinder 1968; Taylor 1963; Mbiti [1969]1975, 1975a; Ray 1976; Mitchell 1977; King 1986; Ikenga-Metuh 1987).

There have, however, been difficulties to study the ATR(s) due to: (1) the absence of sacred scriptures and the lack of written texts or proper documentation that result in the ‘amorphous nature of religious beliefs’ (Parrinder 1968:17; Mbiti [1969]1975:4; Ferdinando 1999:12; Ikenga-Metuh 1987:1); (2) prejudices against the ATR(s) that are caused not only by collections of random

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<sup>8</sup> Both are enemies of the people and greatly feared by them. Their works are, however, different. The sorcerer and the witch are distinguished as ‘day-witch’ and ‘night-witch’ (Parrinder 1968:117).

Witches harm people by their inherent ability, and witches’ activities may be regarded as spiritual and extraordinary things, which are beyond the ordinary human beings’ capabilities (Middleton & Winter 1978:3), while sorcerers make people sick or kill people by evil magical means such as harmful ingredients or true poison (Parrinder 1968:123).

According to Evans-Pritchard (1937:387), among the Azande, a sorcerer uses ‘the technique of magic and derives his power from medicines, and a witch ‘acts without rites and spells and uses hereditary psycho-psychical powers to attain his ends.’

observations and superficial opinions of travelers and colonial agents, but also by early evolutionary anthropological studies and the old bias of Christianity against the ATR(s) (Uzor 2003:27-37; Imasogie 1985:3-4; Ray 1976:2); (3) the profusion of religious beliefs and practices and the myriad of language groups on the African continent (Parrinder 1968:17; Mbiti [1969]1975:1-4); (4) the tendency to overgeneralization; attempts to establish the existence of a single, identifiable ATR by omitting the diversified and verified religious systems on the African continent and by imposing a doubtful unity on very diverse material, without considering the concrete socio-religious context (Ferdinando 1999:9); and (5) the matter of ‘hidden agenda’:<sup>9</sup> the interpretation has been influenced by the different approaches and positions of the researchers.<sup>10</sup>

### 3.3.2 Approaches to the study of African Traditional Religions

The study of ATR(s) in general and of the specific themes of the ATR(s) has mainly been carried out by social and cultural anthropologists and scholars of religious studies. For the purpose of this research, a brief overview of the several approaches to the study of ATR(s) will be dealt with to see how African theologians approach ATR(s).

#### 3.3.2.1 British functionalist approach

The reaction against the evolutionist approach<sup>11</sup> to the study of ATR(s) came about through

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<sup>9</sup> With this term, Kgatla (1997:634) means that ‘the underlying prejudices that emerge from a critical analysis of scholarly approaches to the study of other religions.’

<sup>10</sup> In the case of an outsider, the researcher’s perspectives of his/her own culture, or the traditional western analytical categories of theology, such as monotheism, polytheism, or pantheism, can influence the interpretation of ATR(s) (Ferdinando 1999:13-14). In the case of an insider, he/she might be influenced by African nationalism (Ikenga-Metuh 1987:3; Westerlund 1985:44-48, 53-55; 1991:19; 1993:46) or an apologetic consideration towards the ATR(s) (Ferdinando 1999:16). Ferdinando (1999:16), agreeing with Westerlund, maintains that ‘apologetic consideration’ has influenced African scholars. African scholars who have studied the ATR(s) have attempted to present a continuity between the ATR(s) and the Christian gospel on the one hand, and to assert the assumption of the unity of the ATR(s) to reinforce ‘the often fragile unity of the modern African nation state,’ on the other hand.

According to Westerlund, anthropological study that presents the ATR(s) as entities as bound by local culture is not proper, in Africa, politically and religiously. In the political situation where unity is needed, ‘the unifying perspective of comparative research on African religions may serve a more or less explicit political function’ (Westerlund 1991:19). Westerlund (1991:20) argues that a complete ‘inside view’ that can only be presented by the actual believers themselves is almost an impossibility in a scholarly description of the ATR(s).

‘Converted scholars,’ who once were adherents of a religion, says Kgatla (1997:635), can have an ‘inside view,’ and an inside view should be given the highest priority, or more priority than the view of a pure outsider.

<sup>11</sup> In the evolutionist approach in the late nineteenth century, all societies were supposed to be in the process of evolution during which they move from simple and primitive societies to complex and rational societies (Gellner 1999:10).

British functionalism. British anthropologists generally give more priority to the study of the sociological aspects of African culture, such as the kinship system, the political and social organization, but less attention to the ‘cosmological and symbolical dimensions’ of peoples’ lives (Ray 1976:7).

With regard to religion, the British school of anthropology that had been influenced by Durkheim<sup>12</sup> has focused on functions of religion in the social order. Ray (1976:7) summarizes the British anthropologists’ emphasis on the study of ATR(s) as follows:

How mythology served as a ‘character’ which legitimated sociopolitical institutions, how ritual ‘maintained’ the social order, how religious ideas ‘reflected’ the social structure. Myth, ritual, and symbolism were investigated more as functional components in the social machinery than on their own terms as intellectual phenomena.

Malinowski, who views society as a functioning whole, explains all customs, social institutions, and practices of society, even religion in terms of their functions in the social mechanism; how the various social, politico-religious aspects of African societies basically function to contribute to the satisfaction of individual needs, both material and psychological (Gellner 1999:16-17; Seymour-Smith 1986:176).

For Radcliffe-Brown, society is regarded as an organism, and various subsystems within society are understood in terms of how each system functions adequately in the society. Religion seen as one of the factors of the social cohesion is analyzed in its contribution to maintaining the social structure (Gellner 1999:19).

In social anthropology, the religious beliefs and practices of various peoples must be understood in their own social context within which they function. For this reason, the study of a particular people and society is emphasized, and thus this approach is particularistic (Ikenga-Metuh 1987:5).

There is, however, no room for a religious function of religion itself. The function of religion in the society deprives the religion of the religious meaning. The beliefs and practices of the ATR(s) are then reduced to mere sociological, psychological, or political devices that serve the whole society (Ikenga-Metuh 1987:6), and are therefore portrayed as ‘merely a “reflex” of the social order’ (Ray 1976:8).

Evans-Pritchard approaches the study of ATR(s) in a new way, shifting from function to meaning.

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<sup>12</sup> For Durkheim, who treated religion in terms of its social function, religion is a product of the cumulative mind of society, and thus cannot be understood separately from the social context (Westerlund 1993:47).

He attempts to understand the religious beliefs and practices of the Nuer people within their own universe of thought (Ikenga-Metuh 1987:6). Although the features of religion are understood ‘in terms of totality’ of the social structure of religious beliefs, he also tries to ‘describe and interpret’ the religion as ‘a system of ideas and practices in its own right’ (Evans-Pritchard 1956:320).

### 3.3.2.2 French structuralist approach

The French school of anthropology focuses on the philosophical dimension of peoples as determinant of social structure. The French structuralists argue that African religious systems are not simply reflections of socioeconomic relations but coherent and autonomous spheres of thought and action (Ray 1976:10). They have paid attention to the symbolic-philosophical order, or collective thought of the ethnic groups. The French structuralists have attempted to elucidate African cosmological systems and implicit philosophies in their belief system<sup>13</sup> (Ray 1976:10; Ikenga-Metuh 1987:6; Tienou 1984:47-48).

### 3.3.2.3 Comparative-phenomenological approach

The comparative-phenomenological approach regards religious phenomena as ‘phenomenon *sui generis*’ (Westerlund 1991:16). This method explores the ATR(s) thematically with examples drawn from most parts of the African continent.

The aim of the study is not to present a theoretical explanation, but to describe and understand religious phenomena ‘as such’ (Westerlund 1985:27; 1993:44). African religions are described in a ‘religio-centric’ way, more or less ‘isolated’ from their historical, socio-cultural contexts (Westerlund 1993:45).

This comparative and religio-phenomenological research has been predominant among theologically oriented African scholars, such as Mbiti, Idowu, Mulago and Ikenga-Metuh. Mbiti ([1969]1975:5) mentions that his approach is ‘descriptive, interpretive, bringing together in a comparative way those elements which are representative of traditional religions from all over Africa.’

A lack of recognizing the historical, socio-cultural contexts in which the religious beliefs and

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<sup>13</sup> Levi-Strauss emphasizes ‘a systematic method to uncover the social structure of cultural forms’ because he maintains that although ‘the surface phenomena vary, the underlying ordering principles are the same’ (Seymour-Smith 1986:270).



practices are generated, an attempt to cover too many societies and religious phenomena, the overemphasis on similarities, ignoring the different religio-cultural forms in different parts of the continent, and the claim of generalization of ATR(s) have been charged for its methodological weakness.

Westerlund (1991:16) comments that ‘a decontextualization of religion is a characteristic of broad comparative studies.’ In this sense, African theologians who stressed the cultural ‘contextualization’ of theology and Christianity in Africa, very ironically, have shown a tendency to ‘decontextualization’ of the ATR(s).

#### **3.3.2.4 Historical approach**

The approaches mentioned above have paid little attention to the historical aspects of the ATR(s). The reasons, says Ray (1976:11-12), are partly an ‘anthropological bias against history’ and partly a ‘lack of archaeological and cultural-historical information’ of the historical aspects of the ATR(s).

Especially, Parrinder and Mbiti are pessimistic about the possibility of a historical study of ATR(s) because, for them, ATR(s) have no written documents from within the religion, no founders, no missionaries, no converts and no reformers (Mbiti [1969]1975:4, 5, 190, 191; Onunwa 1991:80, 82). This situation makes it impossible for them to study or describe a history of ATR(s). The methods and perspective of those scholars have been criticized by anthropologists for not considering the socio-cultural contexts and by historians for being ahistorical.

Ranger and Kimambo who have played a leading role in the new method have combined the anthropological and historical methods (Ray 1976:2). The historical approach prefers ‘an empirical approach to aprioristic speculations’ and pays attention to ‘the regionally more restricted cultural provinces’ (Westerlund 1993:50-52), and thus focuses on the limited forms of cultural and religious changes (Onunwa 1991:82; Ray 1976:12).

This approach has attempted to demonstrate that there have been interactions among different ethnic groups due to the conquests, the migrations, and mutual interchange of ideas (Shorter 1975:50-51). There was also the influx of new religious beliefs and practices and modifications of the existing ones (Ikenga-Metuh 1987:9).

Ranger and Kimambo argue that it is impossible to understand the ATR(s) without a proper understanding of the historical dimensions, which have shaped the religion (Ikenga-Metuh 1987:9).



### 3.4 THE CONCEPTS OF GOD IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGIONS

Most African peoples have a belief in God and call God on his name. However, it is not possible to recover the fully original meaning of some of the African names for God.

Smith (1950a:3) maintains that etymological investigations are not always useful, and the etymological meaning of some of the old African names for God, such as Nyame, Nzambi, Imana, and Mulungu are still vague.

Scholars who seek to understand the concepts of God among the Africans have rather focused on the praise-names and titles for God, on proverbs, songs, riddles, myths, legends, daily speeches, and prayers, to know how African peoples conceive of their God (Smith 1950a:4; Ikenga-Metuh 1987:86; Mbiti [1969]1975; 1970a).<sup>14</sup>

#### 3.4.1 The concepts of God in West Africa

##### 3.4.1.1 The Akan concept of God

The Akan peoples designate their God with four names that represent certain qualities and characteristics: (1) *Nyame* or *Onyame*; (2) *Nyankopon* or *Onyankopon*; (3) *Tweadumpon*; and (4) *Odomankoma* (Evans 1950:244-248; Danquah 1944:28).

*Nyame*, according to Ratty, is recognized as 'a God of fullness and of satisfaction' (Evans 1950:246; Ikenga-Metuh 1987:87). However, Danquah and Evans assert that *Nyame* or *Onyame*

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<sup>14</sup> Driberg maintained that African religious thoughts and philosophy are connected to the concept of an 'universal Power' or 'Energy,' which is the origin of all life. This force consists of an abstract power or all pervasive power that is never regarded anthropomorphically. He complained that the tribal term that designate this Power has been translated as God, or a 'High God,' although the idea of a High God does not exist in Africa (Smith 1950a:20-21).

Some scholars, however, use the term, 'the High God' to designate God or the Supreme Being whom the African peoples believe in. Smith (1950a:21) maintains that, although large numbers of Africans have a belief in the 'infinite and eternal energy from which all things proceed,' the claim that the idea of High God does not exist can not be accepted. Smith (1950a:21-22) rejects the concept of 'abstract Power,' 'natural potency,' or 'Cosmic Mana' that is claimed to be always thought of as 'It', not as 'He'. Instead he specifies the criteria for a High God that is conceived of the African people's religious thoughts (1950a:21-22): (1) he has a personality and a personal name; (2) he has a life and consciousness analogous to that of a human being; (3) he is a Being who is not a human being; (4) he is creator; (5) he is the ultimate power and authority behind the world; (6) he is worshipped, though rarely it happens; (7) he is considered as a judge; and (8) on the other hand, the High God may be conceived of as tribal or national God, and he has 'co-equal' or 'subordinates,' so that he may not be a strictly monotheistic God.

Idowu rejects the term, High God because High God is a 'figment of men's imagination' and only 'an academic invention, an intellectual marionette whose behaviour depends upon the mental partiality of its creators' and a product of ignorance and prejudice (Idowu 1969:18-19). In this research, God or the Supreme Being will be used because the High God connotes that God is merely 'distant' or 'transcendent' (Parrinder 1968:39).

means the ‘Shining One’ (Danquah 1944:28; Evans 1950:245).<sup>15</sup>

*Nyankopon / Onyankopon* means ‘Alone the Greater Nyame’ (Danquah 1944:43).<sup>16</sup>

*Odomankoma*, says Danquah (1944:58), is recognized as *Borebore*, meaning the excavator, carver, originator, and the architect. In his research, Evans (1950:249) maintains that the real root of *odomankoma* is *odom*, meaning ‘grace’ or ‘mercy.’ Ikenga-Metuh (1987:87) also recognizes the name as ‘the Merciful One.’

The root meaning of *Tweaduumpon* is uncertain. Some scholars suggest that the meaning of the name is God in whom one puts all trust (Evans 1950:248; Ikenga-Metuh 1987:87).

Etymological studies of the Akan designations for God do not disclose a satisfactory derivation for the designations. Instead, many and varied praise-names of *Nyame* provide a clue to understanding the Akan concept of God: He is *Borebore a aboo Adee*, meaning ‘the great creator who made the thing’; *Oboadee*, ‘He who created the thing’ (Danquah 1944:28, 54; Evans 1950:249). He is called *Amowia* or *amodive*, ‘the giver of sunshine’, and *Amosu* or *Totorobonsu*, ‘the giver of rain’ (Danquah 1944:40; Evans 1950:249; Ikenga-Metuh 1987:88). There are other names: *Panyin*, ‘Elder’; *Brekyrihunuade*, ‘All-knowing’; *Abommubuwafrre* or *Nyaamanekose*, ‘the God of comfort’; *Tetekwaframua*, ‘He who is there now as from ancient times’; *Nana*, ‘the grand ancestor’ (Danquah 1944:54; Evans 1950:249).

According to the Akan names and praise-names for God, he is the creator of all things and the bright God of the heavens. The Akan God is the all-knowing one, the comforter, the dependable one, the grand ancestor, the invariable one, and the merciful one. *Nyame* is recognized as the God who rewards the righteous and punishes the guilty, usually in this world. A common form of punishment is the withholding of rain (Evans 1950:251).

In nearly every Akan compound, there is the *Nyamedua*, ‘God’s tree,’ which is a simple ‘altar’ to *Nyame* (Evans 1950:252). The Akan people have actual temples and priests for the worship of *Nyame* (Evans 1950:253, 255). In addition, the Akan have the belief in and the cult of the *abosom* - the divinities, who are thought of as the ‘sons of *Nyame*’ and dwell in rivers, trees, or rocks (Evans 1950:255). The *obosom* is regarded as being more approachable than *Nyame*, and is for this reason conceived of as a ‘mediator’ between man and God, or as *Nyame*’s ‘spokesman’ (Evans 1950:257). The people address God through the *obosom*. Evans (1950:243) claims that there is a definite monotheistic background to the religion of the Akan.

<sup>15</sup> Danquah (1944:38, 40) rejects Ratty’s claim that *Onyame* was derived from ‘*onya*’ (to get) and ‘*me*’ (to be full or satiated). Rather, he maintains that *Onyame* was derived from ‘*nyam*’ (shining, bright). The meaning of *Onyame* is not God of fullness and of satisfaction, but the Shining One.

<sup>16</sup> According to Danquah (1944:45) and Evans (1950:247), *Nyankopon* was derived from ‘*onyame-ko-pon*’; ‘*-ko*’ comes from ‘*okoro*’, ‘*biako*,’ meaning one, and ‘*-pon*’ is the Akan suffix for great: the Only Great *Onyame*, the Only Great Shining One. Danquah (1944:44) repudiates Ratty’s ‘sky God’, and E.C Hayford’s ‘the Only Great Friend’.

### 3.4.1.2 The Yoruba concept of God

The Yoruba names for God are *Olorun* and *Olódùmarè*.

*Orun* is ‘heaven’ or ‘sky’ and *Ol* - is a prefix meaning ‘owner’ (Parrinder 1950:228; Idowu 1962:37). The name clearly indicates that the Yoruba God is recognized as ‘owner of the heaven or sky.’ According to Booth (1977b:160), *Olorun* is not identified with the heaven in a literal meaning but is related with the world beyond to which the sky is the ‘gate’.

On the meaning of *Olódùmarè*, which seems to be the older and less rationalized Yoruba name for God than *Olorun* (Booth 1977b:160), Booth (1977b:161) understands the name as a kind of ‘cosmic power.’<sup>17</sup> Parrinder (1950:228) explains the meaning of the name as ‘almighty.’ Idowu (1962:18) describes *Olódùmarè* as the creator, the foundation and origin of everything, the origin and ground of all that is. The meaning of *Olódùmarè*, however, is uncertain.

The praise-names of the Yoruba God are *Eleda* or *Eledaa*, ‘Creator’; *Alaye* or *Alaaye*, ‘the Owner of life’ or ‘the one who lives’; *Elemii*, ‘the Lord of life’ (King 1986:8; Ikenga-Metuh 1987:89); and *Alagbara gbogbo*, ‘all-powerful’ (Parrinder 1950:228). *Olorun* or *Olódùmarè* is conceived of as the Supreme Being and Creator who dwells in the Heavens and is all-powerful.

Compared to the neighboring Akan who worship *Nyame* (Evans 1950:253), and the Ewe who in part worship *Mawu* (Parrinder 1950:229, 235), there are, among the Yoruba, no temples, organized direct worship or sacrifices, priests and offerings dedicated to *Olorun* or *Olódùmarè* (Parrinder 1950:229; Thorpe 1991:90).

Instead, the Yoruba worship numerous powerful divinities called ‘*orisha*’ or ‘*orisa*,’ a word commonly used for the mass of ‘lesser gods’ (Booth 1977b:163). Many of these *orisha*, who are often said to be ‘sons’ of God (Parrinder 1950:226), occupy a more prominent place and have more devotees in one city or geographical area. Each *orisha* has its own priesthood, temples or shrines, rituals, taboos, music, and divination techniques (Ikenga-Metuh 1987:132; Thorpe 1991:91). The *orisha* are considered to be the emanations or personifications of God’s powers (King 1986:9).

Because there are no temples, sacrifices, offerings and organized worship systems for *Olódùmarè*, some scholars consider *Olódùmarè* as a God withdrawn from human affairs. *Olorun* or *Olódùmarè*, however, is recognized as being the source of laws. His name is on the Yoruba peoples’ lips in everyday life, and the Yoruba think that they are accountable to *Olorun* or *Olódùmarè* for their

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<sup>17</sup> Booth attempts to interpret the meaning of *Olódùmarè*, based on the interpretation of J. Olumide Lucas. In his *The Religion of the Yoruba* (1948), Lucas explains that ‘a possible meaning is one who has *Odu*, child of *Ere*. *Odu* can refer to the figures in the Ifa divination system, and to a large pot or container. *Ere* can mean ‘python’ or ‘boa.’ *Olódùmarè* may then mean ‘*olodu*, child of python’ (quoted by Booth 1977b:160). Thus *Olódùmarè* may be related to the ‘cosmic serpent’ (Booth 1977b:160).

behaviours.<sup>18</sup> The Yoruba acknowledge that *Orolun* or *Olódùmarè* is inexplicable and unpredictable and will not necessarily respond (Ray 1976:57).

In times of crisis, however, the Yoruba immediately approach him, and exclaim ‘may *Olorun* save me.’ This short ejaculatory statement expresses a strong belief in *Orolun*’s readiness to intervene in peoples’ daily affairs. For this reason, African scholars deny that *Orolun* or *Olódùmarè* is a withdrawn God (Idowu 1962:202; Thorpe 1991:90-91).

### 3.4.2 The concepts of God in the Nilotic areas

#### 3.4.2.1 The Nuer concept of God

The word *Kwoth*, which literally means ‘Spirit’, is recognized as God by the Nuer people (Evans-Pritchard 1956:1). He is conceived of as *kwoth nhial*, ‘spirit of the sky’, or *kwoth a nhial*, ‘spirit who is in the sky.’ In the Nuer religious thought, God is a spirit in the sky, who is invisible and presents everywhere like wind or air. He is the creator and mover of all things (Evans-Pritchard 1956:1-9). In the Nuer religion, there are many *kuth*, which is a plural form of *kwoth*. These spirits can be classified into two categories: the spirits of the above and the spirits of the below (Evans-Pritchard 1956:28).

The spirits of the above are considered as children of God and as lesser and lower than the Father. However, these spirits are conceived of as separate beings as well as different manifestations of God (Evans-Pritchard 1956:48-50). The Nuer either pray directly to God or they pray to God in a particular spirit of the above. The spirits are all God in the figure of a spirit of the above. In this sense, God can be thought of as one but also as every manifestation in the many diverse figures that are derived directly from God (Evans-Pritchard 1956:51-60).

There are also the spirits of the below or of the earth. These spirits can be categorized into many different spirits: totemic spirits, totemistic spirits, nature spirits, and fetishes (Evans-Pritchard 1956:63). A certain Nuer lineage who has a lion-spirit as their totemic spirit, for example, regards the lion-spirit as a representation or manifestation in which God is figured to the group as their patron. The spirit and God is the same thing but are regarded differently (Evans-Pritchard 1956:93).

The word *Kwoth* has a great variety of meanings. The meaning of *kwoth* is to be known from the

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<sup>18</sup> The Yoruba say ‘When I die, both I and you will have to go and tell it before God’: ‘*Nigbati emi ba ku, ati emi ati iwoni ilo ro o niwaju Olorun*’ (Parrinder 1950:230).

context and the manner used by the Nuer. The Nuer people use the word *kwoth*, when they pray to God, the Spirit who is in the sky, and use the word *kwoth* for a particular spirit without indicating its name. The meaning would be understood in the context in which this particular spirit is mentioned (Evans-Pritchard 1956:106). Evans-Pritchard (1956:117), therefore, concludes that ‘the conception of *kwoth* has a structural dimension.’ In the Nuer religious thought, Spirit is figured in different ways to different persons and different groups (Evans-Pritchard 1956:123).

For the Nuer, the Spirit is not only conceived of as creator and father in the heavens, but he is also manifested in many diverse figures in his relation to the different social levels (Evans-Pritchard 1956:143). The Nuer think of the Spirit at different levels according to their thoughts and experiences: ‘Spirit in itself’, ‘Spirit in persons’, ‘Spirit in beasts’, and ‘Spirit in things’ (Evans-Pritchard 1956:120).<sup>19</sup> God is, therefore, ‘a conceptualization of events’ that are regarded as ‘his activities in one or other of his hypostases or refractions’ (Evans-Pritchard 1956:123).<sup>20</sup>

For the reasons mentioned above, certain religious beliefs and practices, such as the role of ancestral spirits, animistic ideas, and witchcraft do not play a prominent part in the Nuer (Evans-Pritchard 1956:316).

In the Nuer religion, God is far away from men, a *deus remotus* in the sky, and also very close to them, a *deus revelatus* in human’s everyday life (Evans-Pritchard 1956:9-10). Evans-Pritchard (1956:318) states that the Nuer religion contains ‘unresolved ambiguities and paradoxes’.

According to Evans-Pritchard, the Nuer religion is ‘pneumatic and theistic’, and a theistic religion is not necessarily to be either monotheistic or polytheistic, but both at different levels (Evans-Pritchard 1956:316). Parrinder (1970:83) says that the Nuer religion is ‘modalistic.’ Evans-Pritchard (1956:316) concludes:

On one level Nuer religion may be regarded as monotheistic, at another level as polytheistic; ... at other levels as totemistic or fetishistic. These conceptions of spiritual activity are not incompatible. They are rather different ways of thinking of the numinous at different levels of experience.

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<sup>19</sup> The spirit who is figured as pure and transcendental is God, the spirit in itself (Evans-Pritchard 1956:120). When the spirit is figured in totemic spirits, he is patron of the lineage and its families. The spirit who is figured in creatures and fetishes is the patron of individuals (Evans-Pritchard 1956:118).

<sup>20</sup> According to Evans-Pritchard (1956:143), for the Nuer, God is associated with lightning or rain. These things are not identifiable with God, but conceived of as modes or manifestations of God.

### 3.4.2.2 The Dinka concept of God

In the Dinka, *Nhialic* is used for the name of Divinity or God.<sup>21</sup> *Nhialic* means ‘the sky’ or ‘the above.’ *Nhialic* is, however, not identified with the physical sky. *Nhialic* is referred to sometimes as a personal Supreme Being, and sometimes as a kind of being. Divinity created men and became their father. He is often recognized as ‘the Creator’ and ‘father’ (Lienhardt 1961:39). Therefore, prayers and sacrifices are offered to *Nhialic*, ‘Divinity’ (Lienhardt 1961:29).

Divinity without a plural form is both singular and plural in intension (Lienhardt 1961:30). The Dinka use the word *yeeth* to designate the important powers (*yath*, the singular form). *Yeeth* can be translated into ‘divinities’ (Lienhardt 1961:30). Divinities can be classed into two groups: the ‘free divinities’ and the ‘clan divinities’ (Lienhardt 1961:30).

Clan divinities are ‘the tutelary spirits’ of the Dinka lineage groups. They are manifested in material forms such as animals and other objects that receive special attention by the clansmen (Lienhardt 1961:30, 106). Free divinities have relationships with individuals and their families (Lienhardt 1961:30). The presence of free divinities can be recognized by specific phenomena such as illness, spirit possession, rain, and other bad things that can be attributed to free divinities (Lienhardt 1961:57).

For the Dinka, the Divinity is conceived of as both single and manifold. All the sky-powers are said to ‘be’ Divinity, but Divinity is not identified with any one of them (Lienhardt 1961:156). Although the Divinity is ‘in the above’ that is far from the ‘physical’ sky, the Divinity makes contact with the earth by falling something like rain, or by sending lightning and comets. The Divinity is manifested in these things (Lienhardt 1961:33). Divinity, however, is not conceived of as a plurality, and religion of the Dinka is not described as ‘polytheistic’ (Lienhardt 1961:156).

The powers are figured in a variety of representations in relation to various experiences of the Dinka, which occur in their social and physical context (Lienhardt 1961:170). With regard to this matter, Lienhardt (1961:156) remarks that ‘Divinity is manifold as human experience is manifold and of a manifold world. Divinity is one as the self’s manifold experience is united and brought into relationship in the experiencing self.’

According to Lienhardt, Divinity is originally one and the same divinity, although different people know Him by different names because of the different languages that are spoken by the different

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<sup>21</sup> Lienhardt prefers not to speak of ‘God’, but of ‘Divinity’, a word which conveys both a personal Supreme Being, creator, a father and a kind of being and activity that ‘sums up the activities of a multiplicity of beings’ (Lienhardt 1961:30).



peoples. All human beings are a single community because they originate from one ancestor and are created by one Creator (Lienhardt 1961:156). Lienhardt (1961:57) states:

All Dinka assert that Divinity is one, *nhialic ee tok*. The implication of this affirmation are that their *nhialic* is the same divinity as that which different peoples know under different names, the Divinity the Nuer call '*kwoth*,' the Muslim 'Allah', the Christians 'God'...Divinity is thought to be universal and known by various names to different peoples.

### 3.4.3 The concepts of God in Central and Eastern Africa

#### 3.4.3.1 The Ngombe concept of God

For the Ngombe people, whose life depends on the forest (Davidson 1950:162), the name of their God is *Akongo*. The Ngombe believe that *Akongo* is spirit and creator (Davidson 1950:163; Ikenga-Metuh 1987:91).

The etymological meaning of *Akongo* has not been discovered. His praise-name is *Akongo Mbonde*, 'Creator God' (Ikenga-Metuh 1987:91). As a forest people, the Ngombe associate *Akongo* with the forest. He is recognized as *Moswa mkonda*, 'Master or Owner of the forest' (Davidson 1950:167). *Akongo* is called *Eliamokonda*, 'the one who clears the forest.' The name *Akongo* conveys the idea of great strength, that is, *Akongo*, the all-powerful (Davidson 1950:167; Ikenga-Metuh 1987:91). *Akongo* is called *Ebangala*, which means 'the beginner', who was at the beginning of everything.

*Akongo* has a special relationship with an individual in the sense of the 'guardian angel.' When a people is faced with a good chance in hunting or other everyday affairs, people say that 'Your *Akongo* is good,' implying that the fortune is attributed to *Akongo* (Davidson 1950:164).

Although the Ngombe do not have priests, temples, and direct worship dedicated to *Akongo*, they recognize *Akongo* as a being who is interested in and influences their lives and events (Ikenga-Metuh 1987:134).

For the Ngombe, *Akongo* is not transcendent being surrounded by mystery. He is a social being to whom people can approach easily. No intermediary is necessary. The Ngombe believe that an



ordinary person can approach and invoke *Akongo*, and bless other people, if he is ritually clean and his life, especially his sexual life, is admitted by the community (Davidson 1950:165).

### 3.4.3.2 The Lugbara concept of God

Among the Lugbara, *Adro*, the ‘Spirit’, is conceived of as the Creator who created men and the world and is ‘an all-pervasive power that stands outside men and beyond their control’ (Middleton [1965]1992:70). He is the ultimate source of all power, and of the moral order<sup>22</sup> (Middleton [1960]1971:27, 252). The Spirit is all-powerful and timeless. He creates and destroys people. The Spirit sends various bad things, such as sickness, disasters, and punishment as well as good things like health and prosperity on people. The Spirit is both good and evil (Middleton 1992:70).

The Lugbara conceive God as having two aspects: a transcendent aspect and an immanent aspect<sup>23</sup> (Middleton 1971:252).

In his transcendent aspect, God is usually named *Adroa* or *Adronga* who is in the sky, remote from mankind and good, and is known as *Adroa ’ba o ’bapiri*, ‘God the creator of men,’ *Adroa onyiru*, ‘good God,’ or *Adroa ’bua*, ‘God in the sky’ (Middleton 1971:27, 252; 1992:71). God is invisible and ‘in the wind’, and referred to as *eri*, which means ‘he’, ‘she’ or ‘it’. God, however, is not conceived of as ‘ba’, ‘person’ because God created ‘persons,’ so that God cannot be a person itself (Middleton 1992:71).

In his immanent aspect, God is called *Adro* who is thought to have the form of a man, and to live

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<sup>22</sup> The Lugbara see God, Spirit as the ultimate fountainhead of all power and authority, and of all sanctions of social relationships between men. However, the social customs that compose the status of members of society are sanctioned by the ancestors (Middleton 1971:27). In this sense, God, as their creator, is thought to be ‘behind’ or ‘above’ all people and all things, and to be in indirect contact with all forms of social action (Middleton 1971:252, 256).

<sup>23</sup> Dalfovo (1998) presents a survey of the literature that deals with the Lugbara, and points out that the scholars who performed their field researches on the Lugbara used different terms to refer to the Lugbara God. According to Dalfovo, McConnell, Ramponi, Middleton, and Crazzolaro described the Lugbara God in different forms or with different names.

McConnell mentioned *Adro*, *Adroa*, and *Adronga* giving to all of them the attribute of God without differentiating among the meaning of the terms (Dalfovo 1998:468).

Ramponi used *Adro*, *Adroa*, *Adronga*, *Adrogo*, and *Adrogoa*, differentiating among the meanings: *Adroa*, *Adronga*, and *Adrogoa* applied to God and *Adro* and *Adrogo* to the other spirits (Dalfovo 1998:469).

Middleton assigned the term *Adroa* and *Adronga* to the transcendent aspect of God, and *Adro* to the immanent aspect (Middleton 1971; 1992; 1970; Dalfovo 1998:469).

Crazzolaro used *adro*, *adroa* or *iyi adro* to refer to spirits, and *Adro* to refer to God (Dalfovo 1998:469).

With regard to the different terms, Dalfovo (1998:470) says that ‘the various expressions of the divinity are dialectal variations of the same term in the language’ and, traditionally, each dialectal area had only one term for the divinity used in their area.

This part of the research follows Middleton who carried out most of his research in western Lugbaraland assigning *Adro* to the immanent aspect and *Adroa* to the transcendent aspect.

on the earth, especially in streams, bush land, trees, hills, on high mountains and rocky places (Middleton 1971:254; 1992:71). He comes into direct contact with humankind (Middleton 1971:27). He is invisible, but when he becomes visible to a man, the man who glances at him will die. *Adro* is associated with death, witches and sorcerers, and is greatly feared, thus he is known as *Adro onzi*, ‘bad God’ (Middleton 1971:254, 257; 1992:71). *Adro* is described in anthropomorphic terms: he has wives and many children, *Adro anzi* (Middleton 1971:254).

According to Middleton (1971:253), the Lugbara believe that both aspects of God are of one God, but they live in different places. The Lugbara God is ‘one and but having a dual dimension’ (Dalfovo 1998:474).

### 3.4.4 The concepts of God in Southern Africa

#### 3.4.4.1 The Zulu concept of God

The Zulu refer to their God by different names: *uNkulunkulu*, ‘the great, great one’ or ‘the old, old one’ (Sundkler 1961:19); *uMvelingangi*, ‘the one who emerged or existed first’ (Smith 1950c:105; Sundkler 1961:19; Thorpe 1991:35). Other names that refer to God are *uHlanga*, ‘an original source of being’; *iNkosi yezulu* and *iNkosi phezulu*, ‘the Lord in Heaven’ (Smith 1950c:105; Ikenga-Metuh 1987:93). As the sky-god, *iNkosi phezulu* is particularly connected with thunder and lightning. When it thunders, the Zulu say that ‘the King is playing’ (Sundkler 1961:20); *uMdali*, *uMenzi* implies that *iNkosi* is the source of all things (Thorpe 1991:35); *uMpande* and *uNsondo*, ‘*iNkosi* is the one who causes growth in plants’ (Thorpe 1991:36); *uSomandla* and *uMninimandla* indicates that he is almighty and all powerful’ (Thorpe 1991:36).

In addition to the lord-of-the sky, who is conceived of as male, there is *Nomkubulwana* who is represented by a female element (Thorpe 1961:37). Thorpe (1991:37) says that although *Nomkubulwana*, the princess of heaven (*iNkosazana yezulu*), is conceived of as a maiden, she is also recognized as an earth mother who is associated with agriculture, spring rain, fertility and drought.

God is too great to be approached and is difficult to be conceptualized. The Zulu, therefore, make proper channels for approaching God. The line of communication is drawn from the living Zulu mediators, such as the elders of the clan or diviners, via the ancestors to God (Thorpe 1991:36).

The *izangoma*, ‘diviner’, is the person who provides a direct line of communication to the ancestors (Thorpe 1991:44).

The spirits of the departed, *amadlozi* (singular, *idlozi*), become the guardian spirit of the descendants. The ancestors are believed to protect their descendants in every respect. The ancestral spirits, therefore, must be propitiated by sacrifices in order to restore health, happiness and other fortunes, and to avert from misfortunes to blessings (Sundkler 1961:21; Thorpe 1991:41).

In this sense, the ancestors, who are ‘the official protectors’ of the tribal group (Thorpe 1991:44), have a real and vital role in the religion of the Zulu (Sundkler 1961:21).

#### 3.4.4.2 The Tonga concept of God

For the Tonga people who have settled in the Zambezi valley, rain has played an important role in their life, and it influenced their concept of God because a natural phenomenon such as insufficient rainfall resulted in the failure of their crops (Hopgood 1950:61).

Among the Tonga, the common name for God is *Leza*. Various derivations of the name have been suggested.<sup>24</sup> The exact connotation of the name is, however, not clear. *Leza* is spirit and is commonly conceived of as sexless, though there seem to be traces of an idea that *Leza* has both male and female characteristics (Hopgood 1950:72).

The Tonga have other names for God, such as *Cilenga*, *Syampanga*, *Namulenga* and *Nacanzo*. By these names, they recognize him as the Creator of all things.<sup>25</sup>

In Tonga religious thought, all things, including those in the sphere of nature and of human affairs, are brought about by *Leza*. Good fortune, or any experience and event of everyday human life is attributed directly to *Leza*. According to the Tonga idiom, *Leza* is often identified with a natural phenomenon itself: *Leza wawa*, ‘God falls’; *Leza waunga* ‘God blows’; *Leza wamweka*, ‘God shines’ (Hopgood 1950:63). God is referred to as father in the time of blessings or good fortunes, whereas the existence of God is doubted in the time of crisis (Hopgood 1950:65-66).

Although the name of God, *Leza*, is on the peoples’ lips in everyday life, bringing thanks to him as well as complaints (Hopgood 1950:62, 66), God is usually thought of as very remote and transcendent (Hopgood 1950:62).

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<sup>24</sup> Smith (1950b:76-77) presents various possible etymological meanings of the name: According to Father Torrend, it comes from a sentence, *U-le-za*, ‘He is coming’; Others say that God is ‘the One who knows’, based on the verb *-eza*, ‘know’; Smith says that, among the Ila-speaking peoples, *Leza* appears as Moulder, Owner, Rain-giver. The Lamba refer to *Leza* as *Lyulu*, which means ‘the heaven’, and as *Luchyele* that derived from the verb *-chya*, ‘dawn.’ Under the name of *Luchyele*, he arranged all things in its own place. The Lamba think *Leza* created all things. For the Kaonde, *Leza* manifests himself by thunder, lightning and rainbow, and sends rain as his gift. According to Hopgood (1950:62), it has a notion of a ‘Great First Cause.’

<sup>25</sup> *Cilenga* and *Namulenga* are derived from the root *lenga*, ‘to create,’ ‘originate’; *Nacanzo* seems to be derived from the verb *anza*, a synonym for *lenga*; *Syampanga* is derived from the root *panga*, ‘to make’ (Hopgood 1950:72).

The Tonga do not normally pray to *Leza*, but to the *mizimu*, ‘spirit of the departed.’ *Leza* and the *mizimu* are considered as being akin in their nature (Hopgood 1950:70), and the *mizimu* are regarded as the mediators who have the right of access to *Leza* and take a role for their descendants (Hopgood 1950:68). The *mizimu* are believed to possess considerable power both for good and ill, and have a great influence on the life of the living (Hopgood 1950:62). For this reason, the people venerate and make offerings to appease the *mizimu*.

### 3.5 INTERPRETATION OF THE AFRICAN CONCEPTS OF GOD

The investigation of the African concepts of God shows that similarities and differences exist simultaneously. The similarity and the diversity among the different ethnic groups can in part be attributed to a basic common heritage and a mutual interchange of cultures due to various ways of contact through the centuries (Booth 1977:159) and, in part, to different ‘sociological and ecological milieus’ (Smith 1950a:15).<sup>26</sup>

The impression formed by this research is that God is thought to be immanent in peoples’ everyday life on the one hand, and at the same time, God appears to the Africans as a God who is far remote from people and not directly involved in their daily affairs on the other hand. God is seldom worshipped directly, whereas the divinities and ancestral spirits are either worshipped by the people or invoked in their prayers. It seems that there is, to a certain extent, a ‘paradox’ (Horton 1962:137): God is conceived of as the Creator and one Supreme Being, but is very rarely the object of direct and regular worship.

The questions now arise: How can God the Creator be supreme yet withdrawn and not worshipped? Does the widespread belief in a universal creator mean that African religions are basically monotheistic? Or does the more predominant everyday concern with the divinities, spirits, and ancestors mean that the ATR(s) are essentially polytheistic?

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<sup>26</sup> Although the peoples’ concepts of God have not been predetermined by the external physical conditions, it cannot be denied that the concepts of God have been coloured and influenced by physical environments and social organizations (Smith 1950a:15).

The Mbuti, the forest-dwelling people, believe in the spirit world that is dominated by the spirit of the forest itself (Thorpe 1991:78).

The Ngombe, whose life depends on the forest, associate their God, *Akongo*, with the forest (Davidson 1950:167). Natural phenomena such as rain have influenced the Tonga concept of God because rainfall is an important factor for success or failure of the harvest (Hopgood 1950:61).

Among the agricultural Nuba people, religious practices are closely linked to the agricultural calendar such as planting, weeding, and harvest (Stevenson 1950:209).

With these issues in mind, this study will now take a look at the interpretations of the concepts of God in Africa. The aim of this section is not to ‘establish facts’ about the concepts of God in Africa, but to examine how Western and African scholars conceptualize the God of African peoples, and then to present their interpretations of the African concepts of God.

Before moving on to the discussion of the matter, Smith’s comment deserves to be mentioned: in the study of ATR(s), ‘the twin dangers of “reading-in” what is not in fact there and of “reading-out” what is not in fact indigenous’ should be kept in mind (Smith 1950a:3).

### 3.5 I. The *deus otiosus* theory

God is, among the Igbo, identified as a creator and a sustainer of all things (Uchendu 1963:94), but is conceived of as being distant and not worshipped directly. There are no temples, priests and sacrifices dedicated to God. According to Uchendu (1963:94) the Igbo God is a withdrawn God.

This is the same with the Bobo of Mali and Upper Volta (Tienou 1982b:445).

The Nupe call God as *Soko*, which is translated as God-the-sky. He is believed to dwell in the sky, but not on earth. Although the name of God is spoken by the people in their everyday speeches, God is thought of as not actively involved with their life because God is thought of as to be far away from the daily affairs of people. He is thought to be outside of the world. The most prevailing remark on the nature of *Soko* is *Sokó lokopá*, ‘God is far away’ (Nadel 1954:11-13).

Among the Nuba (Stevenson 1950:210), the Kono (Parsons 1950:269-270), and the Ambo (Dymond 1950:137-138), God plays a minor part and is rarely invoked, except in desperate times or situations. Instead, the spirits influence human affairs (Parsons 1950:269-270; Dymond 1950:137-138) and are commonly mentioned in prayers, greetings, and curses (Stevenson 1950:211).

In many African societies, God is rarely worshipped, except in the case of the Ashanti, the Kikuyu, and the Dogon. Instead, the divinities and ancestral spirits are the objects of prayers and are thought of as more responsible for everyday life (Dammann 1969:81; Sawyerr 1970:6).

The Western studies of ATR(s) have attempted to reconcile these two contrary attributes and described the God of the ATR(s) a *deus otiosus*. According to **Raphael Pettazzoni**,

*Otiositas* itself belongs to the essential nature of the creative being...the creator’s work is as good as done. Any more intervention on his part would not only be superfluous, but

possibly dangerous, since any change in the cosmos might let it fall back into chaos... Once the world is made, the existential function of the creator could be nothing but prolonging its duration and ensuring its unaltered and unalterable stability.

(quoted by O'Connell 1962:67).

If God interferes in the world that he created and ordered perfectly, the order of the world will be in chaos. The peoples, therefore, understand God as a withdrawn God who does not threaten the stability of the cosmic order (O'Connell 1962:68; Horton 1962:137).<sup>27</sup>

**Eliade** offers some reasons why people constantly push God aside. Eliade argues that people cannot attain a clear comprehension of God due to his absolutely abstract character (Horton 1962:137). As a result, God is almost ignored; accordingly, other religious forms such as the divinities and the ancestors that satisfy 'men's need of sensory contact and tangible imagery' occupy people's minds due to their concrete and accessible character (O'Connell 1962:67).<sup>28</sup>

According to **O'Connell** (1962:68), the African people were 'uneasy not only about the all-power of the high God but also about his all-purity.' God, whose attribute is all-purity, observes the peoples' every action and imposes a sense of guilt on them (Horton 1962:132). The all-purity of God makes people fear to approach God, and then people put God at a distance in order to avoid the sense of the guilt that God imposes on their shameful affairs (Horton 1962:138). Consequently, God becomes a withdrawal God, and they develop the idea of the other gods, who are associated with the powerful God, but do not put the burden of guilt on their impurity (O'Connell 1962:69). The other gods, who are more clearly comprehended in the symbols of their personalities and powers and lay less stress on moral demands, become the intermediaries between God and man (O'Connell 1962:69). O'Connell asserts that God is seldom worshipped directly because his moral demands based on his 'all-purity' are unbearable to the sense of impurity of human beings (Horton 1962:138).<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> In African thought, God's creative power continues in human procreation (Ukpong 1983:189). God is also regarded as the sustainer of the ethical order of the world and the restorer of the justice in the world (O'Connell 1962:68). God is called on directly in desperate times, and the divinities function as intermediaries between God and man (O'Connell 1962:68). Based on the reasons mentioned above, O'Connell (1962:68) argues that God is not completely withdrawn, and therefore Pettazzoni's theory does not succeed to explain the African concept of God.

<sup>28</sup> Ukpong rejects Eliade's explanation of a *deus otiosus*. According to Ukpong (1983:191), the fact that God is conceived of as being distant is undeniable, but the assertion that he is pushed to the periphery of religious life is unacceptable because the African people consider the divinities as creatures and agents of God to administer certain affairs in the world.

<sup>29</sup> Horton (1962:138) argues that there is little evidence which supports O'Connell's stress on the all-purity of God that is thought of as a reason of God's withdrawal. Only few West African myths mention O'Connell's illustration. Instead of God's excessive moral demands, says Horton, the ancestors and earth spirits are the guardians of morality of the descendants and the territorial community respectively (Horton 1962:138).



Ukpong (1983:187) argues that the *deus otiosus* theory is inadequate because the theory fails to recognize the fact that God is constantly on the lips of people and that he is directly invoked in desperate situations. In the African thought, creation such as proliferation is a continuous activity on God's part. Moreover, the organized worship of God exists in some peoples of Africa such as the Akan and the Kikuyu (Evans 1950:256; Ikenga-Metuh 1987:136).

For these reasons, a *deus otiosus* is considered by African scholars to be an improper concept about the God of African people. The methodological problem of the *deus otiosus* theory has been caused, says Ukpong (1983:187), by 'an uncritical application of a Judaeo-Christian thought system' to the understanding of African religious facts.

### 3.5.2 The mediumistic theory

Among the Mende (Harris 1950:281-282), the Shona (Thorpe 1991:54), the Ambo (Dymond 1950:137-138), and the Kono (Parsons 1950:276), shrines, priests, and sacrifices dedicated to God are rare. Instead, the organized worship is offered to the divinities, the spirits, and the ancestors (Mitchell 1977:25). These spiritual beings are thought of as intermediaries through whom men offer sacrifices and approach God (Ukpong 1983:194).

According to Sawyerr (1970:7-8) and Idowu (1962:140-142), peoples' norms of social etiquette which are related to their experience of relationship with kings or chiefs, or even elders influence their way of thinking of and worshipping God.

Social etiquette among the Yoruba requires that a young person must approach an elder through an intermediary, and kings are not treated familiarly by the subjects (Idowu 1962:141). This social pattern has been transferred to the religious context, and has influenced the position of God. Thus, God is not approached directly with sacrifices, but through intermediaries.

Idowu (1962:142) maintains that the Yoruba offer sacrifices to the divinities because they believe that the divinities as intermediaries will transmit whatever sacrifices or prayers are offered to them to *Olódùmarè* or *Olorun*. All the sacrifices, which are frequently offered to the divinities, the spirits, and the ancestors, are ultimately offered to God. In the mediumistic theory, worship of the divinities is an act of worshipping God, who is thought to be 'immanent in the subordinate beings or is symbolized by the images' of the divinities (Shelton 1964:53).



Evans-Pritchard (1956:200) says that whenever the Nuer make sacrifices to the divinities, they pray or sacrifice to God. In sacrificing or in praising a particular divinity, the Nuer are addressing God in a particular manifestation that is conceived of as a ‘hypostasis,’ ‘representation’ or ‘refraction’ of God (Evans-Pritchard 1956:51, 200). Evans-Pritchard (1956:200) maintains that ‘a sacrifice to any one of them is also a sacrifice to God.’

In his research on the Kaguru of Tanzania, Beidelman (1971:33) shows that the people pay little attention to God, who is considered as being distant, even though they admit that God ultimately gives good things such as the fertility of the land.

The Kaguru are more concerned with the ghosts that are believed to guarantee direct fertility of the land (Beidelman 1971:35). Beidelman (1971:35) suggests that to propitiate a ghost is, in a sense, to propitiate God.

Based on Paul Tillich’s theory of the God-man relationship,<sup>30</sup> Booth discusses the issue of the relationship between God and the divinities. According to Booth (1977b:176), the divinities are ‘projections of human needs.’ God is ultimate and transcends human beings; accordingly, he is unavailable for practical needs and thus tends to be irrelevant to life (Booth 1977b:176-177). Moreover, God cannot be recognized without specific manifestations, functions, or symbols, although he is not identified with these (Booth 1977b:176).

The ultimate God is, therefore, personalized in ‘the divinities’ that basically are concrete, functional, and in some sense, available and relevant to man (Booth 1977b:166, 176).<sup>31</sup> Booth (1977b:175-177) maintains that the divinities are in a sense ‘man-made’ projections of the human need of God, and represent the attempt to make God, who is unavailable for and irrelevant to practical needs, available and relevant to man.

Ukpong (1983:196) is strongly opposed to Booth’s interpretation, because in this psychological model the divinities are no more than a mere fiction of the human mind and considered as the non-existent in reality. The problem of the mediumistic theory is to reduce the divinities, the spirits, and the ancestors to mere mediums or channels (Ukpong 1983:187).

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<sup>30</sup> Tillich says that ‘God is the name for that which concerns man ultimately...on the one hand, it is impossible to be concerned about something which cannot be encountered concretely...on the other hand, ultimate concern must transcend every preliminary finite and concrete concern...conflict between the concreteness and the ultimacy of the religious concern is actual wherever God is experienced’ (quoted by Booth 1977b:176).

<sup>31</sup> Ojo proposes to understand the ‘multiplicity of Yoruba gods’ as ‘a logical consequence of their keen recognition of the numerous elements in their physical and biological environment’ (quoted by Booth 1977b:175).

The question is about the status of the divinities and the ancestral spirits: Are the divinities thought of as free and responsible beings or mere channels between God and mankind?

According to Ezeanya (1969:42), the idea that these spirits are agents of God is theory rather than practice:

These spirits...are self-sufficient and do not therefore have to receive gifts from the Supreme God in order to distribute such to human. They can bestow these gifts...acting independently of the Supreme God...They have their resources and have full powers to act without consulting God or asking for his permission.

Ukpong (1983:197) argues that if the divinity is free and responsible, then the divinity deserves thanks and blame with regard to their performance. Ukpong (1983:198), therefore, maintains that the sacrifices offered to the divinities are for them, not for God unless God is explicitly addressed.<sup>32</sup>

The mediumistic interpretation that all sacrifices or prayers are ultimately offered to God through the intermediaries such as the divinities, the spirits, and the ancestors is partly problematic.

### 3.5.3 Diffused monotheism

In Africa, says Idowu (1973:149), God's name is composed of a generic name and a qualifying suffix or qualifying word that belongs exclusively to God and is not shared by any other spiritual being. When the divinities share the basic generic name with God, it indicates that the being and nature of the divinities are entirely derived from God (Idowu 1973:149).

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<sup>32</sup> Concerning the offerings to the evil spirits, Ukpong (1983:198) questions and then answers: If all sacrifices are transmitted to God, what of those sacrifices that are offered to evil spirits? If the evil spirits are offered sacrifices for being propitiate, the good spirits and the ancestral spirits must be offered sacrifices not for transmitting the sacrifices to God, but for having the sacrifices for themselves. Among the Ibibio, says Ukpong, each divinity is conceived of as a free and responsible being (Ukpong 1983:197).

Ukpong (1983) maintains that the *deus otiosus* theory that eliminates God's active involvement in people's everyday life, and the mediumistic theory that reduces the divinities and the ancestral spirits to mere instruments deos not fit the African concept. Both theories attempt to fit the African religious thoughts into the system of a Judaeo-Christian model (Ukpong 1983:199). To understand why sacrifices are not offered to God but to the divinities and ancestors, Ukpong emphasizes the study of what sacrifice means to the African people. On the basis of his research among the Ibibio people, Ukpong says, sacrifice is a 'means of establishing contact with the invisible world.' In Judaeo-Christian tradition, sacrifice is the highest form of worship that is only allowed to God alone (Ukpong 1983:200). But in the Ibibio mentality, sacrifice is thought of as a 'cultic action' that establishes communication with the spiritual beings. It is, therefore, not exclusive to God, but can be offered to 'all and any spiritual beings.' In the Ibibio etiquette, the king may not be approached by the ordinary subjects except through an intermediary. In this analogy, Ukpong (1983:201) emphasizes the fact that the king may not often be approached, whereas Idowu puts his emphasis on the fact the king should only be approached by an intermediary. According to Ukpong, God is not given sacrifices frequently, as the king may not be approached frequently.

According to Idowu (1962:62, 141; 1973:152), among the Yoruba, *Olódùmarè* or *Olorun* is not conceived of as and confused with one of the divinities, *orisha*. The term *orisha* is never applied to *Olódùmarè* or *Olorun*. The divinities are regarded as functionaries and servants of God. Each of them is in his own sphere and plays a role of the god of a particular people with reference to a particular function (Idowu 1973:170).

Idowu (1962:203; 1975:168) argues that ‘polytheism is not a suitable name’ to categorize the Yoruba religion, because polytheism presupposes a pantheon in which *Olódùmarè* would be one among them, whereas He is not of the rank of the divinities and is apart as ‘wholly other.’ The reasonable description for the ATR(s) would be monotheistic (Idowu 1973:168).

Idowu (1962:204), therefore, asserts the need of a new term that designates a religion that believes in one Supreme God and also worships other gods:

We would like suggest such a startling thing as ‘Diffused Monotheism’: this has the advantage of showing that the religion is monotheism, though it is a monotheism in which the good Deity delegates certain portions of His authority to certain divine functionaries who work as they are commissioned by Him.

Parrinder, who regards the religion of the Yoruba as ‘a system of polytheism presided over by a supreme Creator’ (Parrinder 1950:226), remarks that Idowu’s attempts, which reduce the status of the divinities to mere functionaries and declare monotheism for African religion, would be influenced by a preconception: Polytheism is the belief of a ‘savage tribe’, whereas the modern missionary religions in Africa, Christianity and Islam, are monotheistic and therefore traditional African religions ought to be the same (Parrinder 1979:83).

### 3.5.4 De-hellenistic interpretation

The interpretations of the ATR(s) in general and of the concepts of God in particular in Western and Judaeo-Christian traditions have been criticized by De-Hellenists.<sup>33</sup>

p’Bitek argues that African scholars such as Danquah, Busia, Kenyatta, Abraham, Idowu, and Mbiti dress up their deities in ‘awkward Hellenic garments’ and parade them before the Western

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<sup>33</sup> Greene (1996) used the terms, ‘the De-Hellenists’ and ‘the Devout scholars’. I borrowed the term ‘De-Hellenists’ from his article to designate the scholars who oppose the African scholars who are alleged to do Christianization of African religions.

world in order to show that ‘the African deities are but local names of the One God who is omniscient, omnipotent, transcendent and eternal’ (p’Bitek 1970:47). Those scholars, writes p’Bitek (1970:46), try to prove that Africans have, by their own endeavours, known a concept of God that is essentially identified with the Christian God before the advent of the missionaries.

p’Bitek (1970:88) has accused African scholars, missionaries and modern Christian anthropologists as ‘intellectual smugglers’ because they introduced Greek metaphysical terms that are meaningless in African thinking into African religious thought.

p’Bitek (1970:50, 66-67) points out that the interpretation of African deities in terms of the attributes of the Christian God has not helped the African peoples to understand ‘the nature of the African deities as African peoples conceive them.’ It has been ‘inadequate’ and sometimes ‘misleading.’

The main reason, as can be seen in p’Bitek’s quotation (1970:50) from Lienhardt, is that the attributes of the Christian God and of the African God (the Dinka Divinity, *Nhialic*) are ‘not identical...to use the word, God would raise metaphysical and semantic problems of our own for which there is no parallel among the Dinka’ (Lienhardt 1961:29).

According to Mazrui, African scholars who use Greek metaphysics are attracted not because of its ‘usefulness or efficiency’ for conceptualizing African religious thought, but to overcome Western ‘intellectual arrogance’ and to establish their ‘intellectual equality with the West’ through mastering the ‘Western version of intellectual skills’ (quoted by p’Bitek 1970:90).

p’Bitek argues that most African people are not concerned with ‘ontological definitions’ that ‘obscure the reality of African religious thought’ (1970:72-73), but they are concerned about interacting with religious forces in order to obtain ‘the good life here and now...health and prosperity...success in life, a happy and productive marriage’ (1970:62). African peoples may describe their deities as ‘strong’, but not ‘omnipotent’; ‘wise’, not ‘omniscient’; old, not ‘eternal’, ‘great’ not ‘omnipresent.’ African deities who are described in these metaphysical terms are ‘all beyond recognition to the ordinary Africans in the countryside’ (p’Bitek 1970:88).

Although p’Bitek fails to recognize any bridge between traditional African and Western concepts, and then leaves African religions in a state of isolation (Ikenga-Metuh 1982:14), his criticism deserves attention and is an ‘interesting exception’ among African scholars who normally practice the Christianizing interpretation of ATR(s) (Wiredu 2006:328).

After pointing out that the African Christian theological approaches to ATR(s) are patronizing,

Ndolovu, a Swazi scholar, goes on to say:

the tendency to subordinate ATRs to Christianity can also be interpreted as a subtle form of cultural imperialism with the notable exception that it is the African himself who reduces his own culture and religion to an inferior position!...To many African theologians, ATRs ought to be incorporated into Christian Faith and not the other way round. Why can't the Christian Faith be incorporated into ATRs?

(quoted by Chitando 2006:104).

Horton (1964:96) provides some characteristics of ATR(s): (1) 'the frequent apathy' about God; (2) 'the concentration of intellectual and emotional energies' on the lesser spirits; (3) the personal communion that 'seems more often associated with the lesser spirits than with God'; and (4) 'finally and most strikingly', the 'mapping of connections between space-time phenomena as the primary intention' of African religious thought.

According to Horton, ATR(s) show their interest in providing valid explanations and successful predictions of space-time events as does science. In the light of standards of modern science, these religions seldom provide those explanations and predictions. In 'a very real sense', however, African religious thoughts revolve passionately and principally around the desire to 'explain and influence the working of one's everyday world by discovering the constant principles that underlie the apparent chaos and flux of sensory experience' (Horton 1964:96-97).

Among the African peoples, the interactions with God, therefore, are directed more toward explanation, prediction, and control over everyday affairs than on communion with God as an ultimate purpose (Greene 1996:123). Horton argues that theoretical religious conceptions and 'everyday' practices are so closely connected as not to be dissoluble. God in ATR(s), therefore, is worshipped as part of an effort by Africans to explain, control and predict their everyday life, and the effort inevitably influences the African way of worshipping God (Greene 1996:124-125).

Instead of an anthropological interpretation that concentrates on themes, such as a quest for social harmony and a philosophical-theological interpretation of traditional religious concepts, Horton emphasizes that the African religious thought should be recognized as dynamic and non-doctrinaire: in ATR(s), 'concerns with systematization and consistence, and the inclination to be doctrinaire is less evident' (quoted by Greene 1996:125).

## 3.6 INTERPRETATION OF THE AFRICAN CONCEPTS OF GOD BY AFRICAN THEOLOGICAL SCHOLARSHIP

### 3.6.1 African scholarship's interpretation of the African concepts of God

As Muzorewa (1985:11) points out that 'there can be no adequate discussion of the origins and developments of African theology apart from a consideration of God,' one of the most controversial issues of the relationship between Christian faith and ATR(s) is how African theologians articulate the African concepts of God in their theological reflections.

Before turning to a closer examination of Mbiti's and Oduyoye's theological reflections on the understanding of God, it is helpful to look at contemporary African theologians' articulations of the concepts of God in order to compare it with and to clarify those of Mbiti and Oduyoye.

#### 3.6.1.1 E. Bolaji Idowu

African Traditional Religion not only forms the 'foundation and the all-governing principles' of life for Africans, but is also the 'real keynote' for understanding Africans (Idowu 1962:5). According to Idowu, 'the full responsibility of all life belongs to the Deity' (Idowu 1962:5), and the characteristic of African Traditional Religion lies in 'its conception of Deity and its apprehension of the divine will' (quoted by Bediako 1992:295).

Idowu understands the basic pattern of belief in God among the Yoruba in terms of a hierarchical model attributed to the Yoruba socio-political etiquette; accordingly, he views God as king and the other divinities as his ministers (Idowu 1962:63).

God, who is the only one in the whole universe, is *Eleda*, the Creator of heaven and earth (1962:39, 42; 1969b:26), *Oba-orun*, the king who dwells in the heaven, All-wise, All-knowing, All-seeing, immortal (1962:42), omnipotent (1962:40), and the unique and absolute controller of the universe (1973:148).

The divinities that are prominent in the Yoruba religious beliefs and practices are manifestations or functionaries of the single God and 'no more than the conceptualization of some attributes of *Olódùmarè*' (Idowu 1962:63).

Idowu (1965:25) maintains that 'the material gathered' from the African religio-cultural heritage

should be ‘the basic raw material’ for Christian theological construction. In saying ‘God’ in particular, therefore, Idowu means that the God who has been revealed in the Bible is the same God known and experienced as *Olódùmarè* in the Yoruba religion (Idowu 1965:25; Bediako 1992:279), because God has never left Himself without witness ‘in any nation, age, or generation’ (Idowu 1962:202; 1965:25). On the grounds of the belief that the same God has acted in the Biblical religion and in the Yoruba religion, Idowu strongly defends the continuity of the God of African Traditional Religion and the God of Christianity.

Vehemently rejecting European interpretations of the ATR(s), Idowu tries to present what the Yoruba ‘know and believe.’ *Olódùmarè* or *Olorun*, as one real factor that makes the life and belief of the Yoruba be coherent (1962:202; 1973:104), is not ‘a *deus remotus*’ that has been claimed as the African God by Europeans (Idowu 1969b:27), but ‘urgently real’ God (Idowu 1962:202).

Idowu maintains (1969b:29) that Africans ‘have their own distinctive concepts of God...God according to African traditional belief is not a ‘loan-word’ from the missionaries.’ Moreover, the different names of God in Africa are variations of one and the same God, who is ‘the identical concept of God’ in all parts of Africa. Thus, African Traditional Religion in the singular form is the only adequate description of all African belief systems (1973:104, 135).<sup>34</sup>

Idowu’s contribution to the studies of African Traditional Religion is his persistent affirmation: African Traditional Religion has a right to be recognized and vindicated on its own terms (Bediako 1992:289) and African Traditional Religion should be a ‘proper source’ of African theology (Bediako 1992:293).

On Idowu’s articulation of the African concept of God, Parratt (1995:67) points out:

...what is basically problematic about Idowu’s approach is the blurring of the edges between the real existence of God and man’s conceptions of him. To say that there is one God is not the same thing as to say that he reveals himself equally to all people and in the same way,...that all people in all cultures apprehend and understand him to the same degree. Idowu has exposed the thorny theological problem of what exactly the difference is between ‘general’ and ‘special’ revelation.

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<sup>34</sup> The problem of the One God and the many gods in the Yoruba religion, according to Idowu, is not seen as a problem to Yoruba insiders because gods / divinities are understood as refractions of a single God. The multiplicity of divinities constitutes ‘a problem’ only for the outsiders and the casual observers who lack access to what the Yoruba actually know and believe about the Deity (Bediako 1992:286).



According to Bediako's evaluation of Idowu's approach, Idowu pays very little attention to the traditional Christian theological themes and the place of Jesus Christ in revelation. He rather devotes much of his attention to 'the African understanding and experience of God' (Bediako 1992:290) to establish 'the grounds of the African religious identity' (Bediako 1992:284). Consequently, to Idowu, both the 'uniqueness of the Christian faith' and the 'unique nature of the African concept of God' are obscured (Parratt 1995:67).

### 3.6.1.2 Samuel Kibicho

Kibicho (1978:379) rejects the Western missionaries' attitude that the Kikuyu and the traditional Kikuyu religion were almost totally in ignorance of the 'One True God' and that God is only to be found in Christianity. The missionary's emphasis on a radical discontinuity between African Traditional Religion and the Christian gospel is, to Kibicho, 'a relic of the old prejudicial evolutionary view' of African Traditional Religion (Kibicho 1978:380). Instead, he argues for a radical continuity between African Traditional Religion and Christianity (Kibicho 1978:371).

He asserts that when the Kikuyu converted to the new religion, they moved with *Ngai*, the Kikuyu God, into Christianity (Kibicho 1978:385). According to Kibicho, *Ngai* was the same God worshipped in Christianity. The Kikuyu knew the 'One True God' who was the same as the Christian God before the coming of Christianity to Kikuyuland (Kibicho 1978:370). Basically the Kikuyu have had a monotheistic conception of God, although there were different ways of prayers, ceremonies, and sacrifices (Kibicho 1978:372).<sup>35</sup>

In reaction to the Western missionaries' prejudices and evolutionary view of the Kikuyu religion on the one hand, and on basis of a radical continuity between African Traditional Religion and Christianity on the other hand, Kibicho vehemently rejects the idea that Christianity is merely the fulfillment of African Traditional Religion. He asserts that Christian doctrines, such as the doctrine of revelation, of salvation, and even of Christ, including a view of evangelism and of non-Christian religions, should be radically re-interpreted (Kibicho 1978:387) in order that Christianity should be well rooted in the African soil of the African Traditional Religion (Kibicho 1987:370).

According to Kibicho (1978:384), God manifested himself in African Traditional Religion as he did in Christian Scriptures.

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<sup>35</sup> On this point, Kibicho echoes the 1966 Ibadan Consultation's statement that the God whom Africans have worshipped is the same God of Christianity and Idowu's claim that the different names of the African God are variations of one and the same God and that the concept of the African God is identical in all parts of Africa.

In Kibicho's theology, therefore, it cannot be denied that there are impressions that Africans had a full revelation of God found in traditional African communities of faith, and therefore, there was a fully saving knowledge of God before the arrival of Christianity on the African continent. Consequently traditional African communities of faith have had full salvation independent of Jesus and his redemptive work (Westerlund 1985:55).

### 3.6.1.3 Gabriel Molehe Setiloane

Setiloane records an episode of an old African Methodist woman, by which he illustrates his claim: He asks; 'what do you see as unique in what the missionaries have brought to us?' She answers; 'we have learnt nothing new about religion from the missionaries. The only thing they have introduced to us...is *tlhabologe*, civilization, meaning material progress in the style of the West. But we Africans are bringing something to Christianity: a view of Divinity much higher, deeper, and all pervasive' (Setiloane 1979:63: 1978:402). Setiloane argues that the concept of God among the Sotho-Tswana is in some respects higher than that of Christianity, or at least than that of what he calls the 'Western theological tradition.'

According to Setiloane (1976:77; 1986:19, 27), among the Sotho-Tswana, DEITY or DIVINITY,<sup>36</sup> MODIMO is experienced as '*mysterium tremendum et fascinans*' or as '*force vitale*' with which Otto and Tempels respectively described God. *Mysterium* is the primary attribute of MODIMO. MODIMO can not be characterized by epithets in the personal class.<sup>37</sup> MODIMO can rather be described as IT (Setiloane 1976:77). The Sotho-Tswana do not try to understand IT in a rational sense. IT is *tremendum*, *mysterium*, *fascinans*, and even monstrous (Setiloane 1976:225).

MODIMO is one, supreme, invisible<sup>38</sup> (Setiloane 1976:80), and the source out of which everything comes<sup>39</sup> (Setiloane 1976:80; 1986:28). MODIMO is not conceived of as a person, but as

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<sup>36</sup> Setiloane (1978:411) prefers to use 'DEITY' or 'DIVINITY' as the translation of the Sotho-Tswana MODIMO. For him, the translation of MODIMO with 'God' is a mistake and a devaluation.

<sup>37</sup> Setiloane maintains that the missionaries injected the idea of 'Person' into the MODIMO concept of the BaTswana. The concept of MODIMO with heaven and sky was imported by Moffat and Casalis (Setiloane 1986:23). Moffat thought that MODIMO came from '*godimo*' (above) and '*legodimo*' (sky). *Mo* is a personal prefix (Setiloane 1976:77). Casalis maintains that '*Moholimo*' or '*Molimo*' signifies 'He who is in the sky' (Setiloane 1976:78). *Mo* is a personal prefix, and 'holimo' means 'above', 'in the sky.' *Mo-holimo* abbreviated to *Molimo*, meaning 'He who is in the sky' (Smith 1950c:117). Setiloane (1976:78), however, rejects these explanations.

<sup>38</sup> MODIMO manifests itself in natural phenomena, such as lightning and thunder. These are, however, not identical with MODIMO, but manifestations. MODIMO is 'experienced at all points but not directly sensed' (Setiloane 1976:80).

<sup>39</sup> In the Sotho-Tswana, there is no story of creation *ex nihilo*. Men and animals existed in the bowels of the earth. MODIMO as '*Montshi*' (enabler, midwife) helped them to emerge from there to the surface of earth (Setiloane 1976:81).

something intangible, invisible, and all-pervasive (Setiloane 1986:27).

The image of God among the Sotho-Tswana is, therefore, not the same as the image of God which has been introduced by the Western ‘orthodoxy’ of the missionaries (Setiloane 1976:225). What missionaries introduced to Africa was not God, but the God of the Europeans that was meaningful to Europeans, but not to Africans (Setiloane 1976:230).

God revealed himself not only to the Hebrews as Yahweh, but also to the Africans as MODIMO, *uThixo*, and *Lesa*. The Hebrews, Asians, or American Indians experience the One and Only Divinity or Reality in their own cultural and language contexts in order that experiences become meaningful for each of them (Setiloane 1976:229-230). The One and Only DIVINITY or Reality becomes more intelligible to the people when the image of the DIVINITY is ‘conceptualized and verbalized in the geographical and chronological situation’ and in ‘cultural eyes and ears’ (Setiloane 1986:32). According to Setiloane (1986:32), the experience and image of the DIVINITY has ‘authenticity and validity’ in itself.

Based on the concept of MODIMO, Setiloane (1978:388) maintains that the God missionaries introduced to Africa is the same One and Only Source, MODIMO, *Qamata*, *Leza*, and *Umvelingangi* of the African Traditional Religion. However, the concept of God that missionaries have brought is the God of the Europeans. The Western theologians’ ‘God’ could easily die because he is so small and human. The Sotho-Tswana God could never die, because IT has no human limitation. IT is so immense, incomprehensible, wide, tremendous, and unique (Setiloane 1979:60). MODIMO, the Supreme Deity of the Sotho-Tswana, is, in fact, a much wider, deeper, and all-embracing concept than the Christian translation for God in the Bible or other Christian literature (Setiloane 1978:411; 1979:60).

If God was fully known before the coming of Christianity, as Parratt (1995:73) points out, the following questions remain; what then is the uniqueness of Christianity? Is there room for the finality of revelation in Christ? The theological issue at stake is not the issue of continuity, but of ‘the equality of all religions’ (Turaki 1999:31).

#### **3.6.1.4 Charles Nyamiti**

African theology, to Nyamiti, does not mean a ‘new religious doctrine’, a kind of ‘syncretism’ between Christian doctrine and African beliefs, but ‘the very self-same Catholic doctrine expressed and presented in accordance with the African mentality and needs’ (Nyamiti 1971:1). This definition

implies that the ‘Christian revelation’ on which African theology is based should remain unchanged, but the fundamental content of the revelation will be expressed in accordance with the changing cultural situation (Nyamiti 1971:1, 25).

Nyamiti seeks to open up the dialogue between the Christian and African concepts of God by drawing a comparison between the common elements in both religions.<sup>40</sup> The task of the theologian, therefore, is to search out and to select the prominent African cultural elements that might be considered as a basis for theological reflection, and to do a close examination of the themes on a scientific philosophical level for the purpose of systematic theology (Nyamiti 1973:10; 1977:44).

He tries to discover the ‘African connotation’ of the employed symbols and evaluate them critically, ‘correcting and purifying’ them, and ‘drawing on their philosophical implication’ to expound the Christian teaching on God (Nyamiti 1977:53). The selection of themes should be guided by two purposes: firstly, the cultural elements should be common to many African cultures, and secondly, the cultural elements should reflect the uniqueness and particularity of the African culture (Munga 1998:111). Nyamiti (1977:44) suggests that the African themes that can be used for his theological articulation: (1) dynamism and vitalism; (2) solidarity, totality and participation; (3) the sacred; and (4) anthropocentrism.

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<sup>40</sup> Nyamiti has proposed an interaction between the tradition of the Catholic Church and the African cultural tradition and reinterpreted the Christian doctrine in terms of its African counterpart (Bujo 1996:62-63; Chitando 2006:109). Nyamiti (1971:1, 20, 24) claims that the content of revelation that is universal, essential and primary has to penetrate, modify, transform, and Christianize the African culture that is secondary and subordinate. Although Bujo (1992:67-68) criticizes Nyamiti for trying to address African theology on the model of the Western speculative scholastic tradition-Thomistic theology, it is obvious that Nyamiti has taken the traditional African concept as point of departure and framework for his theological reflections. Nyamiti (1971:1) aims to build up African systematic theology according to ‘the African mentality and African need.’ Nyamiti emphasizes that African theology has to be based on the Christian revelation (1977:37), and the African theistic belief is perfected and fulfilled in Christ and the Trinity (1977:19).

In his early monograph (1971, 1973, and 1977), Nyamiti classifies four methods on his approach to theological articulation: the pastoral approach, the apologetical method, the pedagogical method, and the comparative method.

The pastoral approach means that all theological efforts have to be determined by pastoral motives (Nyamiti 1971:5). If theology is separated from the real and urgent problems in the Church, it is of no value. There should not be ‘separation between theology and spirituality’ (Nyamiti 1971:5). It is thus not a method, but an approach (Vähäkangas 1999:52).

The apologetical method functions in negative and positive aspects. The negative aspect points out ‘the insufficiency and defects of non-Christian religions and philosophies’ and shows that Christianity is not against reason. The positive aspect shows that Christianity provides answers to human needs and aspirations (Nyamiti 1971:4, 6). The differences between the African and the Christian themes show that the objects of African needs and aspirations will be found in Christianity, but in a far more perfect and essentially different higher level (Nyamiti 1971:6-7).

The pedagogical method has several tasks, namely ‘the giving of answers that are guided by Christian principles to African problems,’ ‘the expounding of Christian doctrine by means of philosophy and other sciences,’ and ‘the arrangement of theological textbooks in accordance with the educational requirements’ (Nyamiti 1971:4, 8). African philosophy, for Nyamiti, should be worked out as a handmaid to African theology and should serve as a partner in dialogue with African theology (Munga 1998:131-132).

The comparative method endeavours to make a comparison between the revealed truth among different Catholic theologies, between Catholic theology and non-Catholic theology, and among different types of religious thinking (Nyamiti 1971:4, 15-16). The aim of this comparative method is to deepen the understanding of Christian mysteries and to hold dialogue with other Catholic and non-Catholic theologies as well as with other types of religions (Nyamiti 1971:15-16). The comparative method contains an ‘element of theological synthesis by the adoption of non-Christian elements and different Christian theologies’ (Vähäkangas 1999:54). Nyamiti (1971:4) suggests that the three methods do not exclude one another, and ideally should function simultaneously.

Following Tempels' thought <sup>41</sup> that 'vital force' is the key to Bantu thought and that the aim of the people is to protect the 'vital force' from diminishing and to increase it (Tempels 1959:33), Nyamiti (1977:53) maintains that power and life are closely linked to each other in the African worldview and that God can be understood in terms of power and life.

In the African worldview, God is almighty because he is the fullness of life (Nyamiti 1977:55), and life is 'essentially connected with power in solidarity, totality, and communion' (Nyamiti 1977:56). Life is seen as 'a form of power,' and 'the highest form of power is life,' and 'the most perfect activity' is often identified with life (Nyamiti 1977:53). For the Africans, therefore, God is not only 'Life itself' and the ultimate source of vital energy, but also 'Living power itself' (1977:54). God is not only the life-giver, but also the giver of power (1977:54). African dynamism and vitalism lead to an understanding of God who is described as the Vital force par excellence (Nyamiti 1977:54).

When Nyamiti approaches the African and Christian teachings of God, he compares the African and the Christian beliefs about God, and then finds similarities and differences between the two.

Nyamiti (1977:12-13) admits that the African teachings on God have positive aspects, such as a rich symbolism, the Fatherhood and Motherhood of God. According to Nyamiti (1977:4), similarities in the descriptions of nature and attributes of God are attributed to the fact that God reveals himself to all peoples through natural revelation. In this sense, ATR(s) can be seen as preparatory for Christianity, and ATR(s) find their fulfillment in Christ (Nyamiti 1977:4-5). Nyamiti (1977:5) states that 'the God of ATR(s) is the God who reveals himself in the Bible.'

However, the Christian doctrine of God, says Nyamiti (1977:6, 8, 68), is far deeper, purer and nobler than that of ATR(s) that are mixed up with idols, magic and superstition. The Christian teaching of God is the fulfillment of the African teaching of God, and all legitimate African needs and aspirations will be accomplished in the Christian teaching (Nyamiti 1977:74).

Although there are similarities between the African and Christian understandings of God, says Nyamiti (1977:56), the dissimilarities should not be overlooked or minimized. Nyamiti maintains that the negative aspects of the ATR(s), such as superstition, this-worldliness and anthropocentrism (1977:9-12), and the problematic ways of African thinking, such as the lack of a scientific and critical method, the connection with magic and superstition, and anthropomorphic elements (1977:55-56), should be recognized in doing African theology. The dissimilarities and divergences are disclosed by closer studies on ATR(s).

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<sup>41</sup> Some African scholars have not agreed with Tempels' claim on the vital forces as the main thought for understanding Bantu philosophy. p'Bitek (1971:56) rejects Tempels' ontology because Tempels' concept of 'vital force' is not based on observation and analysis of data, but on experience and intuition. He questions whether the applicability of Tempels' ontology to other Bantu thought systems, and indeed to other African peoples is practicable.

In the doctrines of ATR(s), the fundamental biblical concepts of the covenant and of salvation history are absent. Africans approach God not chiefly to gain eternal life but to gain some benefits demanded by the human condition, and God appears as a ‘silent God’ (Nyamiti 1977:6-7). The Christian understanding of God is essentially Christocentric in that Christ reveals a new relationship between man and God, which is lacking in the ATR(s) (Nyamiti 1977:7-8).

Some African natures and attributes of God, for Nyamiti, should not be accepted: such as the attribute of a God, who has wives, a plurality of gods, and the African identification of God with the elements of nature. The reason is that those are incompatible with Christian teachings of God (Nyamiti 1977:19).

Nyamiti (1977:56), therefore, urges African theology to purify such weaknesses of African categories if African theology wants to use them in theological reflections.

### 3.6.2 Christianizing interpretation of African Traditional Religions

Western scholars as well as African scholars of religion have mostly been Christians or at least have been familiar with the Christian thought system (Westerlund 1991:18), and partly have been influenced by its theological basis. Therefore, they show an intention to search for a ‘trans-cultural spiritual unity’ in ATR(s) (Westerlund 1991:16), and a tendency to ‘Westernize’ and ‘Christianize’ certain aspects of the ATR(s) (Westerlund 1993:54, 59; Wiredu 2006:319).<sup>42</sup>

Many African Christian scholars of religion and African theologians assert that there is a radical continuity and correlation between the Christian concept of God and the traditional African concept of God (Idowu 1969a:16) and presuppose the idea of Christianity as the fulfillment of ATR(s) (Westerlund 1993:46).<sup>43</sup> Mbiti (1970b:432) argues that many elements of African traditional religious-cultural heritage can and have to be taken as a *praeparatio evangelica*.

Due to the bias of a theology of continuity, they have naturally inclined to focus on similarities

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<sup>42</sup> According to p’Bitek (1970:40-41), ATR(s) have been studied by three related groups: (1) the Christian apologists, such as Evans-Pritchard, Lienhardt, and Parrinder, who use the African deities to prove that the Christian God does exist; (2) African nationalists who have a defensive battle against the Western scholarship’s negation of traditional African religio-cultural heritage and attempt to show that the Africans were not primitive savages, but civilized people. Kenyatta, Senghor, Danquah, Idowu, Busia, and Mbiti can be categorized into this group; and (3) missionaries, such as Edwin Smith, John Taylor, and Placide Tempels, who reject the notion that Africans have no clear concepts of God, and assert that Africans are highly religious and moral people.

<sup>43</sup> The 1966 Ibadan Consultation that sought to find a correlation between Biblical revelation and African belief tried to show that African peoples have had the full revelation of God before the arrival of Christianity. The Consultation claims that the knowledge of the Christian God is not discontinuous with African peoples’ previous traditional knowledge of God (Idowu 1969a:16). Therefore, it has been argued that African peoples had had their own traditional religion as a *paraeparatio evangelica*. This, however, to some extent, implies that the only value of religion is its being a preparation for the coming of the gospel which is the final revelation of God (Opoku 1993:69).



rather than dissimilarities between ATR(s) and Christianity (Westerlund 1993:46), preferring African Traditional Religion in the singular form. African Christian scholars have frequently used Christian terminologies to present the ATR(s) and interpret some elements of ATR(s) (Westerlund 1993:59). Accordingly, they have systematized ATR(s) into a set of the Western Christian doctrinal system which is implicitly theological and theocentric (Westerlund 1985:88, 33; Ray 1976:14). ATR(s), therefore, have been portrayed in a spiritual pyramid or hierarchy with God who is described as the Creator and Sustainer of the world at the top and under Him a number of the divinities, the spirits, and the ancestors (Parrinder 1968:25; Mbiti [1969]1975:15-16; Idowu 1962:61-62; Westerlund 1991:17).

The term ‘High God’ used by Western scholars to designate the God of ATR(s) has been rejected by African scholars because, for African scholars, the term may connote a difference between the God of ATR(s) and the God of Christianity (Westerlund 1985:88). Idowu (1969b:18) argues that the high god is a ‘figment of men’s imagination’ and ‘an academic invention, an intellectual marionette whose behaviour depends upon the mental partiality of its creators.’ The ‘primitive high god’ is only a product of ignorance and prejudice (Idowu 1969b:19).

Instead of the term, ‘gods’, the expression, ‘divinities’ that are thought to be not equal to God but subordinate to God, is used. The word ‘polytheism’ to designate ATR(s) has been vehemently opposed. According to Idowu, the Yoruba religion is a single and monotheistic religion in the singular form, which he characterizes as ‘diffused monotheism’ (Idowu 1962:102, 204), because the ‘identical concept’ of God does exist in all parts of Africa (Idowu 1973:104). Therefore, African Traditional Religion, for Idowu, becomes a ‘single, Pan-African belief system comparable to Christianity’ (Shaw 1990:183).

African scholars who intend to Christianize ATR(s) have been criticized by other African scholars, such as p’Bitek (1970:46), for not carrying out systematic studies of the beliefs of their people about what the African people actually know and believe. In p’Bitek’s view, these scholars present ATR(s) in a systematic set of Christian doctrines, arguing that African people knew the Christian God long before the missionaries told them about him, and claiming that the God of ATR(s) is identified with the God of Christianity.

Fashole-Luke (1975a:409) has rightly observed two dangerous pitfalls that African scholars must avoid when they study African religious beliefs, practices and rites: ‘the attempt at archaisation for its own sake’ and ‘the temptation to regard ATR(s) merely as a preparation for the gospel and fodder’ for African theology.



After pointing out that the value of African theology is more to be one of ‘function’ than of ‘new content,’ Sawyerr (1987:24) goes on to say: ‘a *Theologia Africana* must avoid any over-readiness to adopt African indigenous ideas and practices merely because they fascinate foreign theologians on the one hand, or on ground of nationalistic patriotism, on the other.’

### 3.6.3 Theological cultural nationalism

From the 1950s and 1960s onwards, African scholars who were located in historico-political contexts of their contemporary African continent showed a vigorous interest in the studies of and the rehabilitation of ATR(s), which became one of the ideological objectives for political and cultural autonomy (Mudimbe 1988:79). African scholars’ motivation for studying ATR(s), therefore, has been strongly influenced by nationalistic ideologies, such as the rehabilitation of their religio-cultural heritage, the reaffirmation of an African identity, and African unity (Westerlund 1985:44).

The typical features of African scholars’ studies of ATR(s) are the glorification of African traditional religio-cultural heritage and the tendency to ‘unite’ African religions into ‘African religion’ (Westerlund 1985:48).<sup>44</sup> In the African scholarship of religion, the tendency to ‘unite’ the beliefs and practices of different peoples into a common African pattern has been observed, and more emphasis has been placed on a ‘single African belief system’ than on a ‘multiplicity of diverse systems’ (Shaw 1990:183; Westerlund 1985:48).

In the religiously and tribally divided African countries, the emphasis on the common aspects of ATR(s) is more important than on its diversity. Transcultural unity of ATR(s) can encourage mutual co-operation among various peoples who are bound by a particular religio-cultural context, and help to accomplish ‘social solidarity’ and ‘national integration’ (Westerlund 1985:58; 1991:19). Concerning the connection between nationalism and the study of ATR(s), Westerlund (1991:19) comments:

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<sup>44</sup> Although the glorification of African culture and religions has been argued in implicit rather than in explicit ways, under the influence of nationalism, the tendency to glorify the ATR(s) has to some extent been imbued in the African scholars’ studies of the ATR(s).

The theological cultural nationalism seems to function in Idowu’s studies of ATR(s), as can be seen in the following: ‘The Yoruba claim to be descendants of a great ancestor...they have been a great race...they appear...to be detrimentally over-conscious of their great ancestry and long, noble tradition...they have been enjoying a well-organized pattern of society...they have their reasons for being proud of their race’ (Idowu 1962:5). Therefore, the church should bear the ‘unmistakable stamp’ that indicates that she is the church in Nigeria (Idowu 1965:11), and their theology should bear the stamp of Nigerian [African] thinking and meditation (Idowu 1965:26; 1973:xi). Mbiti (1975a:2-9) talks about ‘a very rich heritage’ of African people, and the ‘past glories of African empires and civilizations’ and their works of art and buildings, which have remained to the present.

The ‘harmonization’ of different African religions is in accordance with important political goals in the light of current political and religious conditions in pluralist African countries...In countries where national unity is the state goal, the unifying perspective of comparative research on African religions may serve a more or less explicit political function.

African scholars, such as Idowu, Mbiti and Mulago, have tended to maintain ‘the hypothesis of African unity’ in the religious field, insisting on ‘common factors’ of African culture and religious practices and beliefs across the African continent (Mudimbe 1988:79). It can therefore be argued that the nationalist inspiration and/or the urgent political desire to emphasize common religious elements instead of differences in order to unite peoples who might be in religious and tribal antagonism attributed to the religiously pluralist situation must be considered to be factors influencing the interpretation of ATR(s) (Westerlund 1993:46).

The most obvious and important transcultural element in ATR(s) is the belief in One God<sup>45</sup> (Westerlund 1993:56; Muzorewa 1985:8-11; Idowu 1975:140). Mbiti ([1969]1975:30) argues that ‘it is remarkable that in spite of great distances separating the people of one religion from those of another, there are sufficient elements of belief which make it possible for us to discuss the African concept of God as a unity and on a continental scale.’

In particular, the belief in one God may be regarded as a useful and decisive element politically because the belief seems to function as the central and unifying factor that creates national unity when the unity of the ‘nation’ and of ‘Africa’ as a whole is needed rather than the unity of the ‘tribe’ (Westerlund 1985:89).

The emphasis on ‘religious universalism’ rather than ‘culturally bonded particularism’ is not only theologically inspired, but also due to nationalistic inspiration. The theology of continuity that is coupled with the nationalistic inspiration has provided a fruitful ground for a ‘Pan-Africanization’ or ‘nationalization’ of African religions as well as the respectability of African religions (Westerlund 1985:44, 48).<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Normally, African scholars of religion who stand for the theology of continuity pay much attention to the African concept of God for finding a connecting chain between Christianity and ATR(s). However, they usually pay less attention to the other important phenomena of ATR(s), such as magic, witchcraft, and sorcery, because these aspects of ATR(s) are not easily compatible with Christianity (Westerlund 1991:17), and are also regarded as superstition (Nyamiti 1977:9-12). While the concepts and attributes of God as Creator have been mainly expressed by African scholars, the same important attribute of God as Redeemer and the theological themes, such as the fall, sin and redemption, have been paid very little attention (Turaki 1999:27-28).

<sup>46</sup> From his Marxist perspective, Hountondji maintains that cultural nationalism provides the ‘false pretense of a joint participation in the common national culture,’ becomes an instrument to serve political purposes, and distracts ‘the attention of the exploited classes from economic conflicts and resistance against the ruling class’ (Westerlund 1985:83).

### 3.7 ALTERNATIVE INTERPRETATION OF THE AFRICAN CONCEPTS OF GOD

Concerning the academic discussions of ATR(s), according to p'Bitek (1970:102), African deities have been 'used as mercenaries in foreign battle' because the whole argument concerning ATR(s) has been widely articulated in terms of Western academic categories and terminologies, such as polytheism, monotheism, or pantheism. Understanding and interpreting ATR(s) in these well-known categories can result in 'the over-systematization' and the satisfaction of the researcher's 'own theological preferences,' sacrificing 'the contextual diversity of African religious thought' (Ray 1976:52).

To some African scholars, therefore, asking whether ATR(s) are monotheism, polytheism, animism or totemism can be asking a wrong question (Ikenga-Metuh 1982:23).<sup>47</sup> Instead, they suggest that ATR(s) in general and the African concepts of God in particular must be reflected upon within the African contexts because the African concepts of God are conditioned by the socio-cultural and political experiences of the different peoples and the geographical-physical environmental conditions (Ikenga-Metuh 1982:12; Ukpong 1983:199; Greene 1996:125).

Evans-Pritchard (1956:316) points out that the African religious concepts do not need to be fitted into Western categories, such as monotheism, polytheism, pantheism, and animism. The concepts should be understood by 'different ways of thinking of the numinous at different levels of experience.' The Nuer religion can be regarded at different levels as monotheistic, polytheistic, totemistic, or fetishistic (Evans-Pritchard 1956:316).

However, it does not mean that ATR(s) lack inherent unity and have conflicts within the religious systems. Rather, as Ray (1976:52) has rightly observed, 'the totality of elements in each religious system can be viewed from different internal perspectives according to different contextual alignments.'

With regard to the description and interpretation of religion as a system of ideas and practices in its own right (Evans-Pritchard 1956:320), Idowu's comment must be mentioned, although his

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<sup>47</sup> According to Ikenga-Metuh (1982:21-23), the matter of categorizing ATR(s) into monotheism, polytheism, or other Western categories depends on the interpretation of the relationship between the God and the divinities. In the Western and Judaeo-Christian traditions, monotheism connotes not only belief in one God, but also a denial of other gods. In West Africa, and presumably the whole of Africa, there is a belief in one God and a hierarchy of subordinate divinities.

In this sense, it is difficult to regard ATR(s) as monotheistic despite the existence of one God. It is also difficult to characterize ATR(s) as polytheistic even though there are many divinities. The African God is not an equal among the divinities that Africans worship. He is essentially the wholly other.

On the basis of the assumption that theism can be understood as different models on different levels of experience (Evans-Pritchard 1956:316), Ikenga-Metuh suggests that 'African theism' can be used to designate the African religious systems that are neither monotheistic nor polytheistic.

conclusion from the study of ATR(s) betrays his own expectation because of his inclination to Christianization and generalization of ATR(s). Idowu (1973: 106) maintains:

Any study of ATR...should be regional or one that covers only a limited area. The more limited the area covered the more effective and honest the study will be...As the study must go on until enough scholars are produced all over Africa to tackle the subject each in his own language area, any study done in such areas where the native tongue is not that of the scholar must be regarded as tentative.

From what has been said about the interpretation of ATR(s) and the African concepts of God it follows that, instead of the Christianization of ATR(s) or the interpretation of the African concept of God in terms of the Western or Judaeo-Christian tradition, a new dimension is needed to understand and interpret the ATR(s) in general and the African concepts of God in particular.

Among many African theologians associated with a traditional ethos, the assumption that most Africans have a belief in one God who is commonly conceived of as the Creator of all things is widely accepted (Idowu 1973:148; Mbiti [1969]1975:29; Dickson 1984:36; Muzorewa 1985:9). This assumption is partly correct, but partly incorrect.

God is commonly spoken of as the Creator: the Igbo God, *Chineke* (Idowu 1969a:27; Uchendu 1963:95), *Ngewo*, God of the Mende (Sawyer 1970:66-67), the Ambo God, *Kalunga* (Dymond 1950:140), the Ruanda-Urundi God, *Imana* (Guillebaud 1950:181) and *Mulungu* (Young 1950:59).

However, it should also be pointed out that there are numerous exceptional cases.

*Ruwa*, the Chagga God, is not the Creator of the universe. The sun and earth have always existed (Dundas [1924]1968:107). Moreover, *Ruwa* was not really the Creator of humankind; he merely liberated the first human beings from some mysterious vessel by bursting it. He is known as *Ruwa mopara wandu*, 'God who burst out men' (Dundas [1924]1968:108).

Among the Zulu and the Herero, man is thought to be come out of a 'reed' or 'reed-bed' and a 'tree' respectively (Smith 1950a:7).

Among the Sotho-Tswana, there is no creation story, and God, MODIMO, is *Montshi*, 'one who enables men and animals that already existed in the bowels of the earth to emerge on its surface' (Setiloane 1976:81).

Some of the African peoples assign creation to an inferior divinity, a demiurgus. The Yoruba God, *Olódùmarè* or *Olorun* assigned the works of creation to *Orishanla* and *Oduduwa*, giving some earth

and a five-toed chicken (Booth 1977:163).

The Pygmy of the Efe territory among Bambuti Pygmies believe that God, *Arebati*, created the first man. They also believe that the sacred animals, such as the chameleon and the celestial goat, played the most important role in creation: the water on the earth resulted from the works of the chameleon, and the animal world derived its origin from the celestial goat (Schebesta 1936:168-170).

The Central Luo do not have any belief in a supreme God (p'Bitek 1971:50), and they are not concerned with the ultimate Power who is responsible for the sum total of man's sufferings and life. They are rather concerned with individual causes of misfortune (p'Bitek 1971:85). There are no words for 'creation,' 'creator,' or 'to create' (p'Bitek 1971:45). They have no notion of a God who created or even molded the universe out of nothing (p'Bitek 1971:50). According to p'Bitek (1971:45), the idea of a high god among the Central Luo is a creation of the missionaries.

What these examples make clear is that not all African peoples have a homogenous or a unified concept of God. It is incorrect to assume that the concepts of God are all the same in all African ethnic groups across the continent. It is also not possible to designate the systematic description of a single concept of God of the ATR(s).

The African peoples' concept of God differs from other people and even among themselves in their specific ways of understanding God. For the Anlo-Ewe of eastern Ghana, *Mawu* is the Supreme Being who is understood to be male, but not worshipped directly and has no shrines or priests. Among the eastern Ewe, especially the Fon, *Mawu* is the generic name of 'god' and the specific name of a female God who has her own shrines and priests. *Lisa* is a male God who is regarded as the female *Mawu*'s twin brother, husband or son (Booth 1977b:161-162).

When God is spoken of as Creator in ATR(s), for instance, it should be considered that the meaning of the word, 'creation,' differs among the various African people as well as from Christianity.

The Akan God, *Nyame*, is conceived of as Creator, but the Akan God is not thought of as a creator who put something where before there was nothing. In the Akan concept of creation, the notion of bringing something into existence out of nothing does not exist. Instead, the Akan God is thought of as a 'cosmic architect' rather than a creator *ex nihilo* (Wiredu 2006:309-311).

Among the Lugbara, *Adro* and *Adroa* is conceived of as '*ba o'bapiri*, the creator of men (Middleton 1971:27, 252). The verb, *o'ba* which conveys the concept of creation does not contain the conception of creation out of nothing. In the Lugbara God, therefore, the concept of creator who created 'out of nothing' could not be found (Dalfovo 1998:485).

The Banyarwand God, *Imana*, is conceived of as a creator of the men and the world (Guillebaud 1950:181). According to Maquet, the Ruanda word, *kurema* means ‘to produce,’ ‘to make,’ and ‘to create,’ and there was nothing before *Imana* created the world (quoted by Wiredu 2006:327). The Banyarwand concept of God is more like the Christian concept of God than the Akan concept of God concerning the concept of creation.

In regard to the attempts to identify the Christian God with the African God, Wiredu (2006:320) argues that ‘they have been able to satisfy themselves that they have not fundamentally forsaken the religion of their ancestors.’

Although it cannot be denied that there are, to a certain degree, similarities between some aspects of the African concepts of God and of the Christian concept of God, the very fact that there are disparities between the African concepts of God and the Christian concept of God and that there are differences among the various African ethnic groups’ concepts of God should not be overlooked or minimized, but must be maintained.

### 3.8 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In this chapter, several ethnic groups’ concepts of God have been studied, and then an attempt has been made to appreciate how Western and African scholars understand the African God. Throughout the research done in this chapter, it has been elucidated that there is no one cultural area or group that can be considered normative for the whole continent. It means that it is not possible to designate the systematic description of a single concept of God of ATR(s) as a homogenous or one unified concept of God. This can hardly happen.

Each ethnic group has its own religious beliefs and practices including its own concept of God due to a particular historical, religio-cultural background in which the religious elements have developed.

The God of the Banyarwanda, *Imana*, for instance, is conceived of as the Creator of the universe, whereas the *Ruwa* is not thought of as the Creator among the Chagga. The unique aspects of the *Ruwa* would not be found in those of *Imana*, of *Akongo*, of *Nyame*, of *Mawu*, and/or of *Olódùmarè*. An aspect of the Nupe concept of God cannot easily be understood among the Ngombe. One of the essential concepts that exists in the Nuer would be an unrealistic concept to the Central Luo. The Mbuti God has to be measured by the Mbuti traditional religious system itself. The Mbuti concept of



God cannot be interpreted by using the Yoruba religious systems or Christian theological categories. If so, the Mbuti would lose their traditional and indigenous meaning of their religion.

It means that each ethnic group conceptualizes its own particular concept of God. To propose the African concept of God that is claimed to be typical of all the African peoples will only be possible by putting together the various concepts from the various African peoples in one concept that does, in fact, not exist. If there is one God who is the same to all African peoples, or an African concept of God that is commonly considered to be the identical concept of God in all parts of Africa, the very concept of God must be a mosaic, and such a God is in fact not real.

To claim one and the same God whom all Africans have worshipped is to impose a non-existent or unrealistic concept of God on each African ethnic group, and force each of them to believe the mosaic concept of God as their own God.

The concept of God produced by the mosaic reconstruction is neither the Dinka concept of God nor the Kikuyu concept of God. Rather he is ‘a new God of philosophers and scholars’ (Turaki 1999:146). Most strikingly, the attempt to assert the idea of one and the same God for all ethnic groups is rushing into ‘the twin dangers of “reading-in” what is not in fact there and of “reading-out” what is not in fact indigenous’ (Smith 1950a:3). The African traditional concepts of God of the ATR(s) will be distorted by this kind of eisegesis.

Each people’s concept of God can only be explained and understood on its own terms, and should be interpreted as no more and no less than what they believe and practice in the context of the culture in which they occurred.

In the light of what has been studied in this chapter, it can be argued that the theological reflection on the African concepts of God is not merely a theological description of God, but a theological response based on the encounter between the gospel and African culture. This brings up the issue of the interplay between the Christian gospel and African culture, and the issue of Christian identity in the context of cultural plurality.

On the ground of the research concerning the African concepts of God and the interpretation of the concepts of God in ATR(s), the next chapters will tackle some of the crucial issues: how the African traditional concepts of God are formulated through African theologians’ reflections; how African theologians try to achieve a genuine correlation and dialogue between the traditional African concepts of God and the Christian concept of God.



## **CHAPTER 4**

# **THE UNDERSTANDING OF GOD IN MBITI'S THEOLOGY**

### **4.1 INTRODUCTION**

In the previous chapter, several African ethnic groups' concepts of God and the theological interpretations of the African concepts of God, which were studied by both African and Western scholars, were investigated. The study has shown that the concepts of God in Africa and its theological interpretations are not merely descriptions of God but an interplay between the Christian faith and African culture.

This chapter focuses on how John S. Mbiti, one of leading African Inculturation theologians, has articulated the understanding of God in Africa within a Christian theological framework, aiming to achieve a dialogue and integration between the Christian faith and the traditional African religiosity. In this chapter, Mbiti's understanding of God will be dealt with in relation to his methodology, the African concept of time, and understanding of revelation, and Mbiti's articulation of God in African theology will be evaluated.

To begin with the origins and developments of the term 'inculturation' will be traced because Mbiti's theological articulation is closely related to the historical context of the inculturation movement in Africa.

### **4.2 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF AFRICAN INCULTURATION THEOLOGY**

The Christian faith was translated and integrated into a culture in which the gospel was disseminated from the very beginning of Christianity.

From the time of Constantine onwards, however, the 'worldly ecclesiastics' and the 'ugly spirit of intolerance' directed against non-Christians emerged in the Church (Bruce 1995:293). Under the imperial patronage of the Church, the Church became 'the bearer of cultures.' This phenomenon

accelerated the Christian mission to disintegrate the gospel from the culture<sup>1</sup> (Bosch 1991:448).

During the centuries of Western churches' missionary enterprise, the Christian mission's underestimation of the traditional cultures and religions was a general phenomenon, and traditional cultures and religious practices were considered to be transformed by the cultural and religious patterns of Western Christendom (Mudimbe 1997:93).

There were, of course, exceptional attempts to integrate the gospel and the culture. The Jesuit missionaries who worked in China and India during the sixteenth and the seventeenth century used the method of adapting the rich culture of the nations where they worked. It was a 'revolutionary concept' in those times (Shorter 1988:295).

In the twentieth century, especially by the late 1960s, the stage was set for the cultural embodiment of the gospel in the African cultural context, and an attempt to integrate indigenous values into the new Christian culture was taken place among African Christian scholars (Bosch 1991: 451; Mudimbe 1997:93). African scholars' noticeable interests and attempts to make the Christian faith relevant to the African cultural milieu have clearly been shown by the various uses of one terminology after the other: adaptation, indigenization, localization, incarnation, inculturation, etc.

Under the term, adaptation, which was implemented by the Vatican during the Vatican II, African Christians as well as missionaries, firstly, began to adapt some external aspects of African culture, such as African melodies and musical instruments in the worship service, and then selected beliefs, rites, symbols, and customs of traditional African culture and religions that would be adapted to the Christian faith and rituals on the basis of some similarities between African cultural forms and Christian forms (Ngoni 2003:135).

In both African theologians and missionaries, such as Tempels, Mulago, and Kagame, those traditional religio-cultural elements that corresponded to Christian forms were considered as the 'seed of the Word' and 'stepping-stones' for Christianity to pave its way into the Africa to transform traditional religions (Mushete 1979:27; Mudimbe 1988:56; Ngoni 2003:135).

The concept of adaptation was later questioned and utterly rejected by African theologians at the 1974 Synod of Bishops in Rome. The concept of adaptation was, for the bishops of Africa and Madagascar, 'completely out of date' (Shorter 1975:151; 1988:213), and gave too 'little space for

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<sup>1</sup> The Christian mission, according to Bosch (1991:448), presupposed the disintegration of the gospel from the culture because the Church understood the Christian missionary enterprise as the civilization of the savages and the implantation of a superior culture into inferior cultures. Bosch says that colonialism, cultural superiority feelings, and a manifest destiny exercised a decisive influence on the Christian mission enterprise.

African theology' (Vähäkangas 1999:28). They considered 'theology of adaptation' to be 'an invention of Western missionaries', which was only concerned with 'superficial and external trappings' (Martey 1993:66). The concept of adaptation, maintains Shorter (1975:150), contains 'the seed of perpetual western superiority and domination.' Shorter (1975:150) continues:

The idea which this term suggests is one of the western missionary announcing the Gospel in the terms of his own culture, and of the young, mission church adapting this message to suit local idiosyncrasies. The word, 'adaptation' cannot help but convey an activity that is peripheral, non-essential - even superficial.

During the 1974 Synod of Bishops, therefore, the bishops of Africa and Madagascar opted for the 'theology of incarnation.' While 'the theology of incarnation' had been favoured in Roman Catholic circles, especially among Francophone African theologians, 'the theology of indigenization' had been used as the common expression in African Protestant circles.<sup>2</sup>

The term, 'incarnation', however, was disapproved by Pope Paul VI. The Pope condemned all diversified theologies as 'dangerous' and urged African bishops to find 'a better expression of faith' (Shorter 1975:152; 1988:214; Martey 1993:66; Dedji 2003:18).

The term, 'adaptation' was rejected by the bishops of Africa and Madagascar, and 'incarnation' that African theologians proposed was disapproved by the Vatican. The term, 'indigenization' was not so popular in African Protestant circles. Consequently, 'a better expression of faith' had to be found.

The 1977 Pan-African Conference of Third World Theologians (EATWOT II), for the first time, brought not only Roman Catholics and Protestants together, but also Francophone and Anglophone theologians. The conference prepared the ground for a new theological concept that expressed with the term, 'inculturation'.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The SECAM, in Roman Catholic circles, and the AACC, in Protestant circles, provided the context for the search and development of an African theology (Martey 1993:66).

<sup>3</sup> An important landmark in the development of the theology of inculturation was the address given by Pope Pius XII to the Pontifical Mission Aid Societies in 1944. It is important because it appears to be the first recorded instance in which the Church officially recognized the plurality of cultures (Shorter 1988:183).

The term, 'inculturation', is borrowed from 'Enculturation', an anthropological term coined by J.M Herskovits, which denotes the gradual process of learning by which a social reality, such as institution or person grows into or becomes part of his/her culture (Crollius 1986:34, 35; Ikenga-Metuh 1996:7). It should be, however, distinguished from 'Acculturation' which denotes 'cultural contact' or 'the interaction between cultures' (Crollius 1986:35; Ikenga-Metuh 1996:7).

Pierre Charles introduced the concept of 'enculturation' into missiological circles (Bosch 1991:447). The term inculturation, however, was probably first used by Joseph Masson of Gregorian University in Rome, who coined the phrase *Catholicisme inculturé* (inculturated Catholicism) in 1962, and the term appeared in his book, *L'Eglise ouverte sur*

By the end of the 1970s, the term, ‘inculturation’ obtained currency, especially in Roman Catholic circles. By the mid-1980, inculturation was accepted by the EAAT as a theological concept in Africa. From the 1980s onwards, to Francophone as well as Anglophone African theologians who pursue the Africanization of Christianity, this term has become the common expression to embrace both the concept of ‘incarnation’ in Roman Catholic circles and of ‘indigenization’ in Protestant circles (Martey 1993:68; Dedji 2003:31). According to Shorter (1988:11), inculturation is:

the ongoing dialogue between faith and culture or cultures. More fully, it is the creative and dynamic relationship between the Christian message and a culture or cultures.

Father Arrupe describes inculturation as:

The incarnation of the Christian life and of the Christian message in a particular cultural context, in such a way that this experience not only finds expressions through elements proper to the culture in question, but becomes a particular that animates, directs and unifies the culture, transforming and remaking it so as to bring about ‘a new creation.’

(quoted by Schineller 1990:6).

In the process of the dynamic interaction between the Christian message and a certain culture, there would be the interpenetration and mutual enrichment of the two. Consequently, the culture will be enlightened and transformed by the Christian message, and the Christian message will be rethought, reformulated and re-expressed from within the culture (Bosch 1991:425).

African Inculturation theology and theologians, therefore, attempt not only to articulate ‘a new theological reflection’ that aims at integration of Christian faith and African culture, but also to make Christian faith to be expressed in African cultural form that is familiar to people’s thought-patterns and way of life.

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*le monde*, published in 1963 (Bosch 1991:447; Ikenga-Matuh 1996:7). But popularity of the term was given in 1978 by the Jesuit Superior General, Fr. Petro Arrupe who introduced the term to the Synod of Bishops (Bosch 1991:447; Martey 1993:67). In missiological circles, this term was transformed into ‘inculturation’, a theological notion describing the missiological process by which the Christian message becomes inserted in a given cultural environment (Crollius 1986:35).

Ratzinger, however, expressed reservations about the word ‘inculturation’ and instead proposed the word ‘interculturality’. The reason, according to Dorr (2000:98), is to guard against two dangers-syncretism and relativism: (1) syncretism: the elements of non-Christian religions that are incompatible with the teachings of Christianity would contaminate or dilute the kernel of the gospel, and thus the end product would be neither Christian nor traditional African; (2) relativism: several conflicting versions of Christianity would be seen as equally valid or true (Dorr 2000:99).

## 4.3 MBITI'S METHODOLOGY

### 4.3.1 Mbiti's theological concerns

According to Mbiti (1970b:430), 'Christianity has Christianized Africa, but Africa has not yet Africanized Christianity.' He diagnoses the African Church as 'a Church without a theology, without theologians, and without theological concern' (Mbiti 1972:51).<sup>4</sup> In order to remedy symptoms, the gospel and Christianity have to be deeply rooted within 'the point of African religiosity' (Mbiti 1970b:430), and the African should be free to express the Christian faith in 'a manner suitable to African conditions and background' (Mbiti 1972:53).

For Mbiti, the gospel, which remains basically universal and the same for all times, is proclaimed within the African language and cultural context, and the particular culture becomes the 'medium of receiving, diffusing, tuning in and relaying the gospel' (Mbiti 1977:27). Therefore, the Church in Africa should do her best to communicate the meaning of the gospel to Africans in such a way that the gospel can be understood.

Mbiti has been convinced that the fruitful contact between the gospel and African traditional concepts would result in the African expression of the gospel. He, therefore, has attempted to establish a point of contact between the gospel and African traditional concepts, and to integrate these two into an African Christian thought system.

Inevitably, an encounter and living dialogue between the gospel and African traditional concepts have been placed at the forefront of his theological task (Mbiti 1971:2). Mbiti has focused on the integration between African Christian faith and the African traditional concepts 'in ways that would ensure the integrity of African Christian identity and selfhood' (Bediako 2001:426).

In this sense, the attempted cultural embodiment of the gospel in the African context is not simply a cultural reaction to missionary imposition of European forms of Christianity (Bediako 1993:373). For Mbiti, the universal gospel should wear a particular cultural form in order that the gospel can be experienced and embodied in the people of the culture. For this reason, Mbiti (1977:27) maintains that the conversion of African people should take place within African cultural framework.

Therefore, Mbiti asserts that 'energy, effort, wisdom and grace should now be concentrated on Africanizing Christianity' (1970b:430), and boldly maintains that cultural imperialism must

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<sup>4</sup> In this respect, Bediako (2001:428, 432) presents some reasons: (1) rejecting 'the existence of a pre-Christian memory in African Christian consciousness'; (2) the missionaries' 'exclusion of any preparation for Christianity' in ATR(s); and (3) Western missionaries' lack of a sufficient and positive attitude to African cultural and religious values.

terminate first, in order to allow the indigenous culture to relate more effectively to the gospel (1977:30). He adds that ‘without African religiosity whatever its defects might be, Christianity would have taken much longer to be understood and accommodated by African people’ (quoted by Bediako 1993:374).

According to Bediako (1989:59), Mbiti’s search for ‘ways and means of communicating the gospel’ to Africans and his emphasis on ‘Africanizing Christianity’ have a deep connection with Mbiti’s search for an ‘African Christian identity.’<sup>5</sup>

Mbiti regards the African traditional religio-cultural heritage as a prime concern in his theological reflection. This has been clearly shown in Mbiti’s writings ([1969]1975; 1970a; 1971; 1975a; 1975b). His interest on the African religious past in African theology is to ensure the theological root of Christianity in Africa (Bediako 1989:58). That is the reason why Mbiti has in general a sympathetic view of the African religious tradition and of the relationship between Christianity and ATR(s) (Mbiti 1970b:438).

Mbiti differentiates the gospel from Christianity. To Mbiti, Christianity and the gospel are not identical. Christianity is the result of the meeting between the gospel and a particular culture. Mbiti (1970b:438) asserts that

We can add nothing to the gospel, for this is an eternal gift of God; but Christianity is always a beggar seeking food and drink, cover and shelter from the cultures and times it encounters in its never-ending journey and wanderings.

It means that Christianity is always indigenous, and has been developed in its own form, as a result of the effort to articulate the meaning of the gospel in a particular cultural setting in response to the realities of that setting. Therefore Mbiti employs ATR(s) to secure the theological root of Christianity in Africa, and relates the gospel to the indigenous African culture on its own terms and without pressure from outside, especially from Western ecclesiastical-theological traditions which have been assumed as universal norms of Christianity as well as of theology.

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<sup>5</sup> According to Bediako (1989:59), Mbiti regards African identity as the hermeneutical key for doing theology in Africa. African theologians’ anthropological concern about the African religio-cultural heritage have shown, says Bediako (1989:59), that their Christian and theological effort for rehabilitating Africa’s rich cultural heritage has been ‘an endeavor to demonstrate the true character of African Christian identity.’ Walls also says that the prime African theological quest is its concern with the past of the African Christian and the relationship between Africa’s old religions and her new religion (quoted by Bediako 1989:59). The interest in the African traditional religio-cultural heritage and in the relationship between ATR(s) and Christianity makes the issue of identity itself into a theological and Christian matter (Bediako 1989:59). Bediako (1989:60) says that ‘the issue of identity also forced the theologian to become in himself the locus of this struggle for integration through a dialogue and so become infinitely more intense and personal.’

Therefore, the gospel refuses to be made ‘the exclusive property of any one culture, or nation, or religion, or generation’ (Mbiti 1977:29). There is ‘no single form of Christianity’ that should dominate another with a cultural monopoly (Mbiti 1977:29). To Mbiti, Western Christianity and theology are not universal norms that African Christianity and theology should imitate.

Mbiti, therefore, articulates African theology ‘without apology or embarrassment’ (Mbiti 1978:72) to Western theological tradition. Concerning Mbiti’s pursuit of theological liberty from the Western tradition, Bediako (2001:433) comments that Mbiti ‘exorcized’ the ‘Westernism’ and ‘foreignness’ in the Western transmission of the gospel, and that Mbiti affirmed the missionary endeavour without making the missionary central, for the whole operation began with God and was carried through by God.<sup>6</sup>

To understand Mbiti’s theological concerns and how one source combines with the other to form his theology, it helps to look at the sources of his theology. In order to produce an authentic theology that is meaningful to the African context, Mbiti suggests the following sources of African theology: (1) the Bible; (2) the theology of the older churches and the major traditions of Christendom; (3) ATR(s), African philosophy and African religious heritage; (4) the living experience of the church in Africa (1971:189-190; 1972:51). Mbiti designates them as ‘the four pillars on which theological systems of the church in Africa could be erected’ (1972:51). Two additional sources: (5) African culture; and (6) African history (Mbiti 1979b:68). What these sources make clear is that African culture, including traditional religious belief systems, plays a normative role in the theological works which shape African theology (Eitel 1988:326; Kinney 1979:68).

Therefore, Mbiti sees a threefold task for Christian theology in Africa: (1) to retain its African religio-cultural heritage; (2) to endow Christianity with an African imprint and character; and (3) to sustain the uniqueness and catholicity of Christianity (Kinney 1979:66).

### **4.3.2 Mbiti’s methodology**

One of Mbiti’s theological concerns is cultural embodiment of the gospel in the African cultural context. He emphasizes that the African theological method must be a ‘sympathetic study of the relationship between Christianity and ATR(s)’ (1970b:438), and maintains that ‘Christianity has to

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<sup>6</sup> Mbiti paid attention not only to the weakness and failure of mission Christianity, such as the stigma of colonialism, foreignness, Westernism and paternalism, but also to its strengths like the potentialities and strengths of organization, institutionalism, links with the historic traditions of Christendom, financial resources, and personnel from overseas (Mbiti [1969]1975:236).



approach this traditional background with an open mind, with a readiness to change it and be changed by it' (1970b:439).

Mbiti (1968:329), therefore, asserts that the church in Africa must develop a theological method, which should differ from Western theological methodology. Through this new methodology Mbiti wants to get the right theological reflection on the interaction between Christianity and the African religious heritage, and to make the gospel intelligible and relevant to the life and affairs of African people.

In this sense, Mbiti's theological agenda is (1) speaking the gospel in a local language and culture and (2) affirming the African traditional religious heritage as *praeparatio evangelica* (Bediako 1992:307-317). In his *African Religions and Philosophy*, Mbiti clarifies his way of approaching ATR(s):

In this study I have emphasized the unity of African religions and philosophy in order to give an overall picture of their situation....I have therefore chosen to highlight both similarities and differences considering the African picture as a whole. For this reason, I have drawn examples from all over Africa, both making general observations and giving detailed illustrations.

(Mbiti [1969]1975:xii).

My approach here is chiefly descriptive and interpretive, bringing together in a comparative way those elements which are representative of traditional religions from all over Africa.

(Mbiti [1969]1975:5).

In Mbiti's method of approaching ATR(s), several key expressions are stressed, as can be seen from the above quotations: His approach is 'descriptive, interpretive, and comparative'; the unity of ATR(s) is emphasized, considering similarities and differences among ATR(s).

The basic premise of Mbiti's methodology is that traditional Africa and the early Israelites had a lot in common. Based on parallels which resulted from the comparative study between the biblical record and African religiosity, Mbiti wants to find a fundamental ground on which the gospel can be understood in Africa in order to make 'the gospel intelligible to its hearers and bring out its true depth effectively' (Mbiti 1968:39).

As discussed in chapter 2, theologians' methodology and theological articulation are not

irrelevant to his socio-political situation in which they articulated their theological reflection. It seems quite probable to suppose that the reason why Mbiti considers ATR(s) to be a formative factor in shaping African theology is connected with the 1960s-1970s' political situation in Africa.

On the tide of anti-colonial spirits, modern African intellectuals who had a national and cultural consciousness easily viewed Christianity as the religion of the European invader (Nieder-Heitmann 1981:96).

Mbiti's intension to counter the African intellectuals' anti-Christian mood imposed the role of ATR(s) on his methodology and opened the way to ATR(s) to be a formative factor in African theology. Through considering ATR(s) as a formative factor to shape African theology in his scheme of continuity,<sup>7</sup> Mbiti avoids two extreme sides: (1) radical nationalists who criticized Christianity as a religion of Western imperial-colonialism in the tide of the anti-colonial mood; (2) radical missionaries who derogated traditional African religious heritage as a mere superstition in the stream of Western cultural superiority. He maintained simultaneously the value of ATR(s) in Christianity and the usefulness of Christianity in Africa.

#### 4.3.2.1 Anthropological analysis

Mbiti performed his researches on the African traditional religio-cultural heritage. He studied more than 300 tribes' concepts of God in Africa across the continent. The reasons why he paid his attention to the concepts of God in Africa are, according to Mbiti, that ATR(s) revolve around the concepts of God (Mbiti 2004:228), and the concepts of God 'provide one area of great commonality' between the theological record and African religiosity (Mbiti 1980:817; 1986b:200).

In his approach to ATR(s), Mbiti treats religion as 'an ontological phenomenon' ([1969]1975:14), and understands the concepts of God in Africa within African ontology which can be divided into five categories:<sup>8</sup> (1) God as the ultimate explanation of the genesis and sustenance of both man and all things; (2) the Spirits being made up of superhuman beings and the spirits of men who died a long time ago; (3) Man including human beings who are alive and those about to be born; (4) the Animals and plants, or the remainder of biological life; and (5) phenomena and objects without biological life (Mbiti [1969]1975:15-16).

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<sup>7</sup> Bediako (2001:41) categorizes African theologians into three categories: (1) radical continuity (Idowu, Setiloane, Kibicho, and Goba, who argue that the Christian gospel brought little that was essentially new to Africa); (2) radical discontinuity (Kato who rejects all positive evaluation of any pre-Christian religious traditions), and (3) the middle ground between the two radical positions (Mbiti, Sawyerr, and Dickson).

<sup>8</sup> According to Hesselgrave and Rommen (1989:101), Mbiti's concept of God in Africa is contextualized on the basis of 'a reinterpretation of African ontology.'

#### 4.3.2.2 Theological interpretation

As discussed in chapter 3, the beliefs and practices of ATR(s) were not formulated into a ‘systematic set of dogmas’ (Mbiti [1969]1975:3). However, Mbiti, who is a theologically trained scholar, tends to approach and construct ATR(s) in a doctrinal system which is markedly theocentric. Concerning the studies of ATR(s), Mbiti ([1969]1975:1) says that

...our written knowledge of traditional religions is comparatively little....Practically nothing has been produced by theologians, describing or interpreting these religions theologically.

Although he says that he uses a descriptive and phenomenological method to study ATR(s) (Mbiti [1969]1975:5), his method of approaching ATR(s) and way to list the contents of his books show that he has his own theological presuppositions about ATR(s).

Mbiti’s theological tendency in his interpretation of ATR(s) is best expressed by his acknowledgement that he uses ‘the academic and technical language of theology to address the African situation’ (Letters to Nieder-Heitmann, quoted by Nieder-Heitmann 1981:71). Mbiti regards theological interpretation of ATR(s) as a point of departure in his study and evaluation of ATR(s). He employs Christian theological categories such as revelation, sin, monotheism, salvation, and eschatology as the framework to describe ATR(s), and translates the result of his anthropological studies on ATR(s) into Christian theological terms. Mbiti gives a theological interpretation to his anthropological analysis. It gives the impression that his method to interpret the anthropological data of ATR(s) is based on theology (Nieder-Heitmann 1981:59).

Westerlund (1985) says that the framework of *Concepts of God in Africa* is very close to that of Christian systematic theology and is ‘one of most obvious examples of the theological structuring’ of ATR(s). In a sense, Mbiti’s Christian background and theological training play a major role in his analysis of ATR(s), which is one of the formative factors in his theological articulation. His Christian-African background usually dominates his whole theological direction.

It seems justified to say that there is a hermeneutical circle movement between Mbiti’s theological methodology, which plays an important role in his interpretation of ATR(s), and the ATR(s), which is regarded as a formative factor shaping Mbiti’s theology in general and his understanding of God in particular.

## 4.4. THE AFRICAN CONCEPT OF TIME

### 4.4.1 The African concept of time

The African concept of time<sup>9</sup> is, to Mbiti, the key to the understanding of ATR(s) (Mbiti [1969]1975:14) and ‘the basic intellectual framework for interpreting African life’ (Bediako 1993:382).<sup>10</sup>

Mbiti is primarily concerned with how the traditional people’s own myths and religiosity condition their perceptions and acceptance of Christianity. For this reason, Mbiti has paid his attention to the encounter of Christian eschatology with the African concept of time so that Christian eschatology would be meaningful to the Akamba in particular and African people in general.

Mbiti analyzes and objects against the Christian teaching on the New Testament eschatology in Ukambani, which has been channeled through the Africa Inland Mission (hereafter referred to as AIM) and its missionaries.

According to Mbiti (1971:57), their teaching on eschatology is inadequate because of their (1) emphasis on a few aspects of the futurist element of eschatology and (2) the uncritical use and interpretation of the Bible.

The AIM missionaries adapted a literal interpretation of the Biblical language, which is clearly symbolical, in referring to the events of the *parousia*. What is metaphor in the Bible became literal

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<sup>9</sup> Booth (1975; 1993) attempts to trace out the possible influence on Mbiti’s concept of Time, and finds a similarity between the writings of Mbiti and Zahn. Zahn maintains that ‘in many African languages the future is found to be little differentiated... linguistically speaking, the future seems less conceptualized than the past’ and ‘the primary orientation is toward the world of the ancestors’ (quoted by Booth 1975:82). Zahn adds that ‘the human being goes backwards in time; he is oriented toward the world of the ancestors, toward those who no longer belong to the world of the living, while he turns his back on what is to come, the future’ Zahn says that ‘being oriented toward the past, the African finds the justification and meaning of his actions not in the future but in time already elapsed’ (quoted by Booth 1993:85).

According to Booth, although the two authors did not mention Evans-Pritchard’s *The Nuer* (1940) in their bibliographies, they were influenced by Evans-Pritchard: ‘time is to them a relation between activities’ (quoted by Booth 1975:83). And Paul Bohannan’s article, *Concept of Time among the Tiv of Nigeria* (1953), might have influenced Mbiti; Booth (1993:83-88) makes a comparison between Evans-Pritchard and Bohannan, and identifies a parallel between the two: Evans-Pritchard divides time into ‘ecological’ time that has to do with ‘the cycle of nature’ and ‘structural’ time that has to do with ‘the activities of the human group.’ Bohannan distinguishes ‘time indication by natural phenomenon’ that involves years, seasons, moons and days and ‘time indication by social phenomenon’ that involves the human life circle and the market circle.

<sup>10</sup> Bediako (1993:384) explains the African concept of time in reference to African religious ontology and African religiosity: when the five-fold division of ‘African ontology’ - God, spirit, man, non-human animate and inanimate creation - is conceived of in regard to their relations to man, then people can understand clearly how human existence in time is bound up with the demands of the essentially religious universe in which man lives, moves and dies. If the category ‘God’ describes and explains the origin of man, whilst the ‘Spirits’ explains his destiny, then it already gives an indication of why man’s ‘tragedie existentielle’ may be said to move backwards not forward.

The clue consists in what Mbiti thinks about the nature of the past (*Zamani*) to which the present (*Sasa*), the period of ‘intense experience’, is always tending. Mbiti says that the present is tending backwards: ‘People constantly look towards *Zamani*, for *Zamani* had the foundation on which the *Sasa* rests and by which it is explainable or should be understood’ (Mbiti [1969]1975:24).

truth in Ukambani. It caused a serious conflict with the linguistic and conceptual understanding of the traditional beliefs of the Akamba. Consequently their conversion was imperfect and a satisfactory new way of life could not be generated.

Mbiti concludes that AIM missionaries misrepresented the New Testament eschatology in a way that conflicted linguistically and conceptually with the Akamba, and consequently many Akamba Christians became to have ‘a false spirituality’ and were soon disillusioned when they realized that the *parousia* did not come as soon as expected (1971:57).

The rough superficial presentation of the New Testament eschatology and the failure to appreciate the nature of the message actually delivered (1971:86) caused the Akamba Christian to go to the extreme in emphasizing ‘the geographical location and physical interpretation’ of the *eschaton* (1971:87).

Therefore, Mbiti analyzes the African concept of time in order to make Christian eschatology be meaningful to African people.

Mbiti’s African concept of time can be summarized as follows: (1) two dimensional comprising ‘a long past’, ‘a present and virtually no future’; (2) African reckoning of time is ‘concrete’ and specific and ‘related to events but not mathematically’; (3) the African concept of time moves ‘backwards’ into the ‘past’ (*Zamani*), from the ‘present’, the ‘now period’ (*Sasa*) (Bediako 1993:383).

#### **4.4.1.1 Two dimensional concept of time**

Mbiti (1971:25, 56) analyzes African myths and nine verbal tenses of Kikamba (the Akamba language) and finds that there are no myths about the future in traditional African society, and linguistically there is only a very brief future in Akamba’s understanding of time. In East African languages (e.g. Kikamba, Kikuyu, and Luganda), says Mbiti ([1969]1975:22; 1969:160), there is no vocabulary which can directly depict concepts of a distant future, and if one tries to describe something in the distant future, the expression becomes ambiguous. The distant future is not easily spoken of in many African languages. According to Mbiti ([1969]1975:17), East African languages do not have a verb that expresses ‘something happening beyond two years from now’ and an African conceives of a future which does not extend beyond a few seasons. In the same way, African myths are not directed to the future, but to the past (Mbiti [1969]1975:19).

Based on these findings concerning the Akamba’s understanding of time, which resulted from his analysis of myths and language, Mbiti concludes that the Akamba (and African) view of time has no

future dimension and the concept of ‘future’ is virtually non-existent in Akamba and African traditional thinking ([1969]1975:17).<sup>11</sup>

According to Mbiti, time is considered as a two-dimensional phenomenon constituted by an indefinite past and an intensely active present ([1969]1975:17). In African thinking, the dominant factor is a virtual absence of the future (1969:159). The linear concept of time in Western thought, with a past, present and future, stretching to infinity, is practically foreign to African thinking (1969:159). Mbiti says, therefore, that the African concept of time is two dimensional; ‘*Sasa*’ (the present in Kiswahili), ‘a dynamic present’ and ‘*Zamani*’ (the past in Kiswahili), ‘a long past’.

The *Sasa* is the present time or the period of immediate experience, and it might rightly be called the micro-time (Mbiti [1969]1975:22; 1969:160). The *Sasa* covers everything from the recent past to the short future, and a short future which is to occur immediately is actually part of the present and constitutes what Mbiti calls potential time ([1969]1975:17). The inevitable-cyclical rhythm of nature also is in the category of potential time.

The *Zamani* includes everything from the immediate past to the remote past. It overlaps with or intrudes into the *Sasa* period. The *Zamani* period might be called macro-time. The *Zamani* consists of all events which have been actualized. After events being become actualized in the *Sasa*, they are incorporated into the *Zamani*. The *Sasa* disappear into the *Zamani*. Everything sinks into the *Zamani*. They move ‘backwards’ into the *Zamani* period, in which everything finds its halting point. In this sense, events of the *Sasa* move ‘backwards’ into the *Zamani* (1969:161).

The *Zamani* is ‘storehouse for all phenomena and event’ (1969:161), ‘the center of gravity for human thought and activities’ (1969:162), ‘the graveyard of time’ ‘the period of termination’, ‘the dimension in which everything finds its halting point’ ([1969]1975:23), and ‘a vast ocean of Time where everything gets absorbed into an aspect of reality which is neither after nor before’ (Mbiti [1969]1975:23; 1969:161).

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<sup>11</sup> Many African as well as Western scholars reject Mbiti’s view on the African concept of time. They maintain that Mbiti’s category of No-Time is meaningless.

Kato ([1975]1987:57-67) argues that Mbiti exaggerates the value of the Akamba concept of time, and misstates his study of the Akamba concept of time as a whole. Dickson (quoted by Musopole 1994:136) maintains that the existence of the idea of judgment and retribution in some societies in Ghana illustrates the future dimension of time in Africa. Ray (1972:84) points out that the West African concept of destiny that determines an individual’s life history demonstrates that they are oriented toward the future. According to Francis Gillies (quoted by Burleson 1986:121), the future is a fundamental biological category which is dictated by hunger, so it may be said to be a universal category in humankind. Musopole (1994:147) argues that time in Africa is not simply phenomenological, but fundamentally ontological because African people conceive time objectively as a reality in its own right regardless of events. Death which is certain to occur at the future strongly demonstrates a future dimension of time in African people’s thought (Musopole 1994:151).



#### 4.4.1.2 Time as a composition of events

African time is not an academic concern; time is simply a composition of events that have occurred, are occurring simultaneously, or will occur immediately (Mbiti 1969:159). According to Mbiti, African time is seen in concrete terms with reference to specific events rather than mathematically (Mbiti [1969]1975:19; 1971:29). What constitute time are the events and not the mathematics.

In traditional Africa, 'time' does not exist as 'an empty container' into which events may be placed. On the contrary, there is no time apart from events. It can be said that time is not associated with the word 'when', but with the word, 'what' (Mbiti [1969]1975:29). Time is not real until it has been actualized by an event.

The future is virtually non-existent or absent as actual time, since the future events have not taken place ([1969]1975:22), and cannot constitute time (Mbiti [1969]1975:17). The future, therefore, is unreal because it 'contains' no events; more precisely, it has not been experienced or 'humanized' (Booth 1975:84; 1993:90). Events which have not occurred are in the category of 'No-Time' (Mbiti 1969:159). If there is no event, there is no time. Time is not an ontological entity.

The future has no independent existence of its own, since the events that compose time have not occurred in it, and once the events occur, they are no longer future, but the present and the past. The essence of actual time is 'what is Present and what is Past' (Mbiti 1969:160; [1969]1975:17). To Africans time has to be experienced to make sense. In this sense, time is not a commodity to be spent, bought, or sold. It is something to be made or created. In traditional Africa, 'time does not really exist apart from human activity; time is created by the human being' (Booth 1975:84).

Therefore, it can be said for the Africans that 'Africans create time' (Mbiti 1969:159-168).

#### 4.4.1.3 The African concept of time moves 'backwards'

Mbiti argues that time as a succession or simultaneity of events 'moves' backwards rather than forwards, from the now (present) to the past (1969:160; 1971:24),<sup>12</sup> and people set their minds not

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<sup>12</sup> According to Ray (1972:83), as Mbiti points out, it is correct that, in Africa, the concept of the future is severely foreshortened, and the center of temporal gravity indeed lies in the past, and 'there is no concept of history moving forward towards a definite future climax.'

However, according to Ray, it is distorting things to represent the African concept of time as a mirror opposite of the Western notion, so that history moves backward from the present, and is terminated in the past, which is the graveyard of time. Ray (1972:83) maintains that, in Africa, as in the West, time runs forward, from the past into the present. The decisive difference is that it does not move much into a distant future. But that time does not move into a distant future



on future things, but chiefly on what has occurred ([1969]1975:17). Traditional Africans are more oriented towards the ‘finality not in the future but in the past’ (Mbiti 1971:28), because, for the Africans, the final purpose of life is connected with the root of their existence which lies in the *Zamani* (Mbiti 1971:25). Mbiti ([1969]1975:24) says:

People constantly look towards the *Zamani*, for *Zamani* had foundation on which the *Sasa* rests and by which it is explainable or should be understood. *Zamani* is not extinct, but a period full of activities and happenings. It is by looking towards the *Zamani* that people give or find an explanation about the creation of the world, the coming of death, the evolution of their language and customs, the emergence of their wisdom and so on. The golden age lies in the *Zamani* and not in the otherwise very short or non-existence future.

Therefore, according to Mbiti, in Africa, history does not move towards any goal which lies in the future (Mbiti 1971:25). History moves backward (1971:28).<sup>13</sup> There is no concept of history moving forwards to a future climax, or to a better future, or to an end of the world (Mbiti 1969:163). Mbiti says that ‘there is no end to this continuous rhythm and cycles, and there is no world to come... Time has no end’ (Mbiti 1969:163).

There are, however, phenomena that fall into the unchanging rhythms of nature, such as day and night, seasons, birth and death. The Africans regard the rhythms of history and nature as unchanging

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differs entirely from that it runs backward. Mbiti’s depiction of the African concept of time as a futureless dimension is a misrepresentation. Ray says that part of the problem is that Mbiti fails to recognize the important dimension of ritual time. In this sphere, time is essentially cyclical, not linear, and it recoverable. In ritual time, the past is far from being a ‘graveyard’. On the contrary, it is a constant source of ontological renewal through the ritual reenactment of primordial acts (Ray 1972:83). It interrupts ordinary linear time and recovers the mythical past. Through ritual, which re-enact primordial events, one finds renewal (Burlinson 1986:131). African ritual time, therefore, provides a redemptive, soteriological dimension ‘here and now’. Ray points out that Mbiti has simplified not only the future dimension but also the past.

<sup>13</sup> Opinions are divided among scholars about Mbiti’s interpretation of the African concept of time, especially Mbiti’s statement; ‘history / time moves backward’. According to Booth, Mbiti’s statement that ‘history moves backward’ from the *Sasa* to the *Zamani* ([1969]1975:23; 1971:28) should be understood with reference to Mbiti’s assertion that ‘time as a separate reality does not move; only events come and go...’ (1971:24). In Akamba, there is no such thing as ‘time’ in the abstract. For Akamba, ‘it is simply a composition of events that have occurred’ (1971:24). ‘People reckon time for a concrete and specific purpose; one event in relation to another’ (1971:29). It is not ‘time’ that moves into the past, but ‘event’ (Booth 1993:84). Booth (1993) maintains that Mbiti did not say that the African view of time is the mirror opposite of the Western notion, as Ray (1972:83) criticizes. Mbiti simply says that for Africa, time does not exist in the abstract, only in events. According to Booth (1975:83), Mbiti is not suggesting that the African view is of the same kind as the Western view simply reversed. The African view is not the Western view reversed. Booth (1993:84) objects to Ray’s statement that ‘in Africa, as in the West, time runs forward, from the past into the present’ (Ray 1972:83). Booth argues that Ray misses the point that in Africa, time as such, does not ‘run’ anywhere. Africa does not share the Western notion of abstract time which can be measured apart from events (Booth 1993:84) because ‘it is the events which constitute time,’ as Mbiti (1971:24) maintains.

and cyclical (Mbiti 1971:31). They are rhythmically constant; and as constant phenomena of history, there is nothing teleological about them (Mbiti 1971:56). They do not point either to a teleology or end of the world.

Since the future does not exist beyond a few months, the future cannot be expected to usher in a golden age or a radically different state of affairs from what is in the Sasa and the Zamani. The notion of a messianic hope, or a final destruction of the world has no place in traditional concept of history. So African peoples have no ‘belief in progress,’ the idea that the development of human activities and achievements move from a low to a higher degree. The center of gravity for human thoughts and activities is the Zamani period, towards which the Sasa moves. People set their eyes on the Zamani, since for them there is no ‘World to Come’, such as is found in Judaism and Christianity.

(Mbiti [1969]1975:22-23).

In traditional African thought, maintains Mbiti, there is no idea of progress in history, no messianic hope, no final consummation of or completion to human history, no world to come because, for them, the *Zamani* is the center of gravity for human thoughts and activities.

#### **4.4.2 Mbiti’s conclusion**

Mbiti (1971:86) maintains that what the AIM and the Church (Africa Inland Church Kenya, hereafter referred to as AICK) taught concerning eschatology was new to the Akamba and other African peoples. Christian teaching in Ukambani as channeled through AIM and AICK, says Mbiti, emphasized the ‘geographical, locational and physical’ interpretation of Heaven.

Traditionally they never thought of or expected a future world located somewhere in the heaven. Mbiti (1971:86) says that, in the Akamba, there is no belief that the living-dead or spirits dwell with God. The departed dwells on this world but are invisible to human beings. When people depart from this world, they do not desire or expect to live with God because they believe that God exists or dwells on a completely different ‘plane and mode of existence’.

When the Akamba Christians, therefore, oriented their thinking from the *Tene* (the past in Kikamba) period to the future, they also removed the place of the departed which was next to that of

the living from this earth to Heaven, the dwelling place of God, which was believed to be the ‘geographical home’ of the Christians located somewhere (Mbiti 1971:87). Owing to the change of the center of gravity from the past to the future, the Akamba (and other African peoples) experienced a ‘temporal and psychological inversion’ because the traditional dwelling place for the departed - this earth - was to be evacuated and the dwelling place was no longer to be in the *Tene* dimension of Time.

It is evident that the New Testament employs a materialistic language as one of the means of communicating or depicting its eschatological message. The language, however, is not the reality but only a vehicle of communicating a certain dimension that is beyond the human understanding (Mbiti 1971:89). Its language, therefore, should not be interpreted literally but symbolically and Christologically. In the New Testament, the Heaven, which is described in several materialistic languages, has no independent reality. Rather, emphasis is on ‘Jesus as the One through whom and in whom life is Heaven-ly’ (Mbiti 1971:88).

Mbiti argues that, in Ukambani, the materialistic languages, depicting eschatology and Heaven, were interpreted on its literal level, and then misconstrued materialistically, instead of being understood symbolically and Christologically. The materialistic languages failed to convey eschatological truth that lay behind the symbolism. Consequently, the message of eschatology was separated from Christology. This ‘false separation of Eschatology from Christology’, among the Akamba Christians, resulted in ‘a false spirituality’ (Mbiti 1971:89). Then, in regard to Heaven, Akamba Christians created a ‘materialistic future located away from the earth’ and paid little attention how to relate this life to the life of the hereafter, and psychologically escaped to a ‘dreamland’ (Mbiti 1971:89-90).

According to Mbiti, a right understanding of the African concept of time and its incorporation into a contextualized African theology will have a great potential for the African church (Hesselgrave & Rommen 1989:104), and will also provide clues both to the elimination of the foreignness of Christianity and the direction that must be taken to construct a viable African theology (Hesselgrave & Rommen 1989:101).

As a result of his reexamination of the African concept of time, Mbiti espouses a realized eschatology. For Mbiti, the Bible passages that are described in eschatological figurative languages must be understood symbolically and Christologically. He believes that the passages refer to what has already occurred or is now occurring in Christ. In Mbiti’s view, instead of the futurist understanding of eschatology that grows out of the Western linear view of time, a realized

eschatology is in accord with both the Bible and the African *Sasa-Zamani* concept of time (Hesselgrave & Rommen 1989:104).

With regard to his theological aim that African theology should interpret the Bible to make Christ relevant and meaningful to African people and their past and present, Mbiti deals with eight eschatological symbols and words<sup>14</sup> which require reinterpretation (1971:64-85): gehenna; fire; treasures and rewards; the New Jerusalem; the future country; eating and drinking; the escaping of tears and pain; and heaven. These are not the reality itself, but symbols (Mbiti 1971:74).

According to Mbiti, the symbol must be 'timeless if it is to be effective and to make sense in Christian evangelism and living' (1971:70). In the Christian context, the eschatological word is a symbolic imagery. If the eschatological word is not understood and interpreted Christologically and symbolically, it has no independent reality (Mbiti 1971:67). Instead of the literal interpretation of eschatological languages, therefore, he focuses on a symbolic imagery of the languages, and attempts to interpret them Christologically.

'Gehenna' is interpreted not as a place but as 'the negation of incorporation into Christ' (1971:67); 'fire' is a 'Christological symbol' which saves or destroys based on one's relationship with Christ (1971:69). It has neither moral nor religious associations. The Christian gospel should not be reduced to negative treats which have no effect on evangelism due to the literal misinterpretation of symbols (1971:70); 'treasures and rewards' are 'vividly powerful' symbols of fellowship with God (1971:74); 'the New Jerusalem' is a symbol of perfect fellowship between God and His people (Rev. 22:3-5) (1971:76); 'the future country' does not exist apart from Jesus Christ, and it has to do with abiding in Christ. Those who abide in Christ have reached their permanent home which cannot be eroded by time (1971:81); 'eating and drinking and marriage support of the Lamb' are to be understood sacramentally and Christologically, as the Eucharist (1971:82); 'heaven' is not a place, but a symbol of fellowship centered around God (1971:85). Mbiti rejects the future reality of heaven.

As in Jesus God has become 'near and visible', so also in Jesus, Heaven becomes 'tangible and available' within and beyond Time. In Jesus, maintains Mbiti, 'Christian Eschatology becomes practical Eschatology' (Mbiti 1971:89).

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<sup>14</sup> According to Kato ([1975]1987:78), Mbiti strongly opposes the literal interpretation of eschatological symbols and words, and extremely spiritualizes the passages. Mbiti says that the teaching about 'Gehenna', or 'lake of fire', is an 'useful psychological device in evangelism' and he adds that 'Jesus may have accepted current notions about Gehenna without necessarily endorsing them all' (1971:65). Mbiti asserts that the New Testament is explicit that Jesus never promised us a heavenly utopia, but only His own companionship both in time and beyond, both in space and beyond (1971:89).

## 4.5 MBITI'S UNDERSTANDING OF GOD

In his autobiographic record, Mbiti (1980:817) acknowledges that 'the first and most intriguing topic' that instantly attracted his concern was 'the thinking of African people about God.' Why was Mbiti engaged in the very topic? Mbiti (1968:39) has attempted to communicate the biblical revelation to the African people and to make the gospel intelligible to its hearers. In Mbiti's view, African Christians who convert from ATR(s) cannot understand the Christian teaching about God without the help of their traditional knowledge of God because the whole life of African people is not possible to be separated from their religious beliefs and practices (Mbiti [1969]1974:1).

Mbiti, therefore, pursues integration of the traditional African religious heritage and Christianity. Mbiti (1970c:21) regards the traditional African religious heritage as a 'fundamental ground' on which the Christian faith can be understood effectively in Africa.

Mbiti's concern to integrate the traditional African religious heritage and Christianity led him to study and focus on the parallels between the two. Through his comparative study of ATR(s) and Christianity, Mbiti finds that 'great commonality' between the two revolves round the concepts about God (Mbiti 1980:817; 1986b:200). In his lecture, 'Contextual theology, an African perspective' that was presented at the Ecumenical Institute of the World Council of Churches, Bossey, Switzerland, on the 10<sup>th</sup> August 1985, Mbiti says that 'the central point of reference in African traditional religion is God-as Creator, Sustainer, of the Universe, the World, Mankind, and so on' (quoted by Burleson 1986:90). The African concept of God which is conceived of as a kernel of ATR(s) seems to Mbiti to be a point of continuity or a link that connects the traditional African religious heritage and Christianity effectively.

Mbiti asserts that the ATR(s)' monotheism revolves around the concepts of God, whom the people feel and believe they have known since time immemorial (Mbiti 2004:228). Mbiti, therefore, interprets the anthropological data of more than 300 African tribes' concept of God using Christian theological terms.

The questions to be considered here are: How could Mbiti perform a theological interpretation of an anthropological study of the concepts of God in Africa? What are Mbiti's theological presuppositions or underlying considerations that lead him to adopt his methodology?

The important theological presuppositions that influenced Mbiti's theological articulation of God will be examined to comprehend Mbiti's understanding of God within his African theological framework.

## 4.5.1 Mbiti's theological presuppositions

Mbiti's theological presuppositions influenced his evaluation of ATR(s) and his understanding of the relationship between ATR(s) and Christianity. The most important theological presuppositions that decisively play major roles in his analysis of ATR(s) are his belief in African monotheism based on Christian monotheism, and the ATR(s) as a *praeparatio evangelica*.

### 4.5.1.1 ATR(s) as monotheism

From his early writings to the present, Mbiti is convinced that ATR(s) are monotheistic. Mbiti asserts: 'Every African people recognizes God as One' ([1969]1975:36); 'There is only One Creator of the Universe: African Religion is profoundly monotheistic' (2004:222); African Religion is 'a deeply monotheistic religion' (2009:147).

Mbiti, as a Christian African theologian, begins his study of God in African within the theological frame of Christian monotheism - there is 'only One God, Creator and Sustainer of the Universe'; and then he, as an African Christian theologian, moves from Christian monotheism to African monotheism, and arrives at the assertion that African Religion is monotheism.

On the basis of Christian monotheism, Mbiti maintains that 'there is but One Supreme God' (Mbiti 1970:xiii),<sup>15</sup> and African people believe the one and same God in Africa as a whole. Mbiti ([1969]1975:30) says:

African soil is rich enough to have germinated its own original religious perception. It is remarkable that in spite of great distances separating the peoples of one region from those of another, there are sufficient elements of belief which make it possible for us to discuss African concepts of God as a unity and on a continental scale.

By confirming the theological premise of ATR(s) as monotheism, he is able to (1) use a theological basis in order to interpret the various African concepts of God, and (2) to maintain that

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<sup>15</sup> The devout, including Mbiti, who are alleged to Christianize ATR(s), use the phrase 'the universal response to the Divine' (Horton 1984:400). Common to this phrase are three basic assumptions: (1) there is a Supreme Being with approximately the attributes assigned to him by the modern Judaeo-Christian tradition of religious thought; (2) he has endowed all human beings with awareness of his presence and desire for communion with him; (3) the Supreme Being has endowed all human beings with some ability, although an inadequate one, to make vertical reports concerning his presence and his nature.



the African peoples' beliefs about God have a common basic structure which makes comparison meaningful (Nieder-Heitmann 1981:72). Consequently, Mbiti's theological presupposition of ATR(s) as monotheism enables him to speak of a single, comprehensive African Traditional Religion<sup>16</sup> (Mbiti 1975a), even though once he used African Traditional Religions in the plural form (Mbiti [1969]1975:1).

#### 4.5.1.2 ATR(s) as *praeparatio evangelica*

The localization of Christianity cannot effectively be carried out without reference to traditional religiosity. According to Mbiti, in this respect, African peoples, who are deeply religious, experience their life through their religiosity. This traditional religiosity assists the communication of the gospel to its hearers. Mbiti (1970b:432), therefore, maintains that the way African people recognize and accept Christianity is inevitably influenced by their traditional religiosity. This traditional religiosity has done the 'donkey work' of preparing the ground, so that Christianity comes 'marching in' to African people.

For Mbiti (1970b:436; 1970c:21), ATR(s) are largely compatible with Christianity, especially a great deal of religious and cultural element in the Old Testament. He, therefore, says that many parallel elements of these two religions can merge without conflict.<sup>17</sup>

ATR(s) have equipped people to listen to the gospel, to discover meaningful passages in the Bible, and to avoid unhealthy religious conflict (Mbiti 1986b:203). He emphasizes that African traditional religiosity can become an enrichment for the Christian presence in Africa (1970b:437) and a crucial stepping stone towards the Ultimate light ([1969]1975:32). ATR(s) as well as other religions are conceived of as preparatory and the essential basis in the search for the Ultimate (Mbiti [1969]1975:277). Mbiti, therefore, maintains that ATR(s) 'should be regarded as a preparation for the Christian gospel; African religious background...has a great deal of value in it' (1970b:432).

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<sup>16</sup> Mbiti originally spoke of African religions in the plural, because there are about one thousand peoples in Africa, and each has its own religious system ([1969]1975:1). Later on he speaks of ATR in the singular (1975a). He, however, does not present the rationale for this shift to the singular. If it is not due to generalization, then it is most probably his theological premise of monotheism which is responsible for this (Nieder-Heitmann 1981:76).

<sup>17</sup> Mbiti (1970b:432-438) proposes 7 guiding principles in discussing the relationship between Christianity and ATR(s): (1) African peoples are deeply religious; (2) ATR(s) should be regarded as a preparation for the gospel; (3) ATR(s) are largely but not entirely compatible with Christianity; (4) Christianity may be seen as a fulfillment of ATR(s); (5) Christianity is to judge and save ATR(s); (6) African traditional religiosity can become an enrichment to the Christian presence in Africa; and (7) A sympathetic study of the relationship between Christianity and ATR(s) may be of mutual academic benefit to both.



In Mbiti's opinion, the African traditional religious experience and heritage is truly a preparation for the gospel. Christianity does not destroy ATR(s). Christianity rather comes to say YES to ATR(s), and to enrich, to fulfil and to crown ATR(s) (Mbiti 1970b:436).

As such, Christianity will have become an agent of fulfillment in the sense that it will not destroy Traditional Religions as such, but it will have superseded them by bringing into them other dimensions of religions which they lack and which are not opposed to the traditional religiosity. In missiological jargon, these Traditional Religions will have been a real *praeparatio evangelica* (preparation for the gospel).

(Mbiti 1970c:36).

As a theologically trained Christian scholar, Mbiti applies Christian monotheism to the African traditional religious heritage, and then regards ATR(s) as monotheism.

As an African who searches the African cultural identity in the wave of African nationalism, Mbiti prepares a room for the African traditional religious heritage within Christian theology with the intention not to sacrifice the African cultural identity.

Relying on his belief in an African monotheism he declares that the African traditional religious heritage is a *praeparatio evangelica* for the biblical revelation. Consequently, ATR(s) are placed on equal footing with the Old Testament as preparation for the coming of Christ. Mbiti (1970b:436) says that

We can find a great deal of interesting religious and cultural material in the OT which parallels or matches the traditional background of African peoples... in the area of the Old Testament a certain amount of give-and-take or mutual enlightenment can be carried out.

Through maintaining his theological presuppositions, African monotheism and ATR(s) as *praeparatio evangelica*, Mbiti simultaneously endorses his double identity - a Christian and an African. According to Bediako (1989:60), Mbiti's interpretation is;

determined by his Christian theological commitment and is motivated by the thesis that all the religious traditions of Africa, other than the Christian, constitute in their highest ideals a *praeparatio evangelica*.

In this sense, Mbiti's Christian and African background - a Christian who has been trained

theologically and is the very same African who searches for his African cultural identity - plays a major role in his interpretation of ATR(s) in general and his understanding of God in particular.

Mbiti relates his African religio-cultural heritage as *praeparatio evangelica* to the biblical revelation in the hope of creating not only an African Christian theology but an African Christian identity as well.

According to Bediako (1993:372), Mbiti's assertion of 'the African pre-Christian heritage' as 'preparation for the gospel' is 'the most enduring paradigm' in his writings.

On the basis of his theological presuppositions, Mbiti accepts an assumption that there is continuity between ATR(s) and Christianity, and pursues a combination of the traditional African religious heritage and the Christian tradition.

## **4.5.2. Mbiti's understanding of revelation**

### **4.5.2.1 Mbiti's distinction between the gospel and Christianity**

Mbiti seems to think that the implantation of Western Christianity and theology in Africa has been motivated by a Western assumption that identifies Christianity with Western culture and value sets. Mbiti, therefore, attempts to make a distinction between the gospel and Christianity in order to lay a foundation on which African forms of Christianity and theology can be established and developed in its own right, preventing a direct implantation of Western coloured Christianity and theology in the African continent.

Concerning the gospel and Christianity, 'the gospel' is God-given and eternal, while 'Christianity' is the result of the encounter between the gospel and a certain local society. Christianity, therefore, is always indigenous and culture-bound. Mbiti (1970b:438) maintains:

We can add nothing to the gospel, for this is an eternal gift of God; but Christianity is always a beggar seeking food and drink, cover and shelter from the cultures and times it encounters in its never-ending journey and wanderings.

Mbiti does not identify Christianity with Western culture, and he distinguishes the gospel and Christianity. Therefore, to Mbiti, Christianity in Africa should not be understood as the result of the encounter between Christianity as a Western culture and African culture. Instead, it should be

regarded as the encounter of the gospel with African culture. Historically, Christianity (and even Islam) flows into the overall history of Africa, so it can be said that Christianity has deep roots in the history of the African continent.

In this sense, Christianity in Africa can be said to be an African expression of the gospel and can be described as ‘indigenous’, ‘traditional’ and very much an ‘African’ religion (Mbiti [1969]1975:277; 1970c:19). Bediako (2001:432) says that the gospel is capable of ‘translation’ into African terms without injury to its essential content. The indigenous character of African Christianity has been proved by the success of the modern missionary enterprise on the continent.

Because of the reasons mentioned, Mbiti ([1969]1975:xii) does not agree to regard Christianity (and Islam) as ‘foreign’ or ‘European’ (and ‘Arab’). He maintains that Christianity is very much an African religion. Therefore, although Mbiti once spoke in his early writings of the need to ‘indigenize’ Christianity, and used the term, ‘indigenization of Christianity’, he soon came to abandon the idea of the indigenization of Christianity. Mbiti says:

...I do not think that we need to or can ‘indigenize Christianity’. Christianity results from the encounter of the gospel with any given local or regional community/society. To speak of ‘indigenizing Christianity’ is to give the impression that Christianity is a ready-made commodity which has to be transplanted to a local area. Of course this has been the assumption followed by many missionaries and local theologians. I do not accept it anymore. The gospel is God-given. The church in which it is incarnated is made up of people who are by ‘definition’, indigenous where they happen to be born or live or have their roots.

(quoted by Kinney 1979:66).

Just as Christianity as a religion is indigenous, theology as an articulation of theological reflection in African context is always indigenous, resulting from the effort to articulate the meaning of the gospel in a particular cultural context. To Mbiti, the task of African theology comes to consist not of ‘indigenizing’ but rather of letting the gospel encounter, as well as be shaped by, the African experience (Bediako 2001:432).

By maintaining the distinction between the gospel and Christianity, Mbiti objects to identify Christianity with the Western culture. By affirming the diversified expressions of the gospel in different situations, Mbiti attempts to establish a ground on which African Christianity and theology that are relevant to the African situation can be constructed and developed.

#### 4.5.2.2 Mbiti's rejection of the distinction between 'general revelation' and 'special revelation'

Through the distinction between the gospel which is eternal, universal, and essential, and Christianity which is the result of the meeting between the gospel and a culture, Mbiti (1977:29) maintains that there is 'no single form of Christianity which dominates another.'

After objecting to Western Christianity and theology as a universal and normative form, Mbiti challenges the basic theological tradition of the Western distinction between 'General Revelation' (or natural revelation) and 'Special Revelation' (or supernatural revelation).<sup>18</sup> Mbiti (1980:817-818; 1986b:201) abolishes the distinction between the two because it is 'inadequate', 'unfreeing', not 'a biblical distinction', and only 'an academic distinction'.

Mbiti asserts that if any attempt to distinguish between natural/general revelation and supernatural/special revelation is made, a false dichotomy is drawn between the two (Letter to Nieder-Heitmann, quoted by Nieder-Heitmann 1981:109). For Mbiti, 'any act of revelation has both natural and supernatural dimensions', and 'grace and nature belong to God' (Letter to Nieder-Heitmann, quoted by Nieder-Heitmann 1981:109), while Thomas Aquinas says that 'grace perfects nature.' In Mbiti's understanding of revelation, there is no difference between 'natural' knowledge of God and 'revealed' knowledge of God.

Therefore, it is for Mbiti very natural to maintain that God constantly reveals Himself not only to the people of Israel, but also to the traditional adherents of African religion.

God spoke to Moses in the thorny bush of Sinai... is God afraid of speaking to African peoples and revealing Himself to them through the thorny bushes of our continent - through our traditional religiosity?

(Mbiti 1970b:436).

On the basis of his objection against the distinction between general revelation and special revelation, Mbiti freely assumes that all revelation has the same value. Mbiti (1980:817; 1986b:200) maintains:

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<sup>18</sup> According to Kato, while general/natural revelation, which is the precursor of special revelation, simply gives hints to man to hypothesize about the Supreme Being and functions as a pointer to the Creator behind the physical universe, and special revelation, which is given for the purpose of salvation, bridges 'the infinite chasm' between God and man and provides only 'one way of approaching to God' in Jesus Christ, who has 'truly revealed God to man finally and decisively' (Kato [1975]1987:122-126).

Since the Bible tells me that God is the creator of all things, his activities in the world must clearly go beyond what is recorded in the Bible. He must have been active among African peoples as he was among the Jewish people. Did he then reveal himself only in the line of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Samuel and other personalities of the Bible? The decisive word here is ‘only’. The more I peeped into African religious insights about God, the more I felt utterly unable to use the word ‘only’ in this case. In its place there emerged the word ‘also’. This was an extremely liberating word in my theological thinking.

The only difference between the revelation to the Jewish people and the revelation to Africans, according to Mbiti, is that the Jews produced a written record of their revelation, while Africans kept their revelation in non-written forms, such as oral tradition, rituals, and symbols (Mbiti 1986b: 201).

God has not left Africa without witness, and therefore, God is no stranger to African peoples (Mbiti [1969]1975:29; 1979b:68; 1986b:201). Mbiti regards ATR(s) as a field or an instrument of God’s revelation because the intensely religious life of the African is a God-given *praeparatio evangelica*. To Mbiti, God has been known in Africa because God’s self revelation has been manifested in and through ATR(s) for African peoples. And the revelation has not been distorted.

One important task, therefore, is to see the nature, the method and the implications of God’s revelation among African peoples in the light of the biblical record, which is the same revelation to ATR(s) (Mbiti 1980:818; 1986b:201).

In this sense, to Mbiti, God’s revelation is not confined to the Bible, and must be greater than a revelation that is contained in the biblical record. This knowledge and acknowledgement of God is the foundation of ATR(s). The revelation deposited in ATR(s), therefore, is coequal to the revelation in the Bible, especially in the Old Testament because God revealed Himself equally in both ATR(s), the unwritten forms of revelation, and the Bible, the written form of revelation (Mbiti 1970b:436; 1980:817; 1986b:200; Eitel 1988:325).

Mbiti has placed God in the front as the subject of all revelations, strictly speaking, abolishing the distinction between the revelation in the Bible and the revelation found in ATR(s). Mbiti’s rejection of the distinction between the two revelations led him to view that the revelation in the ATR(s) is the same as the revelation found in the Bible.

### 4.5.3 Mbiti's understanding of God

#### 4.5.3.1 One God

The concept of God is perhaps the single doctrine that has attracted remarkable interest in African scholarship of religions and theology. According to Kombo (2000:183), the reasons African scholars have shown their interest in the African concepts of God are that (1) the African theologians seem to view theology as primarily about engaging in discussions about God, and (2) God occupies the most important place in the African cosmology.

In reaction to the presupposition of some anthropologists and Christian missionaries that 'an African could not conceive the idea of the Supreme God' or 'the Supreme being is a *deus otiosus*', Danquah and Idowu asserted respectively that the Akan knew only one God (Danqua 1944) and the Yoruba were originally a primitive monotheism (Idowu 1962; 1973). Mbiti also follows these two: 'Every African people recognize God as One' ([1969]1975:36).

Mbiti's *Concepts of God in Africa* has its roots in Danqua's *The Akan Doctrine of God* (1944), who was the first African to expound the African concept of God in order to make it understandable and comprehensible to the Western people and to make it compatible with Western philosophical systems (Ray 1972:85). Danqua in particular wished to uphold the conviction that the Akan religion had known only one God, objecting against the European tendency which reduced African religions to mere polytheism and dismissed the African Supreme Being as 'remote' and 'abstract' (Ray 1972:85).

In his *Concepts of God in Africa*,<sup>19</sup> Mbiti studies African concepts of God covering nearly 300

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<sup>19</sup> Mbiti (1970a) begins with a section on the 'the Nature of God' in which he classifies the nature of the African concept of God into the intrinsic, eternal, and moral attributes of God; omniscience, omnipotence, omnipresence, creation *ex nihilo*, transcendence, immanence, self-existence, and goodness, etc. A second section illustrates the active attributes of God referring to God as Creator, the providence and sustenance of God, God as King, Lord, and Judge; and so on.

Mbiti ([1969]1975) describes the African God, under 'the big picture of African ontology', in the order of the nature of God, the works of God, the worship of God and so forth. Mbiti (1975a) briefly explains belief in God under the contents: the names of God, the works of God, human images of God, the nature of God, and so on. Mbiti emphasizes that God is not a *deus otiosus* and that he is morally good and merciful. Africans associate God's transcendence with the good and creative aspects of reality. Fear of him, however, causes Africans to attribute fatalistic evil to God. God interacts with those in actual time through natural entities, like rivers, trees, or mountains. The presence of God is keenly felt during times of crisis, especially of sickness and death. During such times, specially gifted people intercede and attempt to control the forces rooted in potential time. Diviners, witches, sorcerers, and elders have different roles in this intermediary process (Mbiti 1970a:3-18). Mbiti ([1969]1975:29, 32) argues that, to many Africans, God is both so 'far' (transcendent) and so 'near' (immanent). Mbiti not only opposes the view held by Western scholars, but also resolves the paradoxical African conceptualization of God as distant (transcendent) and involved in the affairs of men (immanent). Mbiti (1970a:18) says that for Africans 'God is in theory transcendent, but in practice immanent.'

By imposing a Christian conception of God on autochthonous conceptions, Mbiti attempts to advance the problematic claim that the African and Christian conceptions of God are identical.



different peoples in Africa. Systematically Mbiti ([1969]1975:29) investigates the traditional African concepts of God and knowledge of God contained in ‘proverbs, short statements, songs, prayers, names, myths, stories, and religious ceremonies.’ Mbiti (2009:147) collects over two thousand primary and attributive names of God, and reaches at the conclusion that, in all these societies, without a single exception, all African peoples and languages have a notion of one God. This is the most minimal and fundamental idea about God, found in all African societies (Mbiti [1969]1975:29).

Mbiti (1970a:xiii) asserts that African concepts of God have resulted from an ‘independent reflection’ upon the One Supreme God. God is no stranger to African peoples, and in traditional life there are no atheists (Mbiti [1969]1975:29).<sup>20</sup> According to Mbiti (2004:224), the commonest name for God in Africa is ‘Creator’. He asserts that ‘*all*<sup>21</sup> African peoples (*italics are mine*) attribute creation to God,’ and many have ‘Creator’ as their name for God in their languages. Theologically and theoretically, there cannot be two (or more) separate divine Creators of the same creation. This is none other than the God described in the Bible (Mbiti 2009:151).

When the Akamba are speaking of *Mulungu* (God) as *Mumbi* (Creator) of the universe and humankind, they are conceived of as the same Creator and of about the same creation that the Bible depicts in Genesis 1:1 (Mbiti 2009:151).<sup>22</sup> In many African languages, the name of God or the word for God is used in singular form (Mbiti 2004:222). Mbiti (2004:228; 2009:147) argues that this phenomenon demonstrates that the African Traditional Religion is ‘a deeply monotheistic religion.’

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<sup>20</sup> Although nowhere explicitly stated, Mbiti’s belief in one African God seems to be a kind of Pan - Africanism underlying uniformity and coherence (Janzen 1971:263). Mbiti frequently says ‘there is but One Supreme God’ (1970a:xiii); ‘every African people recognizes One God’ ([1969]1975:29); ‘most of the prayers are addressed directly and specifically God’ ([1969]1975:65; 1975a:63; 1975b:3); ‘at least 90% of the prayers are addressed to God’ (1975b:4).

<sup>21</sup> The Igbo God, *Chineke* (Idowu 1969:27; Uchendu 1963:95), *Ngewo*, God of the Mende (Sawyer 1970:66-67), the Ambo God, *Kalunga* (Dymond 1950:140) are conceived of as the Creator. Although God is widely conceived of as the Creator of all things in Africa, there are numerous exceptional cases that Mbiti neglects; *Ruwa*, the Chagga God is not the Creator of the universe and humankind (Dundas [1924]1968:107). The Sotho-Tswana have no creation story (Setiloane 1976:81). In the Central Luo, there are no words for ‘creation’ and ‘to create’ (p’Bitek 1971:45), and they do not have the notion of a God who is the Creator (p’Bitek 1971:50). Therefore, in Mbiti’s ‘*all* African peoples attribute creation to God,’ the word ‘*all*’ is incorrect.

<sup>22</sup> According to Mbiti (2009:151), translating the name of God into indigenous languages (of Africa) has immense theological and religious consequences. Although there are differences that have to be ‘negotiated’, the contents and concepts of these indigenous words have elements that are not contrary to biblical records about God (Mbiti 2009:147). By allowing the biblical word for God to be translated into the indigenous word for God, Mbiti (2009:151) says that ‘Biblical concepts percolate into the indigenous use of the word, expanding and enriching the peoples’ perception of God far beyond the contents of the indigenous word. Through the translation, people see an extension of their knowledge of the God they and their ancestors had known from old. The Bible transmits to them the wider horizon of God’s nature. It is also through the Bible that they get to know and name Jesus Christ, who is not named in their traditional religiosity and knowledge of God. They now see the same God through an expanded revelation that includes Jesus Christ.’

Mbiti, however, does not mention the other side; when the indigenous word for God is used to designate the biblical word for God, the existing traditional and indigenous concepts of the word also percolate into the biblical use of the word, and then the indigenous concepts and contents that do not match the biblical concepts and contents can newly be attached to the biblical concepts of God. In consequence, the biblical concepts of God can be mixed up with the indigenous concepts of God, and might result in a kind of syncretism.



By affirming African monotheism, Mbiti wants to provide theological grounds for interpreting many African concepts of God, and also to show that the beliefs of African peoples have a common basic structure which makes detailed comparison meaningful.

#### 4.5.3.2 The same God

Mbiti attempts to answer whether God, who is the Father of Lord and saviour Jesus Christ, of the Bible is the same God acknowledged by ATR(s).

I wish to take up the first question of how missionaries and African theologians have considered the relationship between the concepts of God in Christianity and those in African religion.

(Mbiti 1988-1989:60).

Many of the earlier missionaries had the opinion that the God of the Bible and the God of ATR(s) could not be the same God and that there should be no mixing of Christianity and heathenism (Mbiti 1988-1989:61). There are, however, serious missionary writers, such as John V. Taylor and Edwin W. Smith, who have admitted or acknowledged that ATR(s) are talking about one and the same God as the Bible does. According to Mbiti (1988-1989:61), African theologians themselves more or less agree that the God whom African religion acknowledges is the same God whom the Bible presents.

On the basis of African monotheism and of objecting to the traditional distinction between general and special revelation, Mbiti presumes that the African God should ontologically be compatible with the God of the Bible.

Mbiti maintains that the subject of the revelation in both ATR(s) and Christianity is same, and arrives at the conclusion that the revelation in the ATR(s) is essentially the same as the revelation of the Bible. From his assertion of the sameness of the subject of revelation, Mbiti moves to the sameness of the content of revelation concerning the knowledge and nature of God.

The traditional African and the early Israelites cherished the same concepts of God, and used the same metaphor to describe the divine. To put it more concretely, the sameness of the subject of revelation leads to the conclusion that all revelation in both ATR(s) and the Bible has the same value (Mbiti 1980:818). The Only One God who is revealed in the Bible is precisely the same God who is known in ATR(s).

He, therefore, says that ATR(s) are largely compatible with Christianity and that many parallel elements of these religions can merge into each other without conflict (1970b:435-436).<sup>23</sup>

Mbiti (2004:228) maintains:

African religion is monotheistic and revolves around the concept of God, whom the people feel and believe they have known since time immemorial. This is the same God described in the Bible. For that reason, the Bible is the word of the same God that they already know, to whom they pray and made sacrifices and offerings.

God who revealed the substance concerning Himself ‘among the Jewish people’ must have revealed the same substance among ‘African peoples’ in different forms, such as oral tradition, rituals, and symbols (Mbiti1980:818; 1986b:201) because the subject of revelation who revealed Himself in Israel / the Bible is the very same subject of revelation who is revealed in Africa / ATR(s); the same substance revealed in different forms. Mbiti (1980:818) argues:

When we identify the God of the Bible as the same God who is known through African religion (whatever its limitation), we must also take it that God has had a historical relationship with African people. God is not insensitive to the history of peoples other than Israel. Their history has a theological meaning.

On the basis of that the subject of revelation who revealed Himself in Israel is the very same subject of revelation who is revealed in Africa, Mbiti (1988-1989:67) attempt to integrate the history of the African religious tradition into the Biblical salvation history.

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<sup>23</sup> According to Mbiti (1970b:435), even though Christianity and ATR(s) are to a great extent compatible, it should not be missed that there is a discontinuity between the two religions. Mbiti says that not all of ATR(s) are compatible with Christianity, and not all of ATR(s) can be fulfilled by the gospel. Mbiti (1970b:436) says that ‘when we turn to New Testament, we find that African religiosity in all its richness is utterly silent and ignorant. Therefore, African religiosity must here assume the listening posture, be at the receiving end.’ Magic, witchcraft, sorcery, and divination, which feature prominently in ATRs, fall clearly outside the Christian orbit and are, therefore, incompatible with Christianity.

To find and establish the common ground between ATR(s) and Christianity should be done carefully, with ‘the aid of academic understanding.’ Mbiti does not assume that African Traditional Religion is without rotteness. He (1970b:436-437) says that ‘we must give Christianity the opportunity and freedom to remove deadness and rotteness from our traditional religiosity.’ Mbiti (1970b:436; 1977:36) maintains that the gospel must judge, evaluate, save, sanctify, and transform many elements of African culture and ATR(s).

However, Mbiti’s articulation of the mission of Christianity to ATR(s) or relationship between ATR(s) and Christianity is not clear. Mbiti does not concretely say how Christianity/the Bible can judge and save ATR(s), and what the passage, ‘judge and save’ ATR(s) means. The similarities are given much weight by Mbiti’s articulation of the relationship between the two religions. Even though Mbiti cautions about the mere surface similarity that can be lead to careless conclusions about possible closeness between the two religious ideas, he overemphasizes the superficial and external similarities between the two religions, and then he overlooks the deep and inner differences between the two.

In other words, Mbiti's assumption that all revelation, whether general or special, is the same amalgamates all history with salvation history, making both indistinct (Eitel 1988:329).

Mbiti (1979b:68) says that God handles this world 'both historically and geographically' and exists 'among the peoples of the world' including African people. God has intervened in human history in order to extend a universal offer of salvation. These historic events were specifically grounded in Hebrew culture but with universal effect.

My interpretation of Israel's history demands a new look at the history of African peoples, among whom this same God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob has indeed been at work. In this case, so-called 'salvation history' must widen its outreach in order to embrace the horizons of other peoples' histories. ... I feel that the issue of looking at African history in light of the biblical understanding of history is clearly called for.

(Mbiti 1980:818).

Mbiti combines the African religious history with the Christian theological category of salvation history (Bediako 1993:388). In this sense, God's revelation does not have boundaries.

As mentioned earlier, African monotheism as a theological presupposition led Mbiti to reach at the conclusion: God in ATR(s) and God in Christianity is the same God. Mbiti (1970a:xiii) argues that African traditional religiosity is the Old Testament for the African Christians.

What the African culture teaches about God is basically the same thing that other monotheistic faiths teach about God. This means, says Mbiti, that the Yahweh of Moses is *Ngai* of Kikuyu or *Olódùmarè* of the Yoruba (quoted by Burleson 1986:83).<sup>24</sup>

God was and is already known by African peoples as *Mungu*, *Mulungu*, *Katonda*, *Ngai*. African people know God according to their languages. They are not empty names, and they are names of One and same God, the Creator of the world, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (Mbiti 1980:818; 1986b:201).

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<sup>24</sup> Mbiti has not totally ignored the problem of the dark nature of God in African religion. See his book, *Concepts of God in Africa* (1970a:29-30; 34-39; 80-97; 244-252).

#### 4.5.3.3 The African concepts of God as a *praeparatio evangelica*

Mbiti maintains that the content and the concepts of indigenous words that describe God have elements that match or are not contradictory to the Biblical account about God. African religiosity has provided the religious ‘groundwork’, ‘vocabulary’, ‘insights’, ‘aspirations and direction’ for ‘the gospel to find a hearing and an acceptance among African peoples’ (Mbiti 1979b:68).

In a sense, the African concepts of God could be regarded as a *praeparatio evangelica*. Likewise Mbiti attempts to demonstrate the African concepts of God as *praeparatio evangelica*. The African name of God is, therefore, the foundation of articulation of the Biblical God within the African context because African people have believed in the same God who has simultaneously been manifested in both Africa and the Bible (Mbiti 2009:151).

Even when translators make use of the existing word for God in African (and other) languages, profound theological issues remain. What does it mean when translations employ ancient (traditional) names by which people have named, acknowledged, and worshipped God in their own languages? Would that be talking of the same God, as named both in these languages and in the Bible? In the minds and life-practice of the Akamba and other African peoples, the answer is unequivocally YES. The very translation of the word God into an indigenous language automatically merges the two worlds as they name the same God, in both the Biblical and African worlds (languages).

(Mbiti 2009:151).

Mbiti (2009:146) is convinced that African people had the concepts and belief in God before foreign Christian or Muslim missionaries and travelers arrived in Africa. Missionaries, who introduced the gospel to Africa, did not bring God to African continent. To the contrary, God brought them there. And the God they have known and worshipped is the God who revealed in the Bible and whom Christians have worshipped. Mbiti (1979b:68; 1980:818; 1986b:201) says that what the missionaries proclaimed was the name of Jesus Christ (Mbiti 1979b:68; 1980:818; 1986b:201).

Mbiti, therefore, willingly agrees with the 1966 Ibadan Theological Consultation’s conclusion: African peoples have known of and worshipped the ‘God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Creator of heaven and earth, Lord of history’, and this pre-Christian knowledge of God is ‘not totally discontinuous with’ God revealed in Jesus Christ.

His studies of the concepts of God in Africa enable Mbiti to articulate that ‘the God described in the Bible is none other than the God who is already known in the framework of the traditional

religiosity' (Mbiti 1980:818). Mbiti concludes:

I have no doubt whatsoever that God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is the same God who for thousands of years has been known and worshipped in various ways within the religious life of African peoples. He is known by various names, and there are innumerable attributes about him which are largely identical or close to biblical attributes about God.

(Mbiti 1979b:68).

The two are very compatible because the same revelation lies at the bottom of each superstructure. God, whether known through the Bible or through African religiosity, is essentially the same.

(Mbiti 1980:818).

#### **4.5.4 Evaluation of Mbiti's understanding of God**

As Hastings (1976:50) pointed out, African theology in the early stage became 'something of a dialogue between the African Christian scholar and the perennial religions and spiritualities of Africa.' In the process, African theologians, as 'insiders' to the traditional African religio-cultural heritage, have arrived at a generally sympathetic view of the pre-Christian tradition.

Taking the view that 'religion permeates into all departments of life,' and that a study of religion is 'a study of the peoples themselves' (Mbiti [1969]1975:1), Mbiti attempts to build a close connection between the religious beliefs and practices and the people who embody the religious beliefs and practices in their everyday lives (Bediako 1989:60).

Therefore, the past that has formed the present of the people cannot be ignored, and moreover the religious practices of the present cannot be separated from the religious tradition of the past. People cannot be isolated from their past.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> According to Bediako (1989:59), ATR(s) belong to the African religious past. The past is not a 'chronological' past, but an 'ontological' past. The ontological past gives an account of the history of the religious consciousness of the African Christians. The African Christians are situated on a line of continuity of the ontological religious past. The pre-Christian religious heritage, therefore, is an important factor to African theologians who attempt to clarify 'the nature and meaning of African Christian identity.' The issue of identity motivated Mbiti to concentrate on the relationship between African's old religion(s) and her new one, Christianity. And then the issue of identity forced Mbiti constantly to confront the question of how the old religion(s) and the new religion in 'African religious consciousness' can be integrated in 'a unified version of what it meant to be African and Christian,' and force him to 'struggle for integration through a dialogue' (Bediako 1989:60).

Mbiti shows his interest in the African religious past in doing African theology. He presents the African traditional religio-cultural heritage with a positive attitude, and interprets ATR(s) theologically. He rejects the assumption of Western scholars that regards the Africans as a religious ‘*Tabula Rasa*’. Mbiti places the religious tradition of the past as a prime concern in his theological work, and makes African identity his hermeneutical key in doing African theology (Bediako 1989:59). In this sense, Mbiti’s most important contribution to the Christian mission enterprise is his theological evaluation of the ATR(s).

Christianity in Africa is not the result of the meeting between Western culture and African religions. It is rather the encounter of the African people in their religiosity with Jesus Christ, whose ‘presence’ in the world is not a historical [i.e., chronological] but a geographical presence in the world made by and through Him (Mbiti 1979b:68). He pays his attention to Africa’s rich religio-cultural tradition and experience, which can be regarded as ‘the theological roots of Christianity in Africa,’ aiming to demonstrate the ‘true character of African Christian identity’ (Bediako 1989:59).

The question, however, has been asked whether Mbiti’s analysis and interpretation of ATR(s) and his theological articulation of the understanding of God are based on methodologically-sound principles or not.

#### **4.5.4.1 The tendency to generalize**

The major criticism of Mbiti’s writings comes from Western anthropologists.

In the view of anthropologists, Mbiti’s materials are inevitably ‘superficial catalogs of examples’ (Ray 1972:83; Shaw 1990:185), ‘Frazerian fashion’ (Ray 1972:83), and resemble ‘Victorian comparativism at its worst’ (Ray 1972:86). Mbiti makes ‘an almost totally uncritical use of secondary sources without any attempt to assess their reliability’ (Welbourn 1971-1972:227). Beidelman (1976:413) criticizes Mbiti’s *African Religions and Philosophy* ([1969]1975) as ‘a scissors-and-paste list of snippets from many different societies jumbled together out of full social context,’ although the concept of people cannot be interpreted easily without knowing their full context. Mbiti’s *Introduction to African Traditional Religion* (1975a) is criticized because that this book is ‘full of errors and more like a Boy Scout manual or an etiquette book on normative behavior than it is an account of the perplexing and disturbing questions of theodicy with which all religions struggle’ (Beidelman 1992:670).

The first area of disagreement is Mbiti's hypothesis of unity. The validity of his hypothesis of unity or a common basic structure of ATR(s), which treats all tribal religions in Africa somewhat homogeneously, has been seriously questioned. Mbiti ([1969]1975:30) asserts that 'there are sufficient elements of belief which make it possible for us to discuss African concepts of God as a unity and on a continental scale.'

The anthropologists, however, are reluctant to discuss 'African religion' or 'African cosmology' or 'African monotheism', since each cultural unit would have to be articulated in and of itself (Burlison 1986:97). Mbiti himself occasionally notes that Africa holds many ethnic groups and languages and hence different systems of ideas and practices. He admits that there are 'great distances separating the peoples of one region from those of another' (Mbiti [1969]1975:30). He, however, returns to characterize 'African Religion' as a generalized system.

He frequently overgeneralizes various African beliefs into a single unified system. A fine example of overgeneralization is Mbiti's assertion that all African peoples attribute creation to God. However, many exceptional cases demonstrate that some African people do not recognize God as Creator of the universe and humankind (Dundas [1924]1968; Schebesta 1936:168-170; Smith 1950a:7; Setiloane 1976:81; p'Bitek 1971:45, 50).

It should not be ignored that when God is spoken of as Creator in ATR(s), the meaning of the word, 'creation,' differs between the various African peoples, and differs from the Biblical witness about creation.

To the Akan, for instance, God is not thought of as a creator who creates something where before there was nothing or brings something into existence out of nothing. Instead of a creator *ex nihilo*, the Akan God is thought of as a 'cosmic architect' (Wiredu 2006:309-311).

Among the Lugbara, their God, *Adro* and *Adroa* is not a creator who created 'out of nothing' (Dalfovo 1998:485).

The Banyarwand God, *Imana* who is conceived of as a creator *ex nihilo*, is more like the Christian concept of God concerning the concept of creation (Guillebaud 1950:181; Wiredu 2006:327).

It is, therefore, incorrect to assume that the concepts of God are the same among all African peoples across the continent.

According to Gyekye, Mbiti's accounts are both false and fallacious: false because it is not the case that Akans lacked the concept of future time and fallacious because Mbiti makes hasty generalizations from what he observed of a very small part of Africa, and applies it to the whole of Africa (quoted by Òkè 2005:28).



Mbiti attempts to cover too many types of African religious beliefs and practices of nearly 300 different societies. In his study of the African concepts of God, Mbiti tries to touch upon almost every aspect of African Supreme Beings. Because of his desire to deal with every feature of religious phenomena, Mbiti gathers ‘bits and pieces’ from different societies (Ray 1972:86), and categorizes them into a set of ‘doctrines’, which are analogous in structure to Christian systematic theological category, without giving recognition to the socio-cultural and ritual fabric within which they are imbedded and without giving an opportunity to discuss the information he gathers in depth. In consequence, it results in little more than a ‘condensed and repetitive taxonomy’ of God’s attributes. Janzen (1971:263) says:

the reader is again and again expected to believe that X custom is practiced, or Y belief held by Z tribe – without any focus suggested in time or place, when one examines the sources of these statements, it becomes clear that often a given ‘tribe’ is represented by a single writer, usually one who know the people early in the colonial period. For every such stated tribe wide custom and belief there must surely be as many exemptions.

He presents the information about the attributes of God in general. However, a particular people’s relationship to God in depth is not examined. By fitting African concepts into a Christian systematic theological scheme, Mbiti is evidently trying to move beyond the various cultural milieus of his materials and to create a kind of Pan-African Christian theology<sup>26</sup> (Ray 1972:86).

Mbiti, therefore, interprets various attributes of the African God in a noticeably Western theological perspective and hastily classifies African religious thoughts and symbols according to the table of contents of a Christian systematic theology (Ray 1972:86; Horton 1984:396; Kato [1975]1987:71; Westerlund 1985:17; Hesellgrave & Rommen 1989:100).

As a result of his interpretation and classification of ATR(s) in Christian theological terms, Mbiti presents one of the most evident examples of systematical-theological structuring of ATR(s) (Kato [1975]1987:69). Consequently, Mbiti seriously distorts the actual African religious situation. Concerning Mbiti’s tendency to Christianize ATR(s), Beidelman (1992:670) criticizes that Mbiti’s sense of consistency in his works can only be seen in his Judaeo-Christian mood.

His concern is criticized because he tries to find African equivalents for concepts from Christian

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<sup>26</sup> Müller (2005:112) says the term, ‘Pan-Africanism’, is a general term for various African movements that have their common goal as ‘the unity of Africans and the elimination of colonialism and white supremacy from the continent.’ For that reason they should have ‘one system of belief.’ When the term applies to Christian theology, Pan African Christian theology refers to a theology that shares its goal with Pan-Africanism theologically and ideologically.

theology and then shows the relevancy of Christian theological concepts for the understanding of African religious ideas (Ray 1972:86). In a sense, Mbiti's generalizations reflect his Christian apologetics and not African traditional religions. This attempt, however, results in the subordination of African religious ideas to Christian theological concepts (Shaw 1990:185).

#### **4.5.4.2 African monotheism**

His belief in African monotheism is one of the most important theological presuppositions which decisively influence his analysis of African concepts of God and the articulation of his understanding of God within the African Christian theological framework.

Mbiti (1970a:xiii), in his 'systematic study of African reflection about God', assumes that 'there is but One Supreme God', and asserts that Africans clearly know the One Supreme God that is known in various forms to all men. Mbiti, who believes that ATR(s) are essentially monotheistic, thinks that many basic African concepts of God are similar to those in Christianity, and many of the attributes ascribed to God in Christian theology also fit to a description of God in ATR(s).

However, Mbiti's theological assertions need to be critically reviewed.

Unlike other scholars (Evans-Pritchard, Lienhardt, Verger, and Horton) who looked at the connections between the historical, sociological, and systematic aspects of the concepts of God, Mbiti focuses upon the concepts of God as essentially independent elements, and thus describes the attributes of God out of context and mixes them without considering their structural relationships within the different cultural and cosmological systems (Ray 1972:87).

In many African cosmologies, the concept of a Supreme Being, who created the world and sustains it, is easily found. There is, to some degree, a similarity between the Judaeo-Christian concepts of God and those of ATR(s). But the other salient attributes of this being are often very different from those of its Judaeo-Christian counterpart. For instance, the Lugbara Supreme Being is associated as much with evil as he is with good (Middleton 1965:70-71; Horton 1984:402).

The theistic diversity found in traditional religions suggests that the term African 'monotheism' is not always appropriate. p'Bitek (1970:47) argues that Mbiti has intended to show the world not only that 'African peoples are not religiously illiterate' but also that the African deities are 'but local names of one God, who is omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, transcendent and eternal.' But,

according to p'Bitek (1970; 1971), his own southern Acholi believe in many *jogi* but not in one *jok*.

As has been examined in chapter 3, the differences among the various African peoples' concepts of God should not be neglected, but be sustained. Each ethnic group conceptualizes their own concept of God due to a particular historical, religio-cultural background in which the religious elements have developed.

According to Tasié (1974:329), Mbiti tends to confuse the God in monolatry - i.e. 'the worship of one God out of many' - with the God in monotheism.

Mbiti and African scholars of religion emphasize a single African belief system of God across the whole African continent. The religiously and tribally divided African countries need the hypothesis of one and the same African God to accomplish 'social solidarity' and 'national integration' (Westerlund 1985:58; 1991:19).

Surely the belief in one God has been encouraged by the nationalist inspiration and/or the urgent political desire. The belief in one God functions as a common and decisive factor to unify culturally bounded tribes into the unity of a 'nation' and of 'Africa' as a whole.

But a systematic description of a homogenous or one unified concept of God in all African peoples across the continent is not possible. The concept of God of the African peoples differs among themselves. It means that each ethnic group conceptualizes its own particular concept of God. Therefore, to maintain one God who is commonly considered as identical in all parts of Africa is to impose a non-existent or unrealistic concept of God on each African ethnic group.

An identical concept of God in Africa must then necessarily be a mosaic work, and a mosaic concept of God is in fact not real. What Mbiti provides is a giant (though incomplete) mosaic of isolated attributes of God that goes far beyond the scope of any actual God (Ray 1972:87). A mosaic reconstruction of God is neither the Yoruba concept of God nor the Sukuma concept of God. The assertion of one and the same African concept of God is, therefore, incorrect in many respects.

On the basis of his assumption of African monotheism, Mbiti asserts that the God of ATR(s) and Christianity appears not only to be the same, but is in fact the same God worshipped in both religions (1970a:xiii-xiv). In Mbiti's view, this one God, known to different African peoples by different names, is the One True God of the Christian worship.

To some extent, there are similarities between some aspects of the African concepts of God and of the Christian concept of God, but the fact that there are decisive differences between the African concepts of God and the Christian concept of God should not be minimized, but be maintained.

According to Kato ([1975]1987:69), Mbiti selectively elaborates on African myths, religious

beliefs and practices which are parallel to the biblical characteristics of God and overstates the concepts of God. Kato investigates and evaluates other myths about African Gods, and he concludes that some characteristics of African concepts of God are directly contrary to the biblical God and there are crucial differences that cannot be ignored between the two, even though Africans are still aware of the existence of the Supreme Being due to the vestiges of the *Imago Dei* (Kato [1975]1987:69).

By identifying the Christian God with the African God, Mbiti has not fundamentally cast off the religion of his ancestors. This, however, is ‘an a priori theological presumption, not a historical datum,’ and it, therefore, seriously throws discredit on ‘the academic value of Mbiti’s whole study’ (Ray 1972:87).

Both cases - Mbiti’s African monotheism and his attempt to identifying the Christian God with the African God - are rushing into ‘the twin dangers of “reading-in” what is not in fact there and of “reading-out” what is not in fact indigenous’ (Smith 1950a:3).

#### **4.5.4.3 Interpretation of divinities / lesser gods**

Related to his African monotheism, Mbiti pays little attention to the important question of the relationship between God and the divinities.

In some cosmologies, there are, besides the one God, other divinities and spiritual beings that are closely associated with God. Mbiti (1975a:68) sees the idea of the intermediaries as a necessary element of the African cosmology.

When Mbiti describes those spiritual things, he employs a monotheistic hierarchical model of the African cosmology in which the divinities or lesser gods and spiritual beings are but mediators between man and God, or are manifestations of God or generally the personification of God’s activities; they could also be called nature spirits, deified heroes, and mythological figures (Mbiti [1969]1975:36; 1970a:117) who function as intermediaries between God and man (Mbiti 1975a:68).

On the intermediaries, Mbiti (1975a:68) explains;

The intermediaries are a link between God and the Creator and human beings. ... The idea of intermediaries fits well with the African view of the universe... The life of this invisible world is in some way higher than that of man, but God is higher still. In order to reach God effectively it may be useful to approach him by first approaching those who are lower than he is but higher than the ordinary person.

This explanation is close to that of Idowu, who understands the mediators as functionaries who work as they are commissioned by God (Idowu 1962:62; 1973).

As discussed in chapter 3, a line of devout scholars, including Mbiti, maintains that lesser spiritual beings are thought of as manifestations or personifications of and intermediaries with the Supreme Being (Horton 1984:403). According to Evans-Pritchard (1956:51, 200), a sacrifice to any one of the divinities is a sacrifice also to God in a particular manifestation that is conceived of as a ‘hypostasis,’ ‘representation’ or ‘refraction’ of God. Mbiti ([1969]1975:58) also maintains that God is the ultimate recipient of sacrifices, ‘whether or not the worshipper are aware of that.’

It can be said, to a certain extent, that the idea of the intermediaries maximizes the status of the Supreme God. In this sense, the idea of the intermediaries is closer to that of the central feature of the Judaeo-Christian religious concept that places emphasis on the primacy and centrality of the Supreme Being as against all lesser spiritual beings (Horton 1984:403).

However, in many cases, even though the ontological primacy of the Supreme Being is maintained, the allocation of time, energy, and thought are often strongly in favour of the lesser spiritual beings (Horton 1984:404).

For instance, the Mende (Harris 1950:281-282), the Shona (Thorpe 1991:54), the Kaguru (Beidelman 1971:35), the Nuba (Stevenson 1950:210-211), the Kono (Parsons 1950:269-270), and the Ambo (Dymond 1950:137-138) are more concerned with the lesser gods, spirits, and ancestors than with God.

Idowu (1973:173) admits that although African religious thinkers regard the lesser gods/spirits purely as manifestations of the Supreme Being, in fact, they treat them all too often as forces in their own right. According to Ukpong (1983) the lesser spirits were autonomous agencies who received offerings in their own right. Ezeanya (1969:41-42) says that the Supreme God is commonly believed to have related with the lesser spirits as his agents, but ‘that is more so in theory than in practice.’

Except in the case of the Ashanti, the Kikuyu, and the Dogon, the divinities and ancestral spirits are the objects of prayers, and are thought of as more responsible for everyday life (Dammann 1969:81; Sawyerr 1970:6). In many other ethnographical descriptions, the Supreme Being seems to be morally neutral, while certain lesser spiritual beings, such as the spirit of the local community and the ancestors are seen to be the guardians of morality (Horton 1984:402).

Regarding Mbiti’s statement that God is the ultimate recipient of sacrifices, whether or not the worshipper are aware of that, Horton (1984:405) points to one question that deserves careful attention: ‘who is the holder of the belief that God is the ultimate recipient of sacrifices in those cases

where the worshipper is not aware of that?’ In this case, the answer is that the holder is the author, Mbiti himself, not the worshipper (Horton 1984:405).

If the lesser spiritual beings are, as Ezeanya (1969:42) describes, ‘self-sufficient’ and act ‘independently of the Supreme God,’ and they have ‘their resources and have full powers to act without consulting God or asking for his permission,’ if the divinity, as Ukpong (1983:197) argues, is free and responsible deserving thanking and blaming with regard to their performance, is African monotheism still valid? If it is not valid, ATR(s) should be called monolatric, not monotheistic.

#### 4.5.4.4 ATR(s) as *praeparatio evangelica* – God, Revelation and Salvation in Mbiti’s theology

Mbiti argues (1970b:435) that ATR(s) are at many points largely compatible with Christianity, although there are fundamental differences that must not be lost to sight of.<sup>27</sup> Mbiti puts his emphasis more on similarities than on differences between the two.

Mbiti is convinced of that the traditional religious beliefs and practices serve a positive function to Christianity, and ATR(s), therefore, can and have to be considered as a *praeparatio evangelica* (Mbiti [1969]1975:277). That the Africans are very religious is undeniable. That their religiosity is a *praeparatio evangelica* is, however, questionable.

p’Bitek, Mazrui, Kibicho, and Goba deny that ATR(s) are a *praeparatio evangelica* because with this view its propagators decline to look at ATR(s) on its own terms (Kombo 2000:218).

Mazrui (1970:125) is critical of Mbiti’s attitude to ATR(s) as a *praeparatio evangelica*, commenting that ‘being a devout Christian, he has not always succeeded in resisting the temptation

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<sup>27</sup> There are, in fact, fundamental differences between the two. The God in Africa, for example, has a wife or wives; Mbiti interprets the wife or wives of God in Africa as follows: ‘in African traditional societies, marriage is a duty for everyone. It is to be expected that some of these societies would attribute a wife (or wives) to God. This is more of logical necessity than a serious conviction, springing from the social structure which makes it more convenient to give God a wife than to think of him as having none...this is just logical and satisfactory to African thinking’ (Mbiti 1970a:114).

However, that God has a wife or wives does not only seem to be the logical result of the social structure. To attribute a wife or wives to God is seen in some Africa people to be ‘a serious conviction’ that refutes Mbiti’s view. In some African peoples’ cosmology, for example, the Ewe people of West Africa (Parrinder 1950:225), God is shown as having a spouse.

Concerning the view of the ‘after-life’ and the ‘final end of man’, the view of ATR(s) differs from Christianity. Mbiti himself agrees to the difference. According to Mbiti, ‘to live here and now is the most important concern of African religious activities and beliefs. There is little concern with the distinctly spiritual welfare of man apart from his physical life... There is neither paradise to be hope for nor hell to be feared in the hereafter. The soul of man does not long for spiritual redemption, or for closer contact with God in the next world’ ([1969]1975:5).

African faith in God is utilitarian, not purely spiritual; ‘the people respond to God in and because of particular circumstances, especially in times of need...they do not search for Him as the final reward or satisfaction of the human soul or spirit. Augustine’s description of ‘man’s soul being restless until it finds its rest in God is something unknown in African traditional religious life’ (Mbiti [1969]1975:67-68). African religion is this-worldly in outlook (Mbiti 1969:164).



to see the divine will of Jesus operating in Africa even before the missionaries came.’

Kato ([1975]1987:69) rejects Mbiti’s assertion that ATR(s) contain the same conception of God found in the Old Testament. After studying his own people, the Jaba, Kato ([1975]1987:44) maintains that ‘there is neither redemption nor evidence of direct divine revelation to individuals in Jaba religion.’ Kato ([1975]1987:70) does not accept that ATR(s) can provide the synthesis element to Christianity.

#### 4.5.4.4.1 Revelation

To Mbiti, God has revealed himself through traditional religions to the African, and revelation in traditional religions is both natural and supernatural. However, his rejection of the traditional distinction between general revelation and special revelation and his acceptance of ATR(s) as an instrument of God’s revelation led to the considerable questions:

If all revelations have the same value (Mbiti 1980:818) and the God of the Bible is the same God who has been worshipped through the oral culture of traditional religions, what is the difference between ATR(s) and Christianity?

If God revealed himself to people in other ways beyond the biblical revelation, can the so-called ‘history of salvation’ be understood without the boundaries of the Judaeo-Christian tradition?

If so, then what salvific or revelatory value does Mbiti assign to ATR(s)? If ATR(s) have salvific power, is it necessary to proclaim Christ in Africa?

Mbiti’s answers to the questions are ambiguous. Mbiti ([1969]1975:29) asserts that God is no stranger to African people, and the concept of God found in African culture is a true revelation of God. He rejects the distinction between general revelation and special revelation and regards ATR(s) as an instrument of God’s revelation.

Mbiti ([1969]1975:277), as a Christian, emphasizes the uniqueness of Christianity and focuses on Jesus Christ. Mbiti says that ATR(s) are not the full revelation of God and the full revelation is found only in Christ. He claims that the ‘final test for the validity and usefulness of any theological contribution is Jesus Christ’ (Mbiti 1971:190). Mbiti says:

Jesus Christ brings in another dimension to this same God. Another dimension which makes God touchable. Concretizes God...Jesus Christ tames God for us.

(quoted by Burleson 1986:87).



The uniqueness of Christianity is in Jesus Christ...even if some of His teaching may overlap with what they teach and proclaim, His own Person is greater than can be contained in a religion or ideology....I consider traditional religions, Islam and the other religious systems to be preparatory and even essential ground in the search for the Ultimate. But only Christianity has the terrible responsibility of pointing the way to that ultimate Identity, foundation and source of security.

(Mbiti [1969]1975:277).

The most radical and unique element in this process is the introduction of the name and person of Jesus Christ, whom traditional religion did not know by name as such. The introduction of Jesus Christ into the religious world of African peoples has resulted in an avalanche of Christian expansion, with people expressing exuberant enthusiasm in celebrating the Faith...In embracing the Biblical Faith, they were not making light decisions, and even many Christians have been martyred, not because of their belief in God as such, but their Faith in Jesus Christ.

(Mbiti 2009:151).

Furthermore, Mbiti (1977:36) argues that the revelation of Christ should judge the revelation found in ATR(s) and that gospel must evaluate, judge, and transform African culture. African culture must bring glory to God.

If his statements mentioned above are correct, it means that the revelation in Jesus Christ is superior to the revelation found in ATR(s). If so, he himself is giving up his rejection of the distinction between the general/natural revelation and the special/supernatural revelation. If the revelation found in Jesus is God's ultimate revelation, then, what are valuable things in African culture? Mbiti is inconsistent and ambiguous in his answer to the relationship between the revelation in Jesus and the revelation in ATR(s).

If Mbiti's assertion that the distinction between general revelation and special revelation should be abolished, and that ATR(s) should be considered to be a *praeparatio evangelica* and an instrument of God's revelation (Mbiti [1969]1975:277) is correct, it means that ATR(s) should be recognized as a religion which has a salvific essence of the gospel. If so, is there a 'hidden Christ' in African culture?

At times Mbiti admits that Christ is 'hidden' within African culture. Mbiti says:

‘Before Abraham was I am’ ...what has not come in the African way is the naming of Jesus Christ...I think one can say that without naming him African peoples have sensed the reality of Jesus Christ....The naming of Jesus Christ is the main element...produced by the missionary movement.

(quoted by Burleson 1986:85).

This would betray a Christocentric understanding of revelation (Burleson 1986:85).

But at times, Mbiti rejects the notion of a ‘hidden Christ’ in ATR(s). Mbiti says:

He intervened in a physical, concrete, historical way...in so doing he made revelation a historical movement...in Jesus revelation became historical.

(quoted by Burleson 1986:86).

However, Mbiti still says that ‘in one sense we say that Christ is always present with God... wherever God is there Christ is...’ (quoted by Burleson 1986:86). Mbiti seems to admit the revelation of Christ which was revealed beyond the boundaries of the Judaeo-Christian tradition and the historical Jesus.

The relationship between the revelation found in Jesus and the revelation found in ATR(s) is understood paradoxically by Mbiti: God is no stranger to African culture (Mbiti [1969]1975:29), and the understanding of God found in ATR(s) is the true revelation of God. But the gospel, which belongs to Jesus Christ, judges the revelation found in ATR(s), and is a stranger to every culture, and cannot be ‘the exclusive property of any one culture, or nation, or religion, or generation’ (Mbiti 1977:29). Paradoxically God is ‘no stranger’ and ‘a stranger’ to the traditional African.

As a Christian, he is convinced that the revelation in Jesus is God’s ultimate revelation. At the same time, Mbiti, as an African, is convinced that God revealed himself to the Africans long before Christianity in a way which ATR(s) had salvific or revelatory value. By articulating simultaneously both paradoxical statements - ATR(s) are the true revelation of God, and Christ is the ultimate revelation of God and the uniqueness of Christianity - Mbiti’s answer to the question of the relationship of ATRs to the Gospel became vague and inconsistent.

There seems to be a confliction between a Christian Mbiti who emphasizes that Jesus is God’s ultimate revelation and an African Mbiti who maintains that ATR(s) are the same as God’s revelation found in the biblical records.

Mbiti focuses on the validity of ATR(s) and emphasizes the understanding of God through ATR(s), and simultaneously emphasizes the uniqueness of Christ. When he mentions Christ as God's ultimate revelation, Mbiti seems to place himself on an exclusive Christocentric position, but when he emphasizes the possibility of salvation in ATR(s), he turns on an universalistic Theocentric attitude. His emphasis on ATR(s) as the true revelation of God collides with his emphasis of Christ as the ultimate revelation of God.

Unfortunately, Mbiti's attempt to integrate two paradoxical emphases is obviously destined to fail because (a) he rejects the distinction between general revelation and special revelation, (b) the abolition of the traditional distinction between general revelation and special revelation has resulted in the weakness of the traditional notion of the uniqueness and finality of Jesus Christ and Christianity,<sup>28</sup> and, therefore, (c) he is not able to find a biblical link connecting the Theocentric aspect and the Christocentric aspect in his understanding of revelation.

It seems that when Mbiti rejects the traditional distinction between general revelation and special revelation he renounces or excludes his own basis for claiming the uniqueness of Jesus Christ.

While Mbiti is attempting simultaneously to hold on to his universalistic Theocentric attitude that assigns the salvific power to ATR(s) and his exclusive Christocentric focus that limits the finality of salvific value of revelation to Jesus Christ, he is exposing himself to be inconsistent, and even contradictory.

Mbiti has not explicitly indicated how Christianity has priority over the ATR(s) and where his assertion that Jesus is Ultimate identity comes from, although he accentuates the uniqueness of Christ and the task of Christianity.

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<sup>28</sup> According to Nieder-Heitmann, in an universalistic sense, Israel believed that Yahweh was God of the universe and therefore He was present within the nations in some way (Nieder-Heitmann 1981:87). However, in a particularistic sense, Israel believed that God was only conceived of as the God of Israel (Nieder-Heitmann 1981:87). Particularism consisted of a radical rejection of the gods, polytheism, and idolatry (Nieder-Heitmann 1981:88). The particularistic and universalistic notions of God's presence do not exclude, but rather complement each other (Nieder-Heitmann 1981:87). The God whom Israel came to know through her own history of salvation from Egypt and God's revelation to Moses also had to be the God of the whole world. He was not national God but had to be shared with the whole world (Nieder-Heitmann 1981:88).

However, Mbiti seems to mix up the particularistic understanding of God with the universalistic understanding of God. When he asserts that there is only one true God and this God is known to a certain extent in Africa, Mbiti is correct. Mbiti grasps the universalistic implication of monotheism in the Bible (Nieder-Heitmann 1981:89). But when Mbiti ignores a certain aspect of idolatry or monolatry that is detected in other religions and even ATR(s), and when he asserts that all African peoples worship only One God, and when he states that polytheism is unknown to traditional African people who recognize one God (1970a:29), he is incorrect.

It is necessary to keep in mind that when the universalistic notion of God's presence is compared to ATR(s) and implication of monotheism, especially of Christianity, is applied to ATR(s) and other religions, the particularistic characteristics of Christianity and its correctives should not be neglected (Nieder-Heitmann 1981:90).

If he wanted to give priority to Jesus and Christianity as a fulfilment of ATR(s), he had to keep the distinction that he already abolished. If he wanted to emphasize the validity of ATR(s) as the true revelation of God, he had not to state Jesus as the ultimate revelation of God that he already stated. In any case, he is caught in a paradox.

#### 4.5.4.4.2 Salvation

If one admits the possibility of divine revelation apart from Christ, it seems quite probable that one will also logically admit the possibility of salvation apart from Christ.

In regard to salvation in ATR(s), Mbiti is not loquacious. According to Mbiti, ‘without naming him African peoples have sensed the reality of Jesus Christ’ (quoted by Burleson 1986:85). It seems that Mbiti admits, to a certain extent, the possibility of salvation without Christ, based on his acceptance of a ‘hidden Christ’ in African culture (Burleson 1986:96).

Although Mbiti once indicates that a ‘hidden Christ’ in African culture is not appropriate, it should be noted that Mbiti still accept the notion of a ‘hidden Christ’ in ATR(s) (Burleson 1986:85, 96). It gives a strong impression that Mbiti admits the existence of revelation of Christ in Africa long before the Christian gospel arrived on the continent, and even before the historical Jesus came.

Therefore, it can be said, although Mbiti has less to say about salvation in ATR(s), that Mbiti indicates that there is a possibility of salvation in ATR(s) respecting God’s universal salvific activity and the reality of hidden Christ in ATR(s).

In order to answer the matter of the possibility of salvation apart from Christ, Mbiti separates the meaning of ‘what salvation is’<sup>29</sup> from the meaning of ‘what salvation ought to be’.

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<sup>29</sup> In keeping with his concept of time, Mbiti (1971:182) maintains that in ATR(s) salvation is either a past or a present event. The issue of an eschatological salvation does not arise because the African’s thinking does not accommodate any eschatological view of time (Mbiti 1971:183; Musopole 1994:98). The God of the ATR(s) saves humans from the calamities of the *Sasa* or natural disasters such as sickness, drought, wars, etc.

In ATR(s), there is no concept of spiritual redemption or of salvation from sin (Burleson 1986:159; Musopole 1994:98). Mbiti says that ‘African religion, in this respect, did not produce the concept of spiritual redemption or salvation...the cosmic outreach of salvation is unknown and would be impossible within the context of African religious heritage’ (quoted by Musopole 1994:98). Salvation in the hereafter is the primary deficiency in ATR(s), but supplied by Christianity. ATR(s) do not speak of ‘moral estrangement between God and man’ (Burleson 1986:158). What ATR(s) cannot save man from is death.

According to Mbiti, therefore, deliverance from death is the ‘most significant consequence of accepting the Christian message of salvation.’ Mbiti says that ‘the idea of salvation extending to the hereafter is probably the main new element in African experience of Christian salvation since it promises to do something which African religion never contained or never could do...’ (quoted by Burleson 1986:162).

I think that question would need to be looked at in two ways - what is and what we think ought to be (or ought not to be). Mainly 'what is' in terms of the fact that many people following other directions of religious experience have found real faith. It is called communion with God, fulfillment in life, hope,...That we cannot deny. And for them if that is what salvation is then they have received salvation without coming under the umbrella of the Church. Now that is what it is.

(quoted by Burleson 1986:96).

'What ought to be' is another thing. The Christians say salvation ought to be through Jesus Christ and I don't feel entitled personally to say that ...I don't think we should universalize [our] understanding of salvation because salvation does not come from us, it is a gift of God... In other words, I am open to accept [the possibility] that God does bring about salvation in...other peoples who may not have had the chance to know about Jesus Christ as we know and name him.

(quoted by Burleson 1986:96).

Although Mbiti speaks of the prospect of the annihilation of the unrepentant soul, saying '[some] can pass into "the second death"...so that God may not resurrect such a soul' (Mbiti 1971:179), in some of his writings, there are hints of universalism: 'there is not a single soul, however debased or even unrepentant, which can successfully "flee" from the Spirit of God (Ps. 139:1-18)' (Mbiti 1971:179). He expresses his hope that all will be saved (Mbiti 1971:179-181).

For this reason, Kato ([1975]1987:78) argues that the stage is well set for universalism<sup>30</sup> in Africa. Kato labels Mbiti as a 'universalist' ([1975]1987:87) on soteriological grounds because Mbiti claims that 'the soul which is undergoing everlasting punishment...would ultimately be saved through the Death-and Resurrection of Jesus Christ' (Mbiti 1971:180). Kato also labels Mbiti as a 'syncretist' ([1975]1987:70) because Mbiti affirms that the African God is identical with the Christian God, and gives the impression that non-Christian religions are valuable and deserve co-existing (Mbiti [1969]1975:277).

By showing the similarities between ATR(s) and the Biblical account, African theologians think that they have authenticated the religious nature of African life. However, it should not be ignored that, though Christianity may have many similarities to the African belief system, the African belief

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<sup>30</sup> Universalism, in Kato, means that all men will eventually be saved whether they believe in Christ now or not (Kato [1975]1987:78).

system is not rooted in divine revelation. In Kato's and other evangelicals' perspective, the impression Mbiti made that the salvific power is contained in ATR(s), and ATR(s) are co-equal with Christianity amounts to 'idolatry' (Kato [1975]1987; Eitel 1988:332).

According to Mbiti, Christianity enriches, fulfils, crowns, judges, saves, and sanctifies many aspects of ATR(s), which are the God-given *praeparatio evangelica* (Mbiti 1970b:436). What kind of aspect of Christianity is then priori to ATR(s)? On which base can Christianity save ATR(s)? If Mbiti's assertion that ATR(s) have salvific power is correct, is there any necessity to turn to Christianity?

Mbiti, at times, maintains that 'the uniqueness of Christianity is in Jesus Christ' and that ATR(s), Islam and the other religious systems are the preparatory and essential ground in the search for the Ultimate. He argues that 'only Christianity has the terrible responsibility of pointing the way to that ultimate Identity, foundation and source of security' (Mbiti [1969]1975:277).

However, at times, Mbiti seems to weaken the uniqueness of Christianity, arguing for 'the religious co-existence, co-operation and even competition in Africa':

However, until that goal is attained...Christianity, Islam, African Traditional Religions and the other religions and ideologies must continue to function, for the sake of their own survival and that of mankind as a whole. Until then, there is sufficient room for religious co-existence, co-operation and even competition in Africa. The final test for the continuing existence of these religions in our continent is not which one shall win in the end. The test is whether mankind benefits or loses from having allowed religion to occupy such a privileged and dominating position in human history, in man's search for his origin and nature of being, in the experience of responding to his environment, and in the creation of his expectations and hope for the future.

(Mbiti [1969]1975:277).

To Mbiti, traditional Western interpretations of revelation, God, and salvation have been too ethnocentric and irrelevant, as far as Africans are concerned. He, therefore, equates local contextual history and circumstances with those in the Bible.

Mbiti's effort, however, forces the universal Christian faith to be accommodated in the religious vessels of ATR(s) which are regional and particularistic (Nieder-Heitmann 1981:43).



By making a context-culture dominant theology, Mbiti has no ‘supracultural standard’ by which to evaluate the synthesis he attempts to establish between biblical revelation and African belief and religiosity (Eitel 1988:330). This phenomenon enhances the potential for distorting biblical truth (Eitel 1988:324).<sup>31</sup>

## 4.6 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This chapter studied Mbiti’s understanding of God in Africa within a Christian theological framework to apprehend how Mbiti attempted to achieve integration between the Christian faith and traditional African religiosity. In order to comprehend his understanding of God in African Inculturation theology, his methodology, the African concept of time, the understanding of revelation

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<sup>31</sup> For Mbiti, one major source of African theology is the Bible. He says that the Bible is an eternal gift of God and ‘nothing can substitute for the Bible’ (1986:59). Mbiti emphasizes the Bible as the primary and essential source for theological development in Africa. Mbiti, however, seems to approach the Bible through the framework of liberal rationalism. The glasses which he uses to read the Bible are coloured by his liberal view of Scripture. Mbiti regards the Bible as a ‘human adviser’. He writes that ‘as far as theology is concerned, let the Bible be our human adviser, and the Holy Spirit our divine adviser’ (Mbiti 1986a:61).

But in his rejection of the distinction between general revelation and special revelation, one can get the impression that the salvific essence of the gospel is contained in ATR(s) as well as in the Bible. In order to avoid complete relativism, Mbiti assigns the Bible to judge culture. He (1977:36) says that it is necessary for the church in Africa to sharpen its use of the Bible as a basis of judging or critically evaluating cultural elements and practices.’

Mbiti, however, does not see the need of abiding by the literal interpretation. Mbiti employs extreme spiritualization in biblical interpretation. Mbiti did not study the Scripture directly but through secondary sources of diverse theologians (Gehman 1987:57; cf. Mbiti 1971:3). Mbiti seeks to find a spiritual sense behind the words used instead of taking the passages in their normal sense.

Mbiti (1971:172) says ‘for there is no explicit Scripture warrant to support a materialistic view of the Resurrection body’; No doubt we should take seriously the concluding words of Mbiti when he confesses, ‘the details of what happens beyond the historical plane of human existence are neither for you nor for me to dogmatize about’ (Mbiti 1971:180).

Does Mbiti really believe the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, the existence of heaven in which all those whom God has declared righteous by faith will spend eternity with Christ, and the existence of hell which is a place of eternal retribution for all those who reject the grace of God through Christ?

Though he never denies that Christ will return bodily as He went up to heaven, neither does he ever affirm the second coming of Christ as historically taught and believed in the Christian Church (Gehman 1987:58). Indeed, hell is reduced to a mere symbol by Mbiti, for he says that ‘if people are threatened with being cast into a lake of fire in the next life, the effectiveness of the symbols is largely lost and the Christian gospel is reduced to negative threats which have no lasting impact upon those who receive or reject Christ’ (Mbiti 1971:70).

Mbiti (1971:172) says that ‘it is almost unthinkable that at the final Resurrection there should be portions of God’s creation not involved in the process of presentation, not brought into the conscious presence of God.’ Though he admits this to be speculation, he is hopeful, and precedes to declare: ‘we venture to speculate that the opportunity to assimilate the effects of the gospel is continued in the life beyond (cf. 1 Peter 3:19f), and that death is not a barrier to incorporation into Christ, since nothing can separate ‘us’ from the love of God (cf. Rom 8:38)’ (Mbiti 1971:175).

He continues that after death there may be a period of punishment, but Mbiti find it ‘almost impossible to imagine that their punishment will last for all eternity in the same way that Redemption is for eternity,’ because to be ‘apart from Christ’ for one day is ‘sufficiently tormenting to make the experience of the non-presence of God everlasting’ (Mbiti 1971:197). Everlasting punishment is, therefore, reduced by Mbiti to one day. Moreover, ‘God’s love and presence will freely invade that soul (cf. Rom 8:35, 39) until - let us hope - the soul responds to the Father’s embrace and kiss’ (Mbiti 1971:180). Thus the ‘second death’ cannot be an absolute reality in Mbiti’s opinion (Mbiti 1971:180). We need to ‘contextualize’ the Bible but we also need to let the Bible ‘de-contextualize’ us (Gehman 1987:61).



and of God, and his understanding of God were evaluated theologically.

Through his anthropological study of ATR(s), Mbiti discovered similarities between the African concept of God and the Christian concept of God, and focused on their similarities. In consequence, he translated his anthropological data into Christian theological terms, and interpreted ATR(s) theologically.

With a sympathetic attitude to ATR(s), Mbiti emphasized two features of ATR(s): on the framework of Christian monotheism, Mbiti was convinced that Africans were already monotheistic and their religions functioned as a *praeparatio evangelica*. Therefore he placed ATR(s) on an equal footing with the Old Testament as preparation for the coming of Christ.

According to Mbiti, God's involvement with people was not restricted to Israel, and God revealed himself to the African and prepared the African continent to receive the gospel. The biblical God was not a stranger to African peoples, although God was known in slightly different ways.

Mbiti arrived at the conclusion from his research on the concepts of God in various African tribes: the God whom Christians have worshipped, who is the Creator and Sustainer of all things, is always the same God whom the African people have worshipped in various ways in their religious life long before Christianity arrived on the continent (Mbiti 1980:817; 1986b:202).

To Mbiti, there is the only one and same God who is acknowledged and worshipped in both Christianity and African religion, even though it cannot be expected that all African people have identical ideas about God due to each people's own concepts within the frame of its own geographical environment, and socio-political structure.

However, the rejection of the traditional distinction between general revelation and special revelation results in the weakness of the traditional notion of the special revelation's uniqueness and finality.

If all revelation has the same value (Mbiti 1980:818) and the only one God has revealed Himself in ATR(s) as well as in Christianity, and the African God is identical with the Christian God, what is the difference between ATR(s) and Christianity? If ATR(s) serve as the *praeparatio evangelica*, why can other religions not be regarded as a *praeparatio evangelica*? If there is continuity between ATR(s) and Biblical revelation, even if there is an overlapping part, wherein is Christianity unique? If the God known in ATR(s) has to be the same as the God known in the Bible, why can the God revealed in other religions not be the same as the God known from the Bible?

There is no conclusive evidence to support Mbiti's theological presuppositions - African monotheism and ATR(s) as *praeparatio evangelica*.

The way he uses Western theological categories in his study of the traditional concepts of God in Africa can perhaps produce more distortion than illumination (Nieder-Heitmann 1981:82). The comparative study of ATR(s) not only pronounced similarities but also found differences. There may be obvious similarities between the two religious phenomena, but when their respective contexts are taken into account, the similarities may be found to be very different in content.

Mbiti, however, does not always take into account the total religious context of religious phenomena. Therefore, it is important to bear in mind that surface similarities may constitute radical differences when viewed in their respective contexts because every religion is essentially unique and incomparable (Nieder-Heitmann 1981:81).

It is clear that Mbiti uses Christian terminology to interpret ATR(s) in order to show the relevance of Christian theological concepts for understanding African religious ideas. The data from anthropological research show that Mbiti's assertion of the only one and same African God among the different peoples of Africa is not correct.

The problem is not Mbiti's anthropological study of ATR(s) in general and of the African concepts of God in particular, but his interpretation of the data in ways of overgeneralization on account of his theological presuppositions.

Even though he nowhere explicitly mention a nationalistic motivation, his nationalistic motivation behind his one and the same African God should not be minimized.

## CHAPTER 5

# THE UNDERSTANDING OF GOD IN ODUYOYE'S THEOLOGY

### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

In the early debate about African theology, women's issues and women theologians' voices were not in the forefront. Since the mid-1970s, however, the situation has rapidly changed and the feminist movement<sup>1</sup> has become one of the main challenges in the theological field (Oduyoye 1998:359:2001a:22). African Women's theology has emerged with 'new conceptual tools' that made theologians reflect theology in a different way of thinking (Munga 1998:13), and has begun to articulate women's experiences and concerns in their theology (Oduyoye 2001a:22).

Oduyoye is called 'the matriarch' of African Women's theology (Frederiks 2003:67), 'the chief initiator' (Pemberton 2003:62) and 'the Queen Mother' of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (Pemberton 2003:63). Oduyoye criticizes oppressive traditional African religious beliefs and practices against women as well as African Christianity which has been shaped by Western Christian missionaries and has legitimized the patriarchal order.

This chapter will survey, as a part of the grounds for a critical comparison of two African theologians, male and female respectively, the historical background of the African women's theological formation, and AWT's aims and methods in general. Oduyoye's understanding of God and her formulating of the image of God in the contemporary African context will be discussed with reference to her methodology and the status of women in African culture and the African church.

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<sup>1</sup> The term, 'feminism', which originally meant 'having the qualities of females,' was used to indicate a commitment to women's struggles against oppression of women, and has become identified with a movement for the liberation of women (Ackermann, Draper & Mashinini 1991:xvi). It attempts to question structures of male dominance and of the patriarchal system, and to address sexism and matters of gender (Brock 1996:117). It has emerged out of the experience and recognition that women have been devalued and treated unjustly as second class citizens in a traditionally male-dominated world at work, at home and in society throughout history (Jakobsen 1994:148). Feminism maintains that women are human. It challenges the patriarchal gender paradigm that defines male as 'superior' and 'dominant' and female as 'inferior' and 'auxiliary' (Fiorenza 1979:191). Feminism demands the free development of full personhood for all women and men, and calls for a redefinition of the cultural images and roles of women and men (Fiorenza 1979:190). It attempts to correct the gender paradigm and end all oppression in order for women to participate in the full equality and dignity of men and women (Ruether 2002:3; Jakobsen 1994:57; Hauge 1992:8).

## 5.2 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF AFRICAN WOMEN'S THEOLOGY

The development of AWT will be traced in its historical and contemporary context because AWT was born of and has grown from women's experience of oppression that has been shaped not only by past religio-cultural factors but also in the contemporary socio-economic and political structures.

An outline of the emergence and development of Western feminism and feminist theology will be given in order to comprehend the emergence and development of AWT. However, it does not discuss the theories and trends of Western feminism and theology in detail.

### 5.2.1 Historical context of the women's movement and feminist theology.

#### 5.2.1.1 The emergence of feminist theology

Although Christian feminist theology<sup>2</sup> emerged in North America and Western Europe since the 1960s and 1970s, it was not born *ex nihilo*.<sup>3</sup> It had been inspired by the modern secular women's

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<sup>2</sup> It should be not overlooked that feminist theology and theologians not only differ in style and content but also contend with each other with respect to the positions they maintain such as the authority of the Bible, of women's experience, and the assessment of the Christian tradition (Hauge 1992:8).

<sup>3</sup> The first wave of feminism, according to Kassian (2005:17), began in the 1700s with the appearance of *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* that was written by an Englishwoman, Mary Wollstonecraft.

Women's movements in America emerged from the 1830s among Southern elite and New England Brahmin women who turned abolitionists (Ruether 1979:183). In the period between 1840s and 1920s, the women's movement in USA had both religious and political ambitions, and then focused on an emancipation of women: women's right to access to higher education, to have property rights, women's right to vote and women's roles in religions. The movement resulted in ordination of Antoinette Brown Blackwell by a congregational church in 1853, the publication of Elizabeth Cady Stanton's *The Women's Bible* in 1895, and the activism of Margaret Sanger on birth control in the early years of the twentieth century (Ross 1999:187). *The Women's Bible* was 'prescient' because of its dealing with sensitive issues such as the male authorship of the Bible, the role of the Bible in establishing women's subordination in family and society, and the emphasis of women in the Bible, who played prominent roles (Ross 1999:187).

The second wave of feminism in the West is widely acknowledged to be inaugurated by the publication of Simone de Beauvoir's *Le Deuxième Sexe*, which was published in 1949 (Ross 1999:188). *Le Deuxième Sexe* is regarded as 'a manifesto for women's liberation' and 'the first phase of the construction' of modern feminist thought (Kassian 2005:18). Simone de Beauvoir objected that women were destined to motherhood, and that they were to submit them to the authority of men (Ross 1999:188). By man-centered religious cultural tradition, women were assigned to second class status and forced to exist for the convenience and pleasure of man (Kassian 2005:19, 29). Simone de Beauvoir urged women to identify themselves as a group and to achieve equality and liberation by rejecting the 'male's superiority' (Kassian 2005:22). For Simone de Beauvoir, a breakaway from the traditional role of wife and mother and the establishment of economic and professional independence were considered as the key for upgrading women's status in society and for realizing women's equality with man (Kassian 2005:22).

In the early 1960s, Betty Friedan, who transformed Simone de Beauvoir's philosophical concept into something more understandable for the average American women, pointed out that there was a gap (discrepancy) between the reality of women's lives and the 'image' what they want to be. She maintained that women had feelings such as frustration, dissatisfaction, emptiness and purposelessness due to society's stereotyped expectation of women's role and behaviour (Kassian 2005:23, 24). Since society ignored the questions of women's own identity, women should have a question of identity in order to find themselves and to know themselves as persons (Kassian 2005:24).

movement of the 1960s (Kretzschmar 1991:108; Keane 1998:122). During the Equal Rights and Civil Rights movements in the 1960s, the women's movement began to grow rapidly. And the early 1970s were recognized as the time of the resurgence of the women's movement (Kim 2006:36). Feminism in the USA emerged from liberal white women in education, government and the professions who seek 'fuller inclusion of women' in these institutions (Kim 2006:36).

This movement focused society's attention on the oppression of women and inspired women to become more self-conscious and more aware of their own needs and aspirations, which had been interred by male authority over female (Williams 1995:117). The movement also gave some black women a public forum in which to articulate their experiences of oppression, isolation and violation (Williams 1995:118).

Christian women paid their attention to their situation and acknowledged that they were under the pressure of patriarchal ideology and structures that had been claimed to be the eternal will of God<sup>4</sup> (Keane 1998:122). The increased awareness of women's issues in society and church motivated women to take on the hard task of critical reconsideration of church life and theology (Hauge 1992:8). During the 1970s, feminist theologians actively encouraged women to campaign for women's equality in church and society. In the early 1980s, Christian feminist theologies became quite prevalent within the context of white Euro-American and European middle-class women.

According to feminist theologians, traditional theology that was based on patriarchal ideologies explicitly functions to support the traditional patriarchal order of society (Hauge 1992:9). Feminist theologians criticize traditional theology that justifies male dominance and female subordination, legitimizes oppressive social structure, and then becomes a patriarchal stamped theology. Male domination of women is, therefore, not primarily biblical-theological, but an ideological one (Ormerod 1997:177). Ruether maintains that the theological tradition has been infected by male

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<sup>4</sup> In the late 1960s and early 1970s, feminists agreed that the patriarchy was resulted from the anatomical and biological distinctions and differences between male and female (Kassian 2005:55). Feminists consequently began to seek 'de-differentiation' or to 'obliterate' the differences between the roles of men and women, and redefine themselves to be just like men (Kassian 2005:38). For them, women's differences were regarded as weakness and vulnerability, while 'sameness' would mean freedom (Kassian 2005:56). Biology would no longer determine destiny (Kassian 2005:56).

In the Christian feminist group, Mary Daly claims that the Christian religion has been an oppressive instrument against women (Kassian 2005:42). A wrong concept of God being male is a major theological mistake in which the problem of patriarchy takes root (Kassian 2005:46). She argues that 'since God is male, the male is God' (quoted by Kassian 2005:46).

Ruether and Russell modified Gutierrez's liberation theology into a feminist theology of liberation for women. They shifted his focus from the liberation of those who are oppressed economically to the liberation of those who are oppressed because of their gender. For Ruether and Russell, a feminist liberation theology is the theological solution for equality. It points toward the freedom and integral personhood of women (Kassian 2005:107).

theologians within a patriarchal culture and church<sup>5</sup> (Ormerod 1997:177). Therefore, feminist theology attempts to strip off the ideological mystification that has developed in the traditional biblical interpretation (Ruether [1983]1993:32). In this sense, feminist theology is considered as ‘a paradigm shift’ from a man oriented theology to a feminist construction of the world, religion, and theology (Ormerod 1997:182).

### 5.2.1.2 The characteristics of feminist theology

Feminist theology, according to Russell, represents

a search for liberation from all forms of dehumanization on the part of those who advocate full human personhood for all of every race, class, sex, sexual orientation, ability and age.

(quoted by Koopman 2004:190).

It pursues liberation to achieve the freedom and dignity of a full and equivalent human being from all that discriminates against women, such as sexism, racism, misogyny, and poverty (Ormerod 1997:167; Jeong 2002:39; Ackermann, Draper & Mashinini 1991:xvi; Kim 2006:36).

Jeong (2002:39-40) lists the following characteristics of feminist theology: feminist criticism, liberation theology, and doing theology.

The aspect of feminist criticism as one of the characteristics of feminist theology is the ideological criticism of the Bible (Jeong 2002:39). Feminists analyze the Bible and the so called traditional patriarchal theology on the basis of their personal experience, and then formulate doctrines applicable to their current situation. The exclusive male language of God and the view that only males can represent God as leaders in church and society are strongly questioned (Jakobsen

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<sup>5</sup> Patriarchy, which literally means ‘rule by/of the father,’ is used by to describe the legal, social, political, and economic system that validates and enforces the dominance of male in relation to female in society and the inferiority of and subordination of females to males (Ackermann, Draper & Mashinini 1991:xvi; Kassian 2005:2). Patriarchy refers to social structures and ideologies that assume implicitly or claim explicitly the superior status of males and their natural right to exercise authority and leadership in society, family and church (Hauge 1992:8). Patriarchy has deeply shaped perceptions of the relation between God and human being. The biblical image of God as the Father has served the androcentricism of society by making it a mechanism for the subservience of the female, and of male authority over female (Akermann 1991:95).

Fiorenza prefers to use the word ‘kyriarchy’ (dominated by the master or lord) rather than ‘patriarchy’ because ‘kyriarchy’ denotes the various forms of oppression, including classism, racism, while ‘patriarchy’ stresses only sexism (Masenya 1995:149).

1994:148; Jeong 2002:39). Some feminist theologians regard the passages of the Bible that address women's quest for liberation as valid, while they discard any passage of the Bible that does not align with their vision of sexual equality as invalid or out-dated. The author of the text that does not address the liberation of women is conceived of as misogynistic (Kassian 2005:108).

Secondly, liberation theology: Feminist theologians make the liberation of women central to the theological task. Feminist theology claims, pointing out what have been overlooked in male liberation theology, that liberation must start with the oppressed of the oppressed, namely women (Ruether [1983]1993:32). It includes the liberation of the marginalized, the oppressed, the exploited, and the neglected (Kim 2006:36).

Thirdly, feminist theology is called 'doing theology.' The purpose of doing theology in feminist theology is to promote women to participate in the struggle of all women against patriarchal oppression in society and church, and to transform male defined clerical theology that legitimizes patriarchal oppression (Jeong 2002:40; Fiorenza 1994:14).

### 5.2.1.3 Womanist theology

Womanist theology,<sup>6</sup> which reflects critically on the experiences of African-American women in society and church, is a response to 'a triple dose of discrimination': sexism and male chauvinism within black communities and black theology; racism in feminist theology; and the social status of black women who are oppressed by white supremacy (Keane 1998:131).

When the Black Liberation Movement articulated 'the black experience', it addressed the experience of black males. There was little or no room for black women's issues under the male leadership. The oppression of black women was not paid much attention in the white feminist agenda. They spoke only of the white women's experience, especially of the white Euro-American middle

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<sup>6</sup> In 1979 the African-American poet and novelist, Alice Walker, coined the word 'womanist.' The word 'womanist' appeared in the title of her book *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose*, published in 1983. It had its root in the black folk culture. According to Walker, the word 'womanish' was an expression used by mothers to describe daughters who were outrageous, audacious, and courageous with wilful behaviour.

According to Williams (1995:119), a womanist is 'committed to the survival and wholeness of an entire people, male and female.' Like feminist theology, Womanist theology starts from women's experience. Abstract ideas are generally not the centre of their interest, and there is no sharp distinction between the sacred and the secular - everything is providential (Keane 1998:132).



and upper class women. They failed to acknowledge their own participation in racist oppression of black women (Keane 1998:131). The white feminists did not include the issues of the poor and non-white women in their critiques (Ruether 1979:176). In this sense, it can be said that Womanist theology is a reaction against ‘white liberal hegemony of feminist discourse’ (Pemberton 2003:3).

According to Ruether (1979:176), there are oppositions between black males and black females, and between white females and black females.<sup>7</sup> Ruether says that ‘the Black and the Feminist Movements have betrayed the black women’ (quoted by Keane 1998:131). Therefore, ‘an undeclared war is brewing’ between black theology and feminist theology (Ruether 1979:175).

‘Womanist’ rejects the stereotyped notion that women are irresponsible; rather stresses a commitment to black and coloured women’s dignity (Pemberton 2003:53). In Womanist theology, African-American women’s experience has its own integrity and must speak its own truth in its own language, expressing its own cultural ideas about women’s reality (Williams 1995:112).<sup>8</sup>

### 5.2.2 African Women’s theology

As the educated elite, early African women theologians encountered with liberation theologies that emphasized context and praxis, and also had a chance to interact with Western feminists and womanists theologians through their involvement in various religio-cultural programmes in the USA and Ecumenical Conferences (Pemberton 2003:54). Through the interaction with them, African women theologians were obviously attracted by certain ideas of white feminists who were enthusiastic for the liberation of women. They were also influenced by ideas of black women who emphasized how black women were discriminated by sexism, racism and classism in society<sup>9</sup> (Pemberton 2003:2).

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<sup>7</sup> According to Ruether (1979:176), racism and sexism have been interstructural elements of oppression within the overarching system of domination by white male. This interstructuring has the effect of alienating white women, black women and black men from each other.

<sup>8</sup> Womanist hermeneutics is characterized by certain features: (1) the reliance on the work of African-American women writers; (2) African-American women’s experience of community in the black church (Ackermann 1998:354). The literary tradition of African-American writers is important because these writers are recorders of the black experience who ‘convey the black community’s consciousness of values which enable them to find meaning, in spite of social degradation, economic exploitation and political oppression’ (Ackermann 1998:354). Their history of slavery is a recurring theme in the work of the women writers. African-Americans seek liberating themes in the Bible and find encouragement to resist racist discrimination and to celebrate their worth and dignity (Ackermann 1998:355).

<sup>9</sup> There are some subtle differences between African American Womanist theology and African Women’s theology: the former centers on the matter of race within the North American situation, while the latter concentrates on culture and Africa’s poverty and the reinterpretation of the gospel in accordance with the specific situation and agenda of the black women in Africa (Landman 1998:137).

While African women theologians absorbed some ideas not only from the Third World liberation theologies but also from the feminist theologies of the West, they gradually acknowledged that the needs and experiences of African women were not the same as that of Western women. For African women theologians, Western feminists were white oriented, and liberation theologies were male-dominated.

African women theologians, therefore, have attempted to overcome the insufficiencies of these theologies and have searched for an African Women's theology that comprehends 'the interstructuring of oppression' on the continent (Jakobsen 1994:149). AWT inspires African women to do 'women-oriented theology' that underscores women as 'actors, agents and thinkers' (Oduyoye 2001a:10).

### 5.2.2.1 Emergence of African Women's theology

African Women's theology emerged in the 1970s as a written form of theology (Oduyoye 2001:22), and made its presence felt in the 1980s (Maluleke 1997d:47).<sup>10</sup> By the late 1990s, AWT had become a critical factor within African theology, and had drawn many practitioners across the continent. Maluleke (1997b:47) describes the emergence of AWT as 'the slow but steady rise'.

The first reason for the emergence of AWT was the male theologians' culturally biased theology. During the 1960s and 1970s, African theologians (mostly male) began to study ATR(s) and African culture. African theologians argued for the validity of African traditional culture and religions in the process of Africanizing Christian theology, and accepted them as a framework of the African theology (Maluleke 1997d:57).

In the process, African theology quickly turned to 'an easy and cheap alliance' between traditional African culture and the Christian faith. African theology became preoccupied with the romanticization of African culture and the African past, and thus resulted in the false glorification of

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<sup>10</sup> According to Maluleke (1995:51), AWT has its roots in EATWOT as well as EAAT, and the work of the Circle for Concerned African Women Theologians. Women's issues have been on the agenda of EATWOT and AACC since the early 1980s (Maluleke 1997c:20).

The male theologians did not recognize the need for women's theology (Maluleke 1997d:54). The appearance of women's theology in EATWOT resulted from women's identifying oppression of women and challenging the male domination of women (Maluleke 1997d:54). In EATWOT that was held in 1983, women theologians who came from all continents stood together to uphold the Third World women's claim for attention to the gender issues. The result was the formation of the Women's Commission within EATWOT (Maluleke 1997c:21; Frederiks 2003:69). This supported a process by which the Third World women could contextualize their own theological reflections in their concrete contexts (Ruether 2002:14).

the past (Mandew 1991:132). For this cultural bias, African theology overlooked the destructive, oppressive, and dehumanizing patriarchal elements of African culture, and was not able to recognize the gender issue<sup>11</sup> on their theological agenda (Maluleke 1995:41; 1997d:56).

For Oduyoye, male African Inculturation theologians have not seriously taken ‘inherent oppressive elements in African culture’ (Martey 1993:83), while they have passionately attempted to incorporate the Christian gospel into African culture. Oduyoye argues that liberation theologians have addressed ‘the liberation of only half of the African people’, neglecting the poverty and oppression of women (quoted by Kwok 2004:10).

Oduyoye (1995a:87) maintains that the past of Africa is not ‘all golden’, and there are also ‘ungolden’ aspects including the dehumanization of women. Instead of ‘the romanticization of traditional African culture,’ African women theologians pay their attention to women’s experience and reality in African society, and critique of some religio-cultural elements that are imbued in African culture and churches. Oduyoye criticizes patriarchy, sexism,<sup>12</sup> male authority over females, and discrimination that are part of the African women’s daily experiences (Oduyoye 1995c:89). Maluleke (1997d:43), therefore, describes AWT as ‘issues of survival’ of African women. In this sense, African Women’s theology is a result of the ‘systematic failure’ of African theologies, which ignore the presence of women and their issues in African Christianity (Maluleke 1995:40).

The second reason is the African culture’s and the church’s oppressive attitude toward women. Although African women theologians seek to recover African identity in the wake of brutal colonial experiences, they are strongly suspicious of indigenous cultural elements that dehumanize women. African culture and religions have often been used to justify the oppression of women (Chitando, A & Chitando, E 2005:28).

It cannot be denied that there are certain religio-cultural, socio-political and economic practices that exclude women from full participation in the family, church and society (Nyerengele 2004:2). Moreover, religio-cultural beliefs and practices make women unable to resist economic exploitation, dehumanization, violence and racism, and force women to accept African cultural beliefs and

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<sup>11</sup> Gender is culturally shaped, while sex is a biological description. Gender can be defined as a social and cultural designation based on the socio-cultural implications of biological sex distinction (Olajubu 2004:48; Nyengele 2004:7). The differences between men and women concerning roles, status, normative patterns of behaviour, attitudes, values, and thinking are not naturally given, but predominantly determined by/in a given culture (Hauge 1992:8).

<sup>12</sup> Sex is a biological designation and sexism is the system of discriminating, limiting, and stereotyping people on grounds of their gender (Fiorenza 1979:1; Ackerman, Draper & Mashinini 1991:xvi; Keane 1998:121). It is, according to Ruether ([1983]1993:37), ‘the distortion of gender into structures of unjust domination and subordination’ and ‘central to the origin and transmission of this alienated, fallen condition.’ Oduyoye maintains that sexism in patriarchal societies attempts to define humanity in terms of males only (quoted by Koopmann 2004:191).

practices as unchangeable norms ordained by God. Oduyoye, therefore, considers the recognition of ‘the universality of women’s subordination and oppression’ as the basis of all feminist work (Oduyoye 1998:359).

This awareness has stimulated African women theologians to articulate the issues of African women, aiming at the transformation of the situation.

### 5.2.2.2 The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians

The role of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (hereafter referred to as the Circle) in the development of AWT cannot be overlooked. The Circle, under the leadership of Oduyoye, was officially launched in October 1989 at Trinity College of Theology in Legon, near Accra, Ghana (Oduyoye 2001b:97-100; Pemberton 2003).

As an organization of African women theologians who come together to reflect on a variety of their experiences of religion, culture, politics and socio-economic structures in Africa (Phiri 2009:106), the Circle has encouraged African women to research and write about many subjects, even sexuality that has been considered as ‘taboo’ in the African culture (Kanyoro 2002:28). The women of differing racial and religious traditions come together to create an atmosphere for multi-religious discourses, to build solidarity among women, and to identify the most critical areas for dialogue and action (Maluleke 1995:52; Kanyoro 2002:28).

The Circle is concerned about a number of issues: studies of the practice of African religions; publication of African women theologians’ literature; promotion of inclusivity; encouragement of ecumenism; promotion of cultural diversity in the study of religion; and to bring AWT to the people’s attention (Oduyoye 1997:1-6).

According to the Circle, women’s passivity has caused them not to recognize ‘the religious, economic and legislative fruits of political independence’ in the post-independence African context (Pemberton 2003:159). The Circle, therefore, urges women to do theology in the mode of ‘resistance’ and of a ‘wake up call’ for women to arise out of weariness (Pemberton 2003:159).<sup>13</sup>

According to Phiri (2009:106), the Circle aims:

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<sup>13</sup> The Circle, however, is not a mass movement. Pemberton (2003:1) summarizes the nature of the Circle as; ‘a movement of educated and committed elite, who voluntarily commit themselves to study, co-operate and publish. The Circle is the fruit not only of the struggle for political, cultural, and religious independence which has engaged African academics for the last half century, but also a modern “hybridization” of the academy.’

To build the capacity of African women, to contribute their critical thinking and analysis, to advance current knowledge using a theoretical framework based on theology, religion and culture. It empowers African women to actively work for social justice in their communities and reflect on their actions in their publications.

In these ways, AWT attempts to present ‘new visions that can renew religious life in various existential contexts’ (Oduyoye 1992:8).

### **5.2.2.3 Definition of African Women’s theology**

According to Oduyoye (1986a:54), theology aims to confront society with the Bible, and intends to read the Bible from the perspective of the people. Therefore, Oduyoye defines theology as ‘an expression of faith in response to experience’ (2001a:22), and describes ‘African theology’ as the theological insights of African Christians (1986a:45).

Oduyoye uses the terms ‘African Women’s theology’ (2001a), ‘African feminist theology’ (1994a; 1996a), and ‘African Christian feminism’ (1986b) interchangeably.

Oduyoye (1986b:32; 1994a:167) employs the words ‘feminism’ and ‘feminist’ to describe ‘the advocacy and the persons who advocate the full participation of women in all spheres of human endeavour on terms of ability and inclination which, by and large, men assume to be only proper to themselves.’

For Oduyoye (1994a:175), the most fundamental issues of feminism are ‘autonomy’ - identifying women - and ‘integrity.’ Feminism, maintains Oduyoye (1986a:121), is to express that

Male-humanity is a partner with female-humanity, and that both expressions of humanity are needed to shape a balanced community within which each will experience a fullness of Be-ing. Feminism calls for the incorporation of the woman into the community of interpretation of what it means to be human.

The word ‘African women’ is defined as those who belong to diverse classes, races, cultures, nationalities and religions found on the African continent and in the diaspora, count themselves as African, and believe that women have a desire and a responsibility to do their own thinking and to speak their own words about God (Oduyoye 2001a:10; Phiri 2009:106).

African women's perspective is uniquely a feminist perspective of African women concerning their experiences within their own religio-cultural, historic and socio-political, economical, and ideological backgrounds of Africa.

'African Women's theology', therefore, refers to a theology inspired by African women, from African women's experience in their daily lives and perspective in an African context.<sup>14</sup>

AWT reflects on the 'rights and dignity of women in all aspects of cultural, political, and religious life' (Maluleke 1995:50), and challenges African male theologians who usually neglect and do not take seriously women's condition as a significant element of the African reality (Nyengele 2004:23).

African women theologians criticize the traditional use of the Bible and Christian beliefs, which justify women's subjugation, dehumanization, oppression and marginalization both outside and inside the church.<sup>15</sup>

They attempt to re-read the Bible as a resource for the struggle against the subordination of women in contemporary society and church life (Ukpong 2000:13).

In this sense, AWT tries to substitute hierarchy for mutuality (Ukpong 2000:13) and aims intentionally to be 'liberative' and 'transformative' in the context of the oppression of women and male dominated structures that violate the dignity of African women in both society and church.

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<sup>14</sup> Oduyoye (1986a:51-52) mentions the legitimate resources for doing theology in Africa: the Bible as the common root or source; Christian history and African history; ATR(s) and AICs. Alongside these sources, Oduyoye adds creative works by African women (Chitando, A & Chitando, E 2005:35).

<sup>15</sup> Feminist theologians criticize the conventional way of interpreting the Bible because the Bible has been used as a means to support the subordination of women. Ukpong (2000:13-14) presents the African theologians' approaches to feminist hermeneutics.

The first approach is conventional hermeneutics by which the Bible and the history of Christianity are interpreted in androcentric terms, and God is conceived of as male and God's feminine attributes are neglected. Feminist theologians stamp this hermeneutical tendency as 'imprisonment of God in maleness'.

The second approach attempts to reinterpret those biblical texts that legitimize the patriarchal order or keep women in a position of inferiority to men by 'a close rereading' of such texts 'in their literary and cultural contexts.'

The third approach focuses on texts in which women play the dominant role in 'the history of salvation' or in the life of the church.

The fourth approach seeks to find 'the basic biblical theological orientation' that can operate as a guide to interpreting the biblical texts that portray women's negative and positive features. Oduyoye illustrates 'the theology of creation' and 'the theology of community' as 'the basic biblical theological orientation' that functions as a hermeneutical guideline. For Oduyoye, the theology of creation affirms 'the basic equality of man and woman created in the image of God' and the theology of community demands 'the exclusion of violence and discrimination in society.'

The last approach interprets biblical texts from the perspective of African women's experience.



## 5.3 ODUYOYE'S METHODOLOGY

### 5.3.1 Oduyoye's theological concerns

#### 5.3.1.1 The dialogue between the gospel and the African culture

Oduyoye's theological concern is to analyze the interaction between African culture and the Christian gospel so that both might be incorporated into a 'new creative symbiosis' (Pemberton 2003:22). Oduyoye, therefore, pays her attention to the study of African traditional culture and religions (1994a:167; 1998:368).

According to Oduyoye, the arrogant Western Christianity and missionaries understood African religions not as 'an integral part of African culture and life' (1993a:111), but as 'nothing but idolatry' (2001a:28). They hesitated to accept the 'pervasiveness and resilience of religious rituals' (Oduyoye 1992a:9), and forced African people to accept the Western style of Christianity. Some Western missionary enterprises in Africa were accompanied by Westernization, a cultural imperialism, and colonialism. A sense of superiority of the West resulted in the 'supremacy of Western culture' as well as the 'finality of Western interpretation of Christianity' (Oduyoye 2003:40, 48).

The missionaries' 'superficial assessment' of the traditional African culture resulted in the Africans' 'superficial acceptance' of Christianity (Oduyoye 1986a:41). As a necessary consequence, Western Christianity has not taken root in African soil and failed to deeply touch the African soul (Oduyoye 1992a:9). African Christians have recognized Christianity as the 'white man's religion' (Oduyoye 1989:198) and the missionaries as 'foreigners' and 'ethnocentric Europeans in collaboration with the colonial administration and colonial violence' (Oduyoye 1986a:29; 1989:198). Western theology has been regarded as nothing but a theology of soul-snatching (Oduyoye 1986a:37). Oduyoye (1979:110) maintains that the history of the modern missionary movement in Africa has proved that Western Christianity is inadequate to the African context.

Since 'traditional life was permeated in all its aspects by religion' (Oduyoye 1979:116), ATR(s) and African culture have functioned as and continue to function as a philosophical source for the individual's life and for the system of society (Oduyoye 1979:115; 1992b:9). It is inescapable, for Oduyoye, to analyze 'the implications of African culture for Christian theology.' Oduyoye, therefore, argues that to escape being a 'fossilized form of nineteenth-century European Christianity' (Oduyoye 1997:110), the Christian faith and African culture as 'two living organisms' should be interplayed in



order to shape Christianity in Africa (Oduyoye 1995a:88).

For Oduyoye, Africans do not need to give up their cultural identity to become Christians, and it is not uncommon to see African Christians who follow traditional beliefs and practices, such as pouring libations, incantations, following widow's rites, naming, and funeral ceremonies in their traditional culture. Oduyoye calls this phenomenon 'crossroads Christianity' to encompass the encounter and interplay between the African religio-cultural heritage and Western forms of Christianity (1995a:80-81).<sup>16</sup> Oduyoye (1995a:78) maintains:

To give up on study and analysis of the autochthonous religio-cultures is to dismiss it as of no consequence to the transformation of contemporary Africa, and certainly of no consequence to the development of Christianity and Christian theology in Africa. I personally am not ready to give up on the need to bring Africa's religio-cultural heritage into the arena of study, analysis and transformation.

In this context, Oduyoye (1979:111) expresses her position concerning the continuity with religio-cultural past: 'to deny history is to deny one's roots and source of self identity.' And she (1986a:54) states explicitly:

My position is that the Christian theologian would be unrealistic to ignore the point at which religion is the deepest element in Africa's living culture. The identity crisis in Africa may be attributed to the loss of a dynamic perspective on life, which comes from knowing and living one's religio-cultural history.

Oduyoye (1995a:89) is convinced that African culture conveys the Christian message as various cultures carry the Christian message in other parts of the world, and thus there is a Christianity that is culturally coloured in Africa. Oduyoye attempts to form an African Christianity that will be 'at home in Africa and in which Africans will be at home' (1995a:77). In this process, the various African traditional beliefs and practices will be incorporated into Christianity and the essential elements of the two traditions will be embodied in one rite. Incorporation of African traditional beliefs and practices into Christian theology does not aim to assist Christianity to tame and control the African spirit; rather it is an attempt to inspire the African spirit to 'revolutionize' Christianity for the benefit

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<sup>16</sup> According to Kwok (2007:477), there is a similarity between Oduyoye's analysis of 'crossroads Christianity', which covers 'the interface' between African culture and Western modes of Christianity, and the notion of 'hybridization' in postcolonial theory which refers to the gray zone of the in-between, denying easy categorizations and boundaries.

of all Christians (Oduyoye 1979:116).

African Christian theologians, therefore, have a duty to integrate the authentic African idioms into Christian theology in order to give relevant terms to Christian theology for expressing Christian faith appropriately in the African context (Oduyoye 1979:110). Various elements<sup>17</sup> of ATR(s) and African culture will make Christianity a truly African religion (Oduyoye 1995a:77) and also help African theology to be relevant to the African context.

For this reason, there should be ‘inculturation’<sup>18</sup> between Christianity and African culture. The need and validity of inculturating Christianity and Christian theology in Africa,<sup>19</sup> argues Oduyoye, can be proved by the fact that the vitalization and popularization of African theology have been done through debates on the appropriateness of incorporating traditional beliefs and practices into Christian theology (1993a:110).

### 5.3.1.2 The oppressive system of African culture and church to women

African religions and culture have influenced the shape of women’s ‘communal identity’ and ‘sense of belonging’, while at the same time these have been manipulated and employed as a tool of control and oppression of women (Oduyoye 1991a:79; Kwok 2004:7). For this reason, Oduyoye (1992:4)

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<sup>17</sup> Oduyoye (1979:109-116) gives the following examples of various African traditional beliefs and practices that should seriously be considered for the development of African theology: African belief in the divine origin of the universe that is shared by Christianity; humankind as the custodian of the earth; a sense of wholeness of the person; African women’s attitude to sacrifice for the benefit of the community. Oduyoye, however, disagrees with the demanding of only one sex’s sacrifice for the well-being of the community; the African attitude to life as ‘life-in-community’; covenant-making that is a characteristic of African life; realistic attitude toward the poser of evil; reconciliation that has a central role in African religion and practices; most rites of passage performed by Christians in Africa have been enriched by African culture; other traditional African liturgical practices that are most apparent among the AICs.

<sup>18</sup> Oduyoye (1986a:69) says that ‘Acculturation will be used to refer to the efforts of Africans to use things African in their practices of Christianity, Inculturation as the manifestation of changes that have come into the African way of life as a result of the church.’

<sup>19</sup> Oduyoye shows an example of inculturation of Christianity in Christian history, exemplifying the developments of Western Christianity (Rome) and Eastern Christianity (Constantinople). Oduyoye (1995a:89) adds: ‘the various forms of churches in the world have assimilated elements of the culture in which they live and of which they are a part and have contributed to moulding those cultures.’

Oduyoye wants to demonstrate how inculturation of the Christian gospel is important, mentioning Nubian Christianity (A.D. 540 to 1500); the Nubian church had no local resources on which to depend, instead they depended on foreign leadership, imported and translated books, and outsiders. Oduyoye insists that the situation of the Nubian church was similar to that of colonial Christianity in Africa.

Oduyoye (1986a:27-28) gives some observations that come from church history in Africa; Christianity rooted in the culture of the people is necessary to survive; indigenous leadership is necessary to take root in the local church; the local and the universal expression of Christianity should be balanced; indigenous churches that depend on the outside or a foreign mother church will never be full-grown; relevant theology for Africa can be shaped by having African leadership, liturgy, and vestments as well as being involved in the sociopolitical realities; the theological foundation must be laid in and by the people; there is an interrelatedness of theology, nationalism and socioeconomic matters, although there is a need to distinguish nationalism and selfhood from theology.

analyzes the social, religio-cultural elements and myths that affect women's lives in Africa, and discloses its dehumanizing elements against women. Some aspects of African religio-cultural beliefs and practices - stereotypical sex roles, the blood taboos, ritual impurity of menstruating women, and the restriction of women from certain rituals - exclude women from full participation in the family, church, and society, and make them give up their autonomy (Oduyoye 1991a:79; Pemberton 2003:160; Kwok 2004:8). According to Oduyoye (1995c:10), African men have used the out-dated sexist statement - 'gender is an indication of ability' - in order to oppress women and validate the low social status imposed on women.

In African women's lives, the 'wholeness' of women-being depends exclusively on childbearing and motherhood (Oduyoye 1992b:20). Mbiti (1991:64) says that 'nothing else is as valuable as having children...If a woman has everything else, except children, she would have no cause or joy to give thanks.' Outside the prominent biological role of a female as birthing and mothering, the image of a woman is portrayed negatively; a person who is 'quarrelsome' (Oduyoye 1995c:58), disharmonious and malignant (Oduyoye 1995c:60).

The oppressive situation of women in Africa also exists in the church. According to Oduyoye (2001a:28), the Western Christian culture and patriarchal ideology have seeped in and endowed men with power. Oduyoye (1995c:10; 1995a:80) maintains that African religious ideology was fuelled by 'the patriarchal manipulation' of the Western culture, and thus Africans are now damaged by 'home-grown patriarchies.'<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> While the existence of patriarchal structures in the Bible is obvious, there are various views as to whether this patriarchy is something to be recommended or rejected (Maddox 1987:197). Is patriarchy the biblically-attested cultural model as a part of God's revelation or only a cultural setting for God's revelation? One extreme group asserts that culture-relative elements cannot be essential revelation, while the other extreme group maintains that all of biblical culture is divinely mandated and, therefore *norma Dei* in all times and culture (Maddox 1987:197-216).

For traditionalists, the patriarchal social structure is an essential aspect of the Christian revelation, and patriarchy remains a normative pattern for contemporary Christian life. This means not only that males must hold the final power in social contexts but also that the 'male' is understood as the paradigmatic expression of humanity (Maddox 1987:198): Stephen Clarke, Susah Foh, James Hurly, and George Knight (Maddox 1987:200).

Liberated traditionalists, such as Donald Bloesch, maintain that male hierarchy in home and church is God's clear plan for humanity. But they try to portray 'a truly Christian form of patriarchalism' (Maddox 1987:202) and maintain that the truly Christ-like way to exercise male leadership is to submit mutually to one another or to serve her self-sacrificially (Maddox 1987:204).

Mary Daly goes further and identifies patriarchalism as essential Christianity, and thus simply declares that Christianity is neither true nor saving lives (Maddox 1987:204).

The egalitarian theologians deny that patriarchal structure is definitely described as the will of God in the Bible. For them, God never intended human society to be patriarchal, and the patriarchal culture is simply one manifestation of the sinful human culture (Maddox 1987:204).

Theologians who refer to themselves as 'biblical feminists' - Scott Bartchy, Mary Evans, Nancy Hardestry, Letha Scanzoni and (earlier) Phyllis Trible (Maddox 1987:205) - made a distinction between what is intended to be taught and what is merely described (Maddox 1987:204). Biblical feminists believe that the Genesis creation story portrays

Oduyoye claims that Christianity has kept silence on violence against women, ignored the oppression of women, and strengthened patriarchal structure and hierarchies in the church. Oduyoye (1995c:157) laments:

I call what I see - the mold in which religion cast women, the psychological binds of socioeconomic realities, political powerlessness, the daily diminution of domestic influence by Western-type patriarchal norms - injustice. No other word fits.

In Akan society, according to Oduyoye (1995c:62), women were expected to accomplish economic roles as part of their mothering assignments. It means that gender relation does not seem to be based on any 'inherent competence' of men or 'inherent incompetence' of women.

In the immediate postcolonial period for most African states, however, the focus was on nation building and revitalization of the African identity. In consequence, gender issues were not on the agenda to be dealt with. Naturally, there have been high illiteracy rates and lower educational levels and achievements among African women. Furthermore many African men ignored the feminism as a dangerous foreign ideology (Chitando, A & Chitando, E 2005:26).

Gender relation that is linked with the roles based on biological sex refuses the equality between male and female and validates male superiority, patriarchy, androcentrism, and kyriocentrism (Oduyoye 1995c:62; Njoroge 2005:35). Oduyoye asserts the crux of the matter of gender ideology as follows:

The gender ideology presupposes that the masculine encompasses the female, or takes priority in relation to the female and is entitled to expect subordination and

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patriarchal domination of women as a distortion of human life that resulted from sin. This inherently oppressive social structure is not God's will. The patriarchy presented in the Old Testament social structures and religious practices is part of the continuing effect of sin described in the Bible, not a way of life prescribed by the Bible (Maddox 1987:206).

Ruether believes that, throughout the entire Bible, there is the religion of the 'sacred canopy' which strives to preserve the existing hierarchical social order and the religion of the prophetic-messianic critique of this existing social order (Maddox 1987:209). Some texts contain patriarchal and misogynist elements that are clearly intentional. By contrast, some texts - prophetic-messianic trajectory - reject all religious sanctification of patriarchal, hierarchical and oppressive social relationships. Ruether argues that the only possible method for a Christian feminist interpreter is to opt for the prophetic-messianic tradition as most truly the Word of God, and the prophetic-messianic tradition exposes and rejects the patriarchal and misogynist elements in the rest of the Bible (Maddox 1987:209).

Fiorenza asserts that the true locus of the Word of God should be identified with the community of faith which lies behind the Bible itself and provides the authoritative norm for the interpretation of scripture: women-church (Maddox 1987:204). For Fiorenza, there are inescapable patriarchal and misogynist elements intentionally taught in the Bible (she agrees with Ruether), and these androcentric elements pervade the entire Bible, including the prophetic-messianic tradition (in contrast to Ruether). Fiorenza suggests that much of the Bible was written purposefully to patriarchalize egalitarian movements and motifs that characterized early Christian life. She asserts that the Bible never has been and never can be in itself the final and unchanging norm for Christian life and thought. The final norm must be the Christian community - women church - that interprets the Bible (Maddox 1987:213).

submissiveness and self-abasement of the female. The gender ideology is not limited to biology. It functions as a pecking order where colonies were female in relations to the colonizing nations. Men slaves are females in relation to women in the master's household. White women are gendered males in relation to black women.

(quoted by Njoroge 2005:34).

Oduyoye, therefore, writes;

Recognizing and becoming sensitive to gender in theology leads to a theology that is liberative, one that does not remain theoretical but demands ethical choices that will empower the transformation of relationships that have been damaged by sexism and misogynist attitudes.

(quoted by Njoroge 2005:35).

Within these situations, Oduyoye and African women theologians have engaged in a resistance against the legacy of Western colonialism and mission. They have encouraged the liberation of African women from the 'life-denying ideologies, patriarchal values and norms that put women into positions of inferiority' in both society and church (Chitando, A & Chitando, E 2005:22).

### **5.3.1.3 Empowering women and the socio-cultural transformation**

Oduyoye embraces African culture as one of the sources of her theological articulation, and respects the African past to shed light on the theological task. At the same time, however, she claims a critical assessment of some aspects of African culture and religious practices, which are considered to be prohibitive of women's development.

Although biblical texts have been subjected to male-biased interpretation and used as a tool for the oppression of women, they also contain some liberative elements for African women (Masenya 1995:154; Achtemeier 1988:48).

Oduyoye (1986a:54) attempts to construct a theology that meets the contemporary African needs. It seeks to transform theological knowledge and socio-political structures that justify domination, subordination, alienation, exploitation, and exclusion of women (Jeong 2002:22).

Therefore, Oduyoye (1995c:182) urges females and males to experience 'reciprocity and mutual respect, support and protection of each person's freedom in continuum with our freedom as the

children of promise.’

Oduyoye (1991:132) maintains that feminism must not just exist in an ivory tower, but requires action that will lead people and communities toward justice. It is a praxis-orientated theology. African women must take up the responsibility to change and transform individual as well as oppressive customs and traditions in order to build community and create for life-giving and life-enhancing relationships.

Oduyoye and other African women theologians claim that the African church needs to focus on the rights and dignity of women in all aspects of women-unfriendly social, economic and political systems (Landman 1998:140). They argue that the church has to unveil patriarchal hierarchies in the church (Oduyoye 1995c:164); the church has to empower women to seek ‘equal treatment and fairness’ of women and men (Oduyoye 1995c:164) as equal inheritors of the common wealth of God (Oduyoye 1995c:181; Amoah 1995:2).

### **5.3.2 Oduyoye’s methodology**

#### **5.3.2.1 Cultural hermeneutics**

The gospel can be communicated to African people through African culture because African culture has shaped a way in which people understand their world. Kanyoro (2002:67) asserts that African culture holds ‘communities captive and communities hold individuals captive to the culture.’ The biblical texts, therefore, are understood through the eyes of culture, and the culture of people provides a hermeneutical key to their interpretation of the text (Kanyoro 2002:20, 50, 55). Since biblical texts have been interpreted by male theologians, Oduyoye and other African women theologians have searched for appropriate hermeneutical tools for the reading and interpretation of the Bible, and have developed a ‘cultural hermeneutics’.

Kanyoro (2002:50) says that cultural hermeneutics is a methodology or a process by which African women theologians analyze and interpret their culture, religion, and the Christian heritage through cultural eyes, aiming to communicate the gospel to both women and men within the African context.

According to Kwok (2004:15, 18), cultural hermeneutics in the African context works in several dimensions such as: examining the images of African women that have been shaped by white people



during the colonial times; analyzing the rituals and ceremonies that define the status of women in society; criticizing the cultural ideologies that perpetuate gender roles and power structures in society; recovering the sources of information about women's various experiences and gender struggles; studying the Bible from their perspective and investigating 'the multi-layer' inlaid in biblical narrative.

Oduyoye employs 'cultural hermeneutics' as an important tool for reading the Bible, not only through the eyes of African culture, but also from African women's perspective. As Russell (2004:28) points out, African culture is a two-edged sword. It provides women with identity, integrity, and way of life, but also strengthens and legitimizes the patriarchal forms of domination over African women. Although African culture is the 'most important authoritative canon' to the African worldview (Kanyoro 2002:55), African culture is not static, and must not be 'romanticized.'

Oduyoye recognizes the ambivalence of African culture. In doing theology, Oduyoye (2001a:14) utilizes African culture, but in incorporating the gospel into African culture, she holds to a critical stance on African culture. It must be recognized that, in the African culture, everything is not liberating (Oduyoye 2001a:12), so that any culture should not be sanctioned by the Bible, and the text of the Bible should not be used to validate any culture (Kanyoro 2002:7).

Oduyoye examines myths, proverbs, folk tales, and symbols that operate in the socialization of women. Oduyoye (2001a:17) uncovers the liberative message from various cultural codes, myth, symbolisms and rituals, and simultaneously unmask the existing patriarchal structures and schemes in African culture and contemporary African society. Oduyoye (2001a:12) thus states:

so cultural hermeneutics directs that we take nothing for granted, that we do not follow tradition and ritual and norms as unchangeable givens, and that cultural relativism does not become covert racism and ethnocentrism.

Oduyoye has proposed 'other ways of reading' the Bible with 'a new awareness of their situation'; re-reading the Bible not from a Euro-American perspective but for African women themselves through African women's view of culture (Oduyoye 1989:198; 2001a:11; Chitando, A & Chitando, E 2005:29). Oduyoye (1998:366) argues that women should 're-read and re-interpret the lives and actions of the women which men's theology either ignores or demonizes.' Oduyoye (2001a:12) asserts that 'any interpretation of the Bible is unacceptable if it does harm to women, the vulnerable, and the voiceless.' Oduyoye (2001a:19) states that 'women, fed on the understandings of men, are now doing their own reading.'



It should be noticed that, although the study of the Bible is one of Oduyoye's great interests (Oduyoye 2001a:19), to Oduyoye, hermeneutics does not seem mainly to be concerned with the exegesis and interpretation of biblical texts. Instead, she, not as a biblical scholar, but as a woman theologian, focuses on the relevancy of the gospel in the African cultural and social context.

Oduyoye proposes both a 'hermeneutics of culture' and a 'hermeneutics of suspicion.'<sup>21</sup> She attempts to recover the 'African historical memory' of African culture and simultaneously challenges the 'inhuman and domesticating customs and traditions' embedded in African culture (Kwok 2004:15). Cultural hermeneutics, therefore, encourages African women to take a critical stance on African culture as well as on the use of African cultural resources as a tool for interpreting the Bible (Oduyoye 2001a:13-14). Consequently, Oduyoye (2001a:12) states that a cultural hermeneutics seeks criticism from 'within' and not an 'imposition from without.'

In this regard, Oduyoye's notion of cultural hermeneutics suggests the use of a hermeneutics of liberation. A hermeneutics of liberation stimulates African women to interpret the biblical texts in a way that liberates women from the patriarchal systems (Kwok 2004:15).

The hermeneutics of suspicion calls for a hermeneutics of commitment. A hermeneutics of commitment promotes African women to investigate the life-giving and liberating values that come from both the Bible and African culture. It encourages African women to take responsibility to change and transform those oppressive customs in order to bring about women's full humanity and participation in society (Oduyoye 2001a:11-14).

Cultural hermeneutics is, to Oduyoye, the African women's way of taking seriously the issues of continuity with the tradition and transformation of the tradition (Oduyoye 2001a:14).

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<sup>21</sup> Oduyoye follows Western feminist theologians in regard to hermeneutics. Fiorenza employs what she calls a four-stage hermeneutics for a feminist biblical interpretation: a hermeneutics of suspicion, of proclamation, of remembrance, and of creative actualization.

A hermeneutics of suspicion allows the reader to raise questions regarding all androcentric and patriarchal texts and its interpretations that were and have been made by the patriarchal perspectives of its authors and interpreters. Hermeneutics is suspicious of the interpretation of the text as an instrument of male domination (Kassian 2005:131).

The hermeneutics of proclamation takes the texts that are supportive of oppressed women and proclaims liberation for women. The texts that authorize the marginalization of women in society should be rejected (Kassian 2005:133).

The hermeneutics of remembrance encourages women to reclaim the suffering and struggle of women in the Bible and to draw feminist meaning from the 'subversive power of the remembered past' (Kassian 2005:133,134). The goal of feminist hermeneutics of remembrance is to heighten women's bitterness, anger, and disillusionment with God and the Bible (Kassian 2005:135).

The hermeneutics of creative actualization takes what one can learn from the Bible as a feminist thinker and then recreates what it means to be a woman in the Christian tradition today (Scholer 1987:411). A hermeneutics of creative actualization reclaims the same imaginative freedom, popular creativity, and ritual powers that the male prophets and apostles possessed (Kassian 2005:135).

### 5.3.2.2 Storytelling

AWT is not dependent on the philosophical meta-language of traditional theologies but on the language of storytelling which narrates women's everyday life (Landman 1998:138).

By storytelling women's various experiences of hope and anger, laughter and sorrow, and victimization and liberation can be heard in their own words. The story as 'women's socio-biography' (Chung 1999:106) provides 'a rich source of women's views on life' for African women theologians, and uncovers factors that dehumanize and marginalize women (Oduyoye 2001a:10).

According to Chung (1999:104), the Third World women theologians take its circular phases in theologizing; they listen to an individual's story, make a critical social analysis, and go on to theological reflection.

Chung (1999:106) maintains that listening to the women's stories concerning their situation equips women theologians with 'the inspiration and courage for revolutionary change,' and critical social analysis reveals 'the whole picture of complex interconnections in the evil structure.'

In the process of listening to story, analyzing it critically, and reflecting on it theologically, African women theologians aim to change the role of women from bystander to participant (Frederiks 2003:72). In this context, African women theologians accept African women's stories as a source of theology (Nyengele 2004:9).

According to Oduyoye (2001a:17), 'African women's theology can be characterized by storytelling' in which women's various experiences can be heard.

Oduyoye (2001a:16), therefore, begins by listening to women's stories that come from various backgrounds, then she continues to reflect on 'the meaning of the story as a whole.' After questioning the meanings of the various experiences of individuals, Oduyoye (1992:4) examines the cultural conditions that are expressed in the stories in order to unearth the root of the belief system and social structure that oppresses women.

For this reason, Oduyoye delineates AWT as 'a narrative theology' in which 'ordinary people are given the opportunity to understand their faith and being in relationship with God and others' (Oduyoye 2001a:17).

### 5.3.2.3 Analysis of folktalk-myths, folktales and proverbs

Oduyoye deals with the corpus of folktalk,<sup>22</sup> such as myths, proverbs, and folktales of the Akan and the Yoruba peoples. By explicating the folktalk, Oduyoye acknowledges that the folktalk has been used to shape African women's lives and African women have been regarded as 'culture's bondswomen' (Oduyoye 1995c). According to Oduyoye, the remarks in the folktalk do not indicate 'historical reality'; rather these function as 'rhetorical devices' and 'ideological constructions of a by-gone age' in order to shape communal values, legitimizing and reinforcing oppressive societal orders (Kwok 2004:17; 2007:481).

In general, the folktalk has been interpreted on a male-centered basis. This male-centered interpretation has reinforced the patriarchal societal structure and the subordinate position of women. The circular interpretation perpetuates the oppression of women and stereotypical roles of women as 'mothers, wives, caretakers, and self-sacrificial persons who put others' needs first' (Kwok 2004:17; 2007:481). For this reason, Oduyoye (1995c:35) rejects the familiar expressions in African folktalk, such as 'in our culture' or 'the elders say' and she does not do theology for the 'African ancestors'.

Oduyoye (1995c:9), therefore, asks for whose benefit the folktalk are told, and claims that the folktalk has to be re-interpreted to eliminate the 'negative effects on the self-image of African women.' By its reinterpretation,<sup>23</sup> Oduyoye tries to change the patriarchal structures of oppression, and to restore the freedom and dignity of life for both women and men in Africa. She declares that some of the folktalk that are harmful and irrelevant should be discarded (Kwok 2004:17).

Oduyoye (1995c:6) analyzes the myth of Anowa,<sup>24</sup> who is 'the mythical woman, prophet and priest whose life of daring, suffering, and determination is reflected in the continent of Africa.' In Oduyoye's analysis, Anowa functions as 'Africa's ancestress' (Oduyoye 1995c:6) and foremother of African women who played prominent roles in liberation (Chitando, A & Chitando, E 2005:34). By

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<sup>22</sup> Folktalk is the social history of people. People want folktalk to be remembered as their collective memory (Oduyoye 1995c:20). Folktalk, including myths, proverbs and folktales, shaped and continue to shape social relations, even under modern political systems (Oduyoye 1995c:19). In Africa, it functions as 'a history of thought, a philosophy of life, an attempt to find an answer to the question' (Oduyoye 1995c:21) and 'vehicles for the transmission of norms' (Oduyoye 1995c:37). It provides a rich source of imagery about women (Oduyoye 1995c:21).

<sup>23</sup> The well-known Yoruba cosmogonic myth tells of the creation of the world by *Olódùmarè*. Oduyoye claims that the emphasis on male domination can be overcome by reinterpreting traditional myths. Oduyoye uses another version of the creation of the world by *Olódùmarè* which depicts *Oduduwa*, the wife of *Obatala*. Although most versions of the story emphasize the role of male divinities in creation, this version demonstrates that it is possible to consider *Obatala* and *Oduduwa* as co-creators. This implies, in Oduyoye's words, that all human beings, male and female, are of divine origin.

<sup>24</sup> Oduyoye shares this symbolic figure with the African writers, Ama Ata Aidoo and Ayi Kwei Armah, who use the mythical woman, Anowa, as the liberational symbol for their novels (Pemberton 2003:75). Both authors describe Anowa as a woman who opposes slavery and the slave trade, and portray her as a symbol of all that is life-sustaining and life-protecting.

tracing the female presence in the Asante and the Yoruba mythology, Oduyoye finds that Anowa can provide a constructive image of the women in Africa (Oduyoye 1995c:7; Pemberton 2003:64).

Anowa, for Oduyoye, demonstrates the life-giving, life-sustaining and life-protecting qualities of women (Oduyoye 1995c:7), and empowers African women to be ‘true African children and daughters of Anowa’ in order to oppose all forces that prevent them from being treated as people of great worth (Oduyoye 1995c:6).

#### **5.4. WOMEN’S STATUS IN AFRICAN CULTURE AND THE AFRICAN CHURCH**

Oduyoye (1994a:174) depicts the reality of the life of African women as follows:

African men carry none of the life-giving burdens that African women carry. Women with babies on their backs and yams, firewood, and water on their heads [are] the common image of African women in real life and in Art.

The predominant views of women in Africa are: the social status of women is defined not in relation to their own qualities and achievements, but to the others (Oduyoye 1986a:122); the personhood of women depends primarily on childbearing and motherhood (Oduyoye 1992b:20); women are recognized as being generically inferior to men (Kilson 1976:140); the role and image of women has been socially and culturally defined by men (Ackermann 1991:94); and women view themselves as the possession of the men who support them (Koopman 2004:193).

Concerning honouring and respecting women, men defend themselves by telling how they honour and respect their mothers, but men withhold their willingness to honour and respect the humanity of a woman (Oduyoye 1995c:73).

Women in Africa, therefore, are supposed to be ‘fragile and dependent’ due to the destructive practices that are concealed under the guise of ‘cultural values’ and ‘the Western patriarchal ideology’ that works for men (Oduyoye 1995c:106).

Oduyoye (1998:360) maintains that the African church has little concern for the issues of oppression and marginalization of women in the church. According to Oduyoye (1986a:124), ‘the women are very much concerned about the church but the church is not so much concerned about women.’ Furthermore, male African theologians have asserted that feminism and sexism are not

issues of African women, but issues of Western women and bourgeois, and have no real place in Africa (Oduyoye 1995c:13, 88, 185).<sup>25</sup>

#### 5.4.1 Women's status in ATR(s) and African culture<sup>26</sup>

Although ATR(s) are not recognized as a 'revealed religion' (Oduyoye 2001a:25), African religio-cultural, social order and moral precepts are conceived of as having a divine origin. In Africa, culture and religion are not distinct from each other, and are perceived as the thread which ties 'the community beliefs' and fastens 'the solidarity of communities' (Kanyoro 2002:14).

African women are born into a community where ATR(s) and African culture are embodied and form a communal ideology (Oduyoye 2001a:26). Women, therefore, recognize their life as 'life-in-community.' Their status has been defined and shaped by the communal ideology (Oduyoye 1979:110; 2001a:26). Communal ideology determines what men and women are required to do and not to do for the community (Oduyoye 1995c:61). Individual achievement is acknowledged only when it promotes the profit of the whole community (Oduyoye 1995c:56).

ATR(s) as an integral part of African culture and life function as a key role in enforcing societal norms and ethics (Oduyoye 1992a:16). Therefore the critique of religion and culture poses as a threat to community security (Kanyoro 2002:14).

Within the African religio-cultural heritage, according to Oduyoye (1994a:173), the seeds of the objectification and marginalization of women existed, and colonial policies simply helped to justify the oppression of women. As Dorothy Ramodibe argues, 'African tradition and culture present themselves to women as an oppressive system. It has a male-domineering factor. It is a patriarchal system' (quoted by Mandew 1991:131).

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<sup>25</sup> Male African theologians have a perception that feminist theology is a bourgeois concept, and important to white, middle-class, North America women (Jakobsen 1994:149).

According to Ikenga-Methu (1996:141), many African feminist theologians 'unfortunately' have not searched the rich African symbolism in evaluating the status and roles of women in African societies. Ikenga-Metuh (1996:141) asserts that the equality that feminist theologians argue for must not be confused with uniformity. Male theologians maintain that 'our women are not oppressed' (Oduyoye 1995c:13).

In Africa, feminism is often associated negatively with women who have 'difficulty' relating to men (Oduyoye 1994a:169). African anti-feminists say that Africans must live as Africans and remain true to the religio-cultural traditions that are primal to Africa, and say that we must not anger our ancestors by adopting new religious and foreign ways (Oduyoye 1994a:171).

<sup>26</sup> In approaching women's status in ATR(s), one confronts the problem of insufficient and fragmentary information about women in ATR(s). Anthropologists have mainly been involved in researching the public structures of social authority that entail relations between men. Even in societies where women play significant public roles, such as the queen mothers in several Akan and Bantu speaking societies, the roles generally have been dealt with not on their own merit but only in their relation to some male roles (Kilson 1976:134).

In African society, although some women of the royal family may hold a higher rank than some public men (e.g., the Swazi, the Ganda, the Bemba, and the Azande) and some women may manage men within the domestic area (e.g., the Khoikhoi) and a few women may exercise power (e.g., the Mende), females have been considered as inherently inferior to males (Kilson 1976:138).

An examination of the folktalk and rituals indicates how ATR(s) and African culture have shaped women's lives, and how the interpretations of folktalk and rituals have stereotyped the image of women negatively.

#### **5.4.1.1 Women in African folktalk**

Folktalk, including traditional African myths, folktales, proverbs, and memorable sayings, functions as a source for cultural norms, which form and preserve 'acceptable' social roles and practices (Oduyoye 1995c:14). Oduyoye (1995c) analyzes the 'religio-cultural corpus' of Africa<sup>27</sup> in order to examine the influence of folktalk in shaping the image and status of African women and its effect on women's roles and participation in African society.

##### **5.4.1.1.1 Women in myths**

Although some African myths do not blame women for the loss of paradise, women who appear in the mythologies of creation (cosmogonies)<sup>28</sup> and the origin of evil and death are mostly described as people who brought trouble into the world.

According to Oduyoye (1995c:33), there is a tendency in folktalk to use women to illustrate negative human traits.

In the Bambara cosmogonic myth, the world was distorted by the jealousy of the first woman (Ikenga-Methu 1987:43). Among the Tutsi, the Dinka, the Igbo, and the Akan, a covetous woman who wanted to grind more than one grain permitted used a long handed pestle and stuck the sky. This angered God and made God withdrew with the sky (Ikenga-Methu 1987:55-56; Mbiti

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<sup>27</sup> Oduyoye used the term 'religio-cultural corpus' in order to denote the vast sources of traditional influences on life, the language and imagery of proverbs, folktales, and myths.

<sup>28</sup> Cosmogony, in a broad sense, is theory which explains the origin and organization of the universe. African cosmogonies, especially creation myths that connect the origin of the universe to the activity of pre-existing divine beings, not only provide the 'symbolic categories' by which Africans comprehend the organization of their universe, but also propose 'patterns' by which they seek to keep the equilibrium and the harmony of the universe through ritual (Ikenga-Methu 1987:41).

[1969]1975:97). In an Urundi myth, death spread all over the world because of a woman (Ikenga-Methu 1987:58).

By using the two myths, the Saga of *Ozidi* and the *Ogboinba's* Destiny, Oduyoye (1995c:26) illustrates that women are not permitted to use powers selfishly and for life-denying pursuits. Instead, women can use powers for the good of others and to wipe out powers that are malicious to the whole society (Oduyoye 1995c:29).

In the *Ogboni* and *Oro* of the Yoruba and the *Porro* of Sierra Leon, the annual demonstration of male domination over female in religious festivals continues to perpetuate women's inferiority in the minds of growing boys and girls (Oduyoye 1995c:32).

A good woman does not put her own needs first, but put community welfare above her personal desires because her selflessness is the *sine qua non* of a healthy community.

Through these myths, the society duly suppresses any outcry of rebellion on the part of women, and thus demonstrates the futility of a woman's efforts to change her destiny (Oduyoye 1995c:34).

However, Oduyoye attempts to find the positive role of women in the myths. In the Yoruba myth of origin, although all main actors - *Olódùmarè* and *Obatala* - are depicted as male (Oduyoye 1995c:22), this myth indicates that all human beings, male and female, are of divine origin because the breath of God has been breathed into both male and female (Oduyoye 1995c:23).

In the myth of *Woyengi*, the one who creates is a woman called either of *Woyengi* or *Tamarau*, the Great Mother (Oduyoye 1995c:23). Sexual differentiation and one's destiny are pre-mundane choices that are unalterable. According to Oduyoye (1995c:23), however, the quality of human beings, both male and female is embedded equally in the divine ordering of life.

#### **5.4.1.1.2 Women in folktales**

Folktales are usually directed at the stability and welfare of the whole community. When the folktales teach the norm of relationship, they are invariably and strictly gender based and age based (Oduyoye 1995c:37). Women in folktales are usually portrayed as malevolent (Oduyoye 1995c:40) and demanding (Oduyoye 1995c:42).

Concerning marriage relationship, the folktales depict that only women are unfaithful (Oduyoye 1995c:52). The folktales ridicule women and project a superior male intelligence (Oduyoye 1995c:42).



### 5.4.1.1.3 Women in proverbs

Some proverbs<sup>29</sup> enhance the dignity of all human beings and highlight individual worth regardless of sex and status (Oduyoye 1995c:73). A common image of the woman in the proverbs, however, is a 'quarrelsome' person (Oduyoye 1995c:58).

Throughout Africa, proverbs underline the social pressure to get married and to stay married (Oduyoye 1995c:65). The women's role in marriage is not considered to be of equal value with the role of men (Oduyoye 1995c:66).

### 5.4.1.2 Women in rituals

Religion and ritual function as a system in which power, influence, domination and oppression operate (Oduyoye 1991a:79). Most of these rituals seem to work in favour of African men and to place women on the periphery<sup>30</sup> (Oduyoye 1992a:17).

Although Africa women frequently are in charge of shrines or have significant roles in personal rituals of status transformation associated with birth, puberty, and death (Kilson 1976:139), women are often limited or excluded from the central communal rituals that address royal ancestral spirits, deities, heroes, or spirits of fertility (Kilson 1976:137). Women rarely play primary roles, such as high priests of shrines, the principal intercessor with spiritual beings, or as healers (Kilson 1976:138; Oduyoye 1992b:10).

Instead they play subordinate roles, such as supplicants, ritual assistants, cultic dancers, and most importantly mediums. In family rituals, men usually preside and menopausal women carry out duties only in supportive roles (Oduyoye 1992a:17).

Among the Swazi, the Ganda, the Bemba, the Azande, the Lamba, the Khoikhoi, the Nyakyusa,

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<sup>29</sup> Proverbs, according to Oduyoye (1995c:55), is defined as short and popular sentences that use plain language to express some practical truth that results from experience or observation.

<sup>30</sup> There are, of course, some cases of women who play key ritual roles. Among the Swazi, the queen mother shares a dual monarchy with her son and together they serve the royal ancestors and make rain through magic (Kilson 1976:137). Among the Mende, women can achieve high status in public affairs in their own right (Kilson 1976:138), and ancestral spirits associated with women's communal sodalities are addressed by women (Kilson 1976:137).

However, men ordinarily carry out the prominent role in rituals. This domination of men is reflected in the sexual identity of divine beings. When the sex of the Supreme Being is mentioned, it is male (the Mende, the San). The Supreme Being and male deities are supposed to have divine wives (the Yoruba, the Bemba, the Ganda, the Mende and the San) and mothers (the Bemba). Ancestral spirits of both sexes may be worshipped within domestic groups (e.g. the Yoruba, the Mende, the Lamba, and the Safwa), while male ancestors in fact are the only ones venerated in national cults (e.g. the Swazi, the Bemba, the Ganda, and the Nyakyusa). These findings with reference to the sexual identity of spiritual beings suggest that female deities like their human counterparts have domestic rather than public orientations (Kilson 1976:135).

and the Yao, the blood of menstruation and the blood of childbirth are associated with a threat to life (Kilson 1976:136). Menstruating women are regarded as unclean, and this ritual impurity restrains women from full involvement in religious ritual practice (Oduyoye 1986a:123).

Women are required to perform purification rituals after a husband's death, or after childbirth, or even after men's failure to accomplish a task. The failure of men to complete the task is also attributed to the unfaithfulness of a wife in their absence. Thus, women's sexual infidelity, men's contact with women who are in ritual impurity, or even women's practice of witchcraft cause men's inability and ineptitude in performing their tasks (Oduyoye 1992b:16). These purification rituals are very often prescribed by men diviners and performed on women by women (Oduyoye 1992b:19).

Oduyoye maintains that these perceptions reinforce the negative image of women. The exclusion of women from and the placement of women in secondary roles within the central communal rituals imply that men do not want women to have positions of responsibility and authority over men (Oduyoye 1992a:18).

#### **5.4.1.3 Women in marriage and child-bearing**

In most African societies, female sexuality has no independent value outside of marriage and procreation (Oduyoye 1992a:16).

Marriage is regarded as a necessity for women. A responsible woman ought to be married and ought to produce children (Oduyoye 1995c:64). The productivity of women is the foundation of marriage. Procreation which has been positioned at the center of the women's universe is the most important factor that governs male-female relations within marriage in Africa. Their positions as husband and wife are secured only after producing their offspring.

On the contrary, barrenness is recognized as the most severe disaster that could happen to an African woman. For this reason, many taboos and rituals for women are related with procreation (Oduyoye 1992a:16; 1991a:77). In the African community, therefore, procreation is not a choice, but a duty (Oduyoye 1995c:30) and the reason of women's existence (Oduyoye 1992a:17). Moreover, procreation is not only a socio-cultural expectation but also a religious duty in Africa (Oduyoye 1995c:165). For the Akan and the Yoruba, marriage and child-bearing are conceived of together (Oduyoye 1995c:49). In this context, women are valued not for what they are but for what they can produce for society (Phiri 1997:71).

Through procreation men ‘reproduce themselves and continue the family name’ and women ‘actualize their psycho-religious need to be the sources of life’ (Oduyoye 1995c:142). In the same way, descendants are obliged to secure a proper burial of their parents.

For this reason, procreation is conceived of as the inauguration and the completion of ‘the eternal cycle of life’ (Oduyoye 1995c:30).

Although there are many problems in polygamy, polygamy is prevalent and customary, and both men and women cannot quit this custom. Rather there is a tendency to regard it as a norm. The reason is that having children is more important than anything else (Oduyoye 1995c:52).

In the African religio-social context, women are simply described as ‘objects of genetic and social transmission’ (Oduyoye 1995c:142) and ‘instruments of production and reproduction’ (Oduyoye 1995a:169).

Oduyoye pays her attention to an exchange of gifts and services between two families that takes place during the initiation of marriage. Oduyoye (1995c:134) admits that the marriage gifts are not economic transfers in a way in which people would buy a slave. She agrees that the marriage gifts are ‘part of a religious and spiritualizing ritual’ (1995c:133) and ‘a bonding factor’ that ties two families together (1995c:134). Oduyoye, however, turns her sight to the other side of the exchanges of gifts. The gifts are not reciprocal gifts or gifts given to a woman. The gifts are given by the husband’s family to the wife’s family, more exactly given by the father of the man to the father of the woman (Oduyoye 1995c:136). In regard to the Asante marriage ceremony, Oduyoye (1995c:136) asserts that an Asante bride is not a good to be sold, but is seen as a gift given to a man. The fact implies that the man offers material things to the father of the woman in gratitude for the ‘gift’. Oduyoye (1995c:136) argues that these material things become implicitly ‘a transaction between men over a woman’. Oduyoye (1995c:134) points out:

Marriage, then, locates a woman in a socially validated relationship that enables her to procreate to the advantage of either her matrikin or her affinal kin. Not much attention is paid to a women’s personal biological or psychological need to be the locus of life.

According to Oduyoye (1995c:137), the marriage ceremony ‘symbolizes the transfer of the control of a woman’s sexuality from her father or maternal uncle to her husband’ and dehumanizes a woman, putting a woman under the yoke of culture.

## **5.4.2 Women's status in African Christianity and church**

### **5.4.2.1 The ecclesiastical oppression of women in the church**

It has been said that the church played a significant role in African education during the colonial period and made a little economic and political progress. For Oduyoye, this statement is only partly true. Oduyoye (1995c:183) argues that Christianity has not contributed much to the liberation of women from an oppressive system and to 'the socio-cultural transformation of Africa.' The African church has done little to change sexism (Oduyoye 1995c:9). Instead of raising women's voices in protest, the African church has tended to promote notions of domesticity among African women and has excluded women from various areas of leadership in the church (Chitando A & Chitando, E 2005:25). The African church has encouraged women to fulfil the traditional role of being respectable and responsible women and good wives.

African theologians who employ the liberation paradigm reflect on the issues of the injustice, of class, and of race, but they usually disregard the issue of gender (Oduyoye 1995c:175). It shows how African Christianity and the church reinforce the cultural conditioning of women's subordination that leads to the depersonalization of women (Oduyoye 1995c:9).

According to Oduyoye (1995b:479), the assertion that Christianity has contributed to the liberation of women in Africa is problematic and a myth, which is not illustrated with concrete or continuing examples.<sup>31</sup>

### **5.4.2.2 The theological oppression of women in the church**

In the Western Christian thought, women's sexuality is deemed to be 'a necessary evil' and 'the root of human troubles' (Oduyoye 1986a:131). In Africa, the sexist elements of Western Christianity and the androcentric traditions and the patriarchal order of the Bible have fuelled traditional sexist elements in ATR(s) and African culture. In other words, there has been collaboration between the sexism of Christianity and the cultural sexism of Africa, and it has caused the oppression of women in the church. Furthermore, this collaboration convinces African men that the God of Christianity sanctions the cultural sexism of the African traditional society. In consequence, it accelerates the

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<sup>31</sup> According to Swantz, however, Christianity has had a significant role in opening up new roles for women, in giving them more freedom as individuals and considering them as equals to men (in Fashole-Luke, E, Gray, R, Hastings, A & Tasie 1978:149; cf. see Frederiks 2003:67-69).

marginalization of women from religious rituals and political power (Oduyoye 1995c:183).

The other factor causing the oppression of women is the one-sided interpretation of selected texts. Oduyoye (1995c:174) points out that many African Christians have used the Bible in order to support the norms of ATR(s) and African culture, and have reinforced the traditional socialization of African young people. It means that the Bible has been used to subordinate women and to make women accept even the traditional culture, which is oppressive to women, as the divine will (Oduyoye 1995c:174). For this reason, Oduyoye (1995b:481; 1995c:176) strongly argues that ‘Christianity has converted the African people to a new religion without converting their culture.’

In the African women’s perspective, the concept of God as male is very problematic. God, who transcends gender, is ‘imaged’ in male terms, and thus the female is to be seen as created in the image of the male, not directly in the image of God (Oduyoye 1986a:130). Some women have realized that they have surrendered not only to a ‘man’-made world but also to a ‘man’-made God. The imagining and visualization of God as male has blinded the church to the ‘absence’ or ‘presence’ of women and has only allowed males to exercise leadership in the church (Oduyoye 1995b:482). The understanding of God as male weakens the status of women in the church and forces women to serve in obscurity and silence (Oduyoye 1995b:482; 1995c:178).

According to Oduyoye (1995c:183), such perceptions are based on the one-sided interpretation of a few selected texts, which are named ‘the androcentricity of the biblical text’. In consequence, African women remain dependent on male exegesis and regard male interpretation of biblical events as the universal norm (Oduyoye 1995c:183; 1995b:486).

In this tendency of interpretation, the implications of those biblical texts that affirm the full personhood of women and the creation of both men and women in God’s image are virtually ignored (Kretzschmar 1991:109).

African women who demand the rights and dignity of women are accused of being uncritical imitators of decadent Euro-American culture (Chitando, A & Chitando, E 2005:29).

Oduyoye says that a Biblist attitude absolutizes the Bible to legitimize the status of female as inferior and subordinate, and it also makes the African church slow to change its attitudes toward women. Oduyoye (1995c:190) maintains that African Christians should not regard the Bible as ‘an infallible oracle’ to consult for instant solutions and responses, and they should not uncritically accept the theology of ‘the Bible says’ which believes ‘whatever is in the Bible is true.’

### 5.4.2.3 The status of women in AICs

In an article, *Women's status in indigenous African Christian Churches in Southern Africa* (1998), Awino investigates the position of women in AICs, especially Botswana women's participation in the indigenous religious movements. Awino demonstrates that many women have founded and led a number of AICs, and some women have elevated themselves to high positions in the AICs. Awino (1998:176), however, finds that there are still much patriarchal order and hierarchical aspects in AICs. Women are rarely in positions of direct authority. Awino (1998:178) shows that the structures of inequality are deeply rooted on the basis of gender even in AICs.

Oduyoye regards AICs as the true bearers of African spirituality and theological indigenization (Pemberton 2003:90). She has done her research in the Aladura churches<sup>32</sup> in which the male hierarchy generally follows the order described in 1 Corinthians 12:28. Concerning the female leadership in the Aladura churches, the popular role models are Miriam, Rachel, and Lydia (Oduyoye 1995c:124). It is generally asserted that the Aladura churches give women more room to express leadership abilities than do the mission churches that have grown out of the Euro-American missionary enterprise.

According to Oduyoye's study of the women founders and leaders of AICs, women are most visible in the structures of authority, and few such churches have women as the heads of the leadership (1995c:126). Women in leadership are recognized by their followers as divine agents (Oduyoye 1995c:126).

Oduyoye (1995c:125, 127), however, discovers that the status and involvement of women in the Aladura and the Zionist churches closely follow the women's traditional roles and the practices of ATR(s). African women leaders mirror the leadership of women in ATR(s). Traditional taboos still exclude even women founders of the churches from sacramental ministries (Oduyoye 1992b:10). Although most congregations consist mainly of women, most prominent positions are still in the hands of men. Women's participation in church affairs is encouraged, but there are limits to their participation. Oduyoye (1995c:127) comments on the Cherubim and Seraphim churches:

There are still traces of traditional male superiority in the Cherubim and Seraphim arrangements...most members are women - but men have more opportunities to lead. I

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<sup>32</sup> As a church of Nigerian origin, the main characteristic is prayer. The designation *aladura* means 'the praying ones'. (*Adura* means 'prayer' in Yoruba). This church has branches all along the West Coast of Africa, in London, and in the United States (Oduyoye 1986a:153). Oduyoye prefers to use 'the charismatic African churches' rather than use AICs as the official designation of these churches (Oduyoye 1986a:154).

would maintain that this is not a mere trace, but rather a replica of what happens in both church and society.

Adopting the practices of ATR(s), the Aladura churches have often chosen women who have reached menopause to be ordained into the ministry of sacraments. As women in both traditional and contemporary society are mostly excluded from or rarely involved in the rituals of ATR(s), women in the Aladura churches are hardly admitted to administer the Christian sacraments (Oduyoye 1995c:128). Although there are many women prophets, visionaries, healers, and preachers in the Aladura churches, the sacrament ministry is controlled by or limited to men in these ‘very African’ churches.

With regard to this situation, Oduyoye (1995c:128) comments that ‘their very Africanness has meant that some of the taboos of African Traditional Religion have been transferred into Christian practices.’ Concerning the involvement of women in AICs, Oduyoye (1995c:129-130) concludes;

The traditional African views of male superiority and male privilege have been reinforced by both traditional religious biases and the Western churches’ exclusion of women from ministry.

This phenomenon demonstrates that patriarchal structure and hierarchies are manifested in both the church and African culture. The pyramids of power that exist in African culture have found companions in Christianity (Oduyoye 1995b:485). The church, maintains Oduyoye (1986b:40), continues to expose ‘Christianity’s inability to overthrow patriarchy’ that in the human history has always tended to devalue and treat women as second class citizens.

### **5.4.3 Oduyoye’s conclusion**

In Africa, women are linked not only with the welfare and security of society through their procreative abilities but also with the source of danger through the polluting nature of their blood (Kilson 1976:136). Procreation is essential for ‘social continuity’ and ‘the eternal cycle of life’ (Oduyoye 1995c:30). Fertility and vitality of humanity are conceived of as ‘religious duties’ and ‘religious goals’ (Oduyoye 1995c:165; Kilson 1976:140). Such religious duties and goals force



women to think that their value is affirmed by their fertility. Kilson (1976:140) maintains that traditional African religious ideology which stresses ‘women’s domestic and inferior orientations in society’ cannot promote the transformation of the society.

African women should claim the unshakable principle of their status, ‘the God-ordained dignity of human beings’ (Oduyoye 1995c:171). Oduyoye (1995c:35) urges African women to investigate African folktalk that has been used to validate and reinforce male supremacy in societal relations, and to reveal the patriarchal nature of the folktalk that continues to shape ‘ideological constructions of the past.’ Therefore, the ‘unnatural’ things like ‘women walk miles to fetch water for men’s baths’ should be removed (Oduyoye 1995c:63).

If proverbs are sexist, oppressive, and preventive to self-actualization of women’s humanity, these inappropriate proverbs should be judged as ‘unrealistic’ and even ‘unreasonable’ (Oduyoye 1995c:75). If myths and folktales project the perpetuation of traditional ideologies, their validity should be questioned, dismantled, and proclaimed as ‘no longer relevant’ (Oduyoye 1995c:55, 57).

Oduyoye agrees with Ruether’s indication ([1983]1993:23) that patriarchy is itself ‘idolatry and blasphemy’, because ‘the idolizing of the male as the representative of divinity’ is ‘to make males more like God than females.’ Although there are many barriers to enhancing women’s status in African society and church, the African church needs to expose and challenge the thought system and structure that form such patriarchal hierarchies (Oduyoye 1995c:184).

This process will make the church become a home for both women and men, and facilitate the divine plan for the free and full expression of the humanity of women and men (Oduyoye 1995c:184).

For Oduyoye, this is the very act of ‘redeeming Christianity’ from its image as a force that vindicates the oppression and marginalization of African women.

## **5.5 ODUYOYE’S UNDERSTANDING OF GOD**

### **5.5.1 Oduyoye’s theological presuppositions**

#### **5.5.1.1 Women’s experience as a source of theology**

Christian women theologians regard women’s various experiences, especially the experience of oppression throughout history, as a primary source for doing theology and as an authority in

theological reflection (Ruether [1983]1993:12; Hauge 1992:9; Jeong 2002:1).

For Fiorenza, ‘the struggles for women at the bottom of the patrikyriarchal pyramid of domination and exploitation’ are of significance for her theological work (Fiorenza 1996:99). She argues that the locus of revelation is not the Bible or the tradition of the traditional church, but the *ekklesia* of women<sup>33</sup> and the experience of struggling for the liberation of women (Dube 2003:31).

According to Ruether ([1983]1993:12), human experience is the starting point and the end point of a critical feminist hermeneutical circle. In classic theologies, the Bible and tradition have been recognized as ‘the objective sources of theology,’ while ‘experience’ has been considered as being distant from the sources. Ruether ([1983]1993:12-13), however, maintains that since the objective sources of theology themselves have been codified into human experience, traditional Western theology itself has been formed on the basis of ‘male experience rather than on universal human experience.’

Although African women theologians take a critical distance from Western feminist theologians, they also place their experiences at the center of theological work.

For Oduyoye (1986a:45; 2001a:22), AWT is essentially a theological reflection of women who theologize out of their own and other women’s experience. These women’s experiences include experiences of poverty, the legacy of colonialism, and neo-colonialism (Oduyoye 1996a:112). Oduyoye (1986a:121-135) maintains that the women’s experience should be ‘an integral part of the definition of being human’ and ‘a legitimate resource and the base of her interpretative departure for the theological task in Africa.’

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<sup>33</sup> Women-church is a feminist concept that arose in a Catholic context but has spread well beyond it (Hunt 2009:86). The term is often confused with the notion of a church that is comprised of all women, or of only women, or for women only (Maddox 1987:213). Women-church is a movement of self-identified women and women-identified men from biblical times until the present (Maddox 1987:213). It is autonomous groups seeking to actualize ‘a discipleship of equals’ (Hunt 2009:85), and is a locus from which women are sent forth to feed, heal, and liberate (Hunt 2009:88). It includes all and only those persons who are committed to the struggle for women’s liberation (Maddox 1987:213).

For Fiorenza, the goal of the *ekklesia* of women is ‘to assert women’s religious power and liberation from all patriarchal alienation, marginalization, and oppression.’ Fiorenza holds that ‘the locus of divine revelation and grace is therefore not the Bible or the tradition of a patriarchal church, but the *ekklesia* of women and lives of women who live the option for our women selves’ (Dube 2000:31). The appropriate normative interpreter of Scripture is ‘women-church’. According to Fiorenza, females enjoyed equal discipleship and service in the company of Jesus and in the earliest New Testament church, and enjoyed a freedom that has now been lost throughout Christendom.

Some critics question the concept of the *ekklesia* of women, asking these questions: how does any such historical reconstruction, given its hypothetical nature, can ever form a sufficient basis or norm for a shared Christian life and practice? Does Fiorenza really believe the first century expression of this discipleship of equals - women-church - was as pure as she sometimes seems to suggest? (Maddox 1987:215).

If so, Achtemeier (1988:46) rightly points out that the question is not that women should enjoy equal status, personhood, and discipleship in the church, but how the God-given freedom is to be gained or regained and how the church in our time can become the whole people of God.

### **5.5.1.2 African culture as a source of theology**

Oduyoye says that African Christians live in the dilemma of ‘the two-forked paths’ of gospel and culture. It means that African Christians feel ‘the schizophrenia involved in pleasing the propagators of Western Christianity while doing another rite in another venue to fulfill traditional righteousness’ (Oduyoye 1995a:84).

The dualism of African Christians has been formed with the arrival of Western Christianity, which did not have a sympathetic attitude to the African religio-cultural tradition. Western missionaries carried out a ‘wholesale’ refusal to value the African religio-cultural tradition and caused the defamation of the African religio-cultural tradition (Pemberton 2003:161).

In this context, Oduyoye (1986a:139) claims that the indigenization of Christianity in Africa needs not ‘the restatement of the faith’, but ‘the adaption of African ritual and forms.’ Oduyoye (1998:366; 2001a:18) suggests that theological messages should be coded into myths, folktales, proverbs, maxims and ritual practices that are very familiar to all Africans. For Oduyoye, the Bible is not limited to Christian sources, but widened to the African religio-cultural tradition (Oduyoye 1996a:113).

Oduyoye, therefore, accepts African religio-cultural traditions - African history, ATR(s), oracles, prayers, symbols, rites, and the sources of African spirituality - as resources for Christian theology. Oduyoye (1995a:86) asserts that

A critical appropriation of African culture will contribute to the evolution of an authentic African Christianity to enrich world Christianity as well as to make Christ at home in Africa to the extent that the Christ is at home where justice and compassion are integral to the community’s culture.

### **5.5.1.3 Doing theology for transformation of the human community**

African women theologians maintain that theological work should not be performed as ‘an academic intellectual gymnastics.’ Theological reflection should rather be more than an attempt to give ‘reasoned expression to our belief in God’ (Oduyoye 1986a:138).

For Oduyoye, theology is not an ‘intellectual exercise’ or ‘thinking theology’, but doing theology. Oduyoye (2001a:16) asserts that theological reflection should move to a transforming praxis for those who are hungry and whose needs are ignored. A theology divorced from ethical demands

would have little relevance in Africa. Oduyoye (1986a:54), therefore, wants to do her theological work in the contemporary African context, aiming to transform the society.

Oduyoye has criticized African Inculturation theologians, because they are romanticizing ‘traditional cultures’, while paying little attention to gender and other forms of inequality that are inherent in traditional cultures (Mashau & Frederiks 2008:121).

For Oduyoye, the existence of God cannot be proved by the rhetoric of loving and caring words; rather the existence of God must be demonstrated in doing what God commands us to do; loving and caring other people (Oduyoye 1997-1998:503). African women theologians make women’s ‘theological voices’ be heard and also address ‘gender violence’ that has been ‘a long-term taboo’ in the African culture (Chitando, A & Chitando, E 2005:30). Oduyoye exposes the economical exploitation and political alienation against women, and the dehumanization of women in traditional and contemporary African society (Oduyoye 2001a:17). For Oduyoye (1998:369; 2001:17), theology aims to transform power and the oppressive systems and to become itself a transforming power for change of the whole human community.

### 5.5.2 Oduyoye’s understanding of God

Oduyoye (1997-1998:494) attempts to ‘establish the nature of the reality of God in African cosmology and culture’ through the dialogue between the gospel and African culture.

Every African believes in the existence of God (Oduyoye: 1997-1998:494; cf. Mbiti [1969]1975:29). God is constantly involved in the affairs of human beings. This God is *Gye Nyame* (Except God), meaning ‘without God nothing holds together’ (Oduyoye 1986a:89; 1997-1998:494). A *deus otiosus*, to Oduyoye, is an inadequate and improper concept in Africa. God, who is called Being in beings and a Source Being, is experienced as ‘Designer and Maker’ of the universe (Oduyoye 1986a:90), as ‘the foundation of life’ (Oduyoye 1997-1998:495), and as ‘sustainer and controller of all things’ (Oduyoye 1997-1998:496; 2001a:45). God is depicted as the one who holds together the universe in unity (Oduyoye 2001a:45). God is caring and compassionate, and God has the power to punish injustice (Oduyoye 2001a:44).

The male-centred context of African culture and Christianity, however, produces an assumption that ‘God is male.’ The androcentrism and the male image of God are tied up. The assumption of the

androcentric thought about a monotheistic male God rationalizes the marginalization of women. This implies that only males can represent God as leaders in the church and society. In androcentric situations, the essence of African womanhood is distorted (Oduyoye 1995b:481; 1995c:176), and women cannot but conceive God as the one who sanctions the subordination of women (Oduyoye 1997-1998:500).

Oduyoye (1994a:173) articulates the understanding of God from women's experiences in the African religio-cultural context that partly causes the 'objectification and marginalization of women' and partly enhances women's true identity as being in the image of God. Oduyoye (1998:367) fights for 'the liberation of African culture and the liberation of Africans from cultures.'

### **5.5.2.1 Understanding God in women's experience**

According to Oduyoye, most male African theologians have not related their God-talk to the gender issue. Even African liberation theologians who have dealt with the issues of class and race usually disregarded the issue of gender (Oduyoye 1995c:180). Oduyoye (1994a:173) seriously contends that 'men make God and women worship them.'

African women theologians, therefore, attempt to read the Bible and depict God's image from women's perspective. They articulate God as the loving liberator of the oppressed and the rescuer of the marginalized (Oduyoye 1997-1998:501). Through their experience of the liberating God of the Bible, women understand God as the one who is empowering them with a spirituality that resists the dehumanization of their own lives (Oduyoye 1997-1998:501).

In African women's theology, hospitality is a word that is associated with caring, providing, helping, sharing and 'ministering' to the needs of others (Oduyoye 2001a:46). In Oduyoye's view, hospitality is 'inherent in being African, as well as in adhering to a religion that derives from the Bible' (Oduyoye 2001a:94).

Basically, African hospitality can be seen as 'the extension of generosity', 'an unconditional readiness to share', and 'the willingness to carry one another's burden without expecting to gain benefit or rewards (Gathogo 2008:42). In this sense, God's hospitality to humanity is defined as 'mothering'; a model of godlikeness (Oduyoye 2001a:47). Therefore, African women experience God as the one who mothers. God nurtures and mentors as a compassionate mother (Oduyoye 2001a:47).

African women theologians experience God in Christ (Oduyoye 1997-1998:500). Christ is the

friend who helps them bear life's burdens and the prophet who challenges oppressors and hypocrites (Oduyoye 1997-1998:500).

Reflecting on the exodus theme in Africa, Oduyoye (1986a:96) adds the ethical obligation to the motif of liberation: 'What shall we do to be saved?' Oduyoye (1986a:96) maintains that;

The criteria for being 'Christian' would be taken from the saying of Jesus Christ that by their fruits they shall be known. ...To work diligently toward this type of theology is the task of the Christian theologians today.

Oduyoye articulates the understanding of God not only in resistance to the androcentric situation, but also for the transformation of African cultural aspects that are oppressive to women.

### **5.5.2.2 The same one God: creator and liberator**

#### **5.5.2.2.1 Creation as liberation**

In the creation story of Genesis 1, according to Oduyoye, God 'delivers' the universe from chaos - emptiness and formlessness - by a deliverance act of God (1986a:90, 91). Chaos, which means 'distrust', 'disintegration', and 'disharmony' (1986a:94), is contrary to the nature of God (1986a:90). Within the creation story, the creation is described as the salvation of chaos, and the experience of salvation is understood as a resolution of chaos. In this sense, the creation story tells of that God brings an ordered condition into a chaotic world (1986a:80). For Oduyoye, the creation story is a theological statement that affirms God's transforming response to a chaotic situation.

#### **5.5.2.2.2 Creator as liberator**

Oduyoye asks: 'Is the God of our redemption the same as the God of our creation?' and then she answers 'Yes' (Oduyoye 1986a:80). Oduyoye understands God in relation to creation and the exodus motif. According to Oduyoye (1986a:90), the ordered universe came into being from the 'pain of God', who suffered with a chaotic world that was contrary to his nature. God the Creator is one who saves the universe from chaos (Oduyoye 1986a:82). God transformed a chaotic situation into an ordered condition by his salvation act.

As God triumphs over chaos, God delivers the oppressed who cry for salvation (Oduyoye 1986a:80). In the Exodus Event, the Israel understands the salvation activity as the outcome of the nature of God, who cares for the oppressed including women and the weak (Oduyoye 1986a:80).

In the Old Testament, the salvation brought by God is described in military and political terms (Oduyoye 1986a:99).

God is called Yahweh Sabaoth, the commander of the large array of forces. When the Israelites call God as Sabaoth, they are referring to actual experiences of ‘God-at-war’. God, the Saviour who fought Israel’s battles against human enemies, is a reality eliminating actual enemies in literal battles. Yahweh is a fighting God and a warrior God who is in a holy war and crushes the enemy in order to deliver the oppressed who cry for liberation (Oduyoye 1986a:85). Yahweh is the One who gives victory (Oduyoye 1986a:99).

By emphasizing creation and the exodus motif, Oduyoye attempts to demonstrate that God the Creator is the very same God the Liberator. She focuses on how God, who is described in these two motives, can be articulated theologically in the contemporary African situation. Oduyoye (1986a:81) understands the exodus as ‘a paradigm’ of freedom from a hierarchal order that was and has been accepted as ‘natural’ and ‘permanent’.

The Exodus motif, to Oduyoye, offers an illustration to contemporary African Christians Both the Israelites and the Africans experienced slavery and exploitation as well as God’s salvation. Oduyoye (1986a:81) connects ancient Israel’s experience of slavery in Egypt and contemporary Africans’ experience of colonial history, and compares Israel’s Exodus from the oppression of Egypt and Africa’s struggle for liberation from the exploitation of Western colonialism.

Under ‘the situation of neo-colonialism’ in post-independent Africa, the comparison stimulates theology to struggle to be relevant to the realities of Africa (Oduyoye 1986a:81). Oduyoye (1986a:81) emphasizes that African independent movement is not to return to ‘a precolonial order’, but to move to something that will happen in the future.

Oduyoye (1986a:87) maintains that God is actively involved in politics, and through God’s involvement, foreign domination should be overthrown in order to ‘enable Africans to build up a new society.’ In Oduyoye’s theology, there is a tendency to combine the political and the religious. She has ‘no problem with reconciling nationalism with Christianity’ (Oduyoye 1986a:88).

Salvation from chaos is not the salvation of the soul only but total salvation from the sinful



structures that threaten human beings (Oduyoye 1986a:80). When God saves people, God saves them totally. Oduyoye maintains that African women theologians should apply God the Creator as well as God the Liberator to the issues of women in the contemporary African situation: the degradation of women, discrimination against women, marginalization of women from centers of leadership, and exclusion of women from ministration of sacraments (Oduyoye 1997-1998:500).

### 5.5.2.3 The masculine language for God

In certain parts of Africa, God is conceived of as male, while in other places God is perceived to be female (Oduyoye 1994a:180; 2001a:43). God is seen as supra-gender or gender neutral (Frederiks 2003:76). For instance, *Modimo* is recognized not as ‘he’ but ‘it’ (Setiloane 1976:77; Frederiks 2003:75). In both the Akan and the Yoruba, the languages for talking about God have non-gender specific pronouns. Thus, ATR(s) are less sexist in its images of God (Omoyajowo 1988:78; Taringa 2004:178). The divinities are also of both sexes.

African women theologians are disinterested in the grammar of sexism because of their own languages with inclusive pronouns (Oduyoye 1995c:111). For this reason, most African women and men would say that the gender of God is irrelevant to their theology and spirituality. According to Oduyoye (1995c:194), the ‘grammar of the gender of God is not the heart of the matter.’

For African Christians, the fatherhood of God in the Bible does not confer any special priority on human fathers. The gender of God plays a marginal role (Oduyoye 2001a:42), and does not seem to have any direct or specific impact on religious practices in ATR(s) (Oduyoye 1995c:112). The naming of God as both female and male has been left aside as an area of low priority, though a few attempts do exist (Oduyoye 2001a:46). For this reason, in the theological writings of African women, one of the most critical items on the agenda of feminism is not the gender of God, but the person of God; Who God is, what God does, what is of God and what is not of God (Oduyoye 1994a:180).

Taringa (2004:175), however, argues that the feminine image of God in Africa in general and among the Shona in particular has begun to be suppressed, since most African Christian theologians have tended to present the African concepts of God in the exclusively male image of the Judaeo-Christian tradition.

Furthermore, the exclusive masculine pronoun for God becomes a crucial point in the global

theological controversy,<sup>34</sup> and Western theological thought that prefers to use the masculine language pervades in African theological thought (Oduyoye 1995b:483; 1995c:178). The African church is required to participate in the debate centered around the gendered understanding of God.

According to Mary Daly, although ‘no theologian or biblical scholar believes that God literally belongs to the male sex...the absurd idea lingers on in the minds of theologians, preachers and simple believers’ (quoted by Kim 2006:37). Therefore, feminist theologians want to rename God, eliminating the use of the masculine pronoun in speaking of God (Letham 1992:6).

Language, symbols, and metaphors that are used to portray God are most powerful vehicles through which human beings experience and interact with God (Kim 2006:36). What we call God and how we describe God in our human language inevitably impact on the way we recognize God. By stressing the power of language, women theologians insist that God should not be addressed as ‘He’, ‘Father’, ‘Ruler’, ‘Judge’, ‘Master’, ‘Lord’, and ‘King’.

In the androcentric and patriarchal culture of the biblical traditions, masculine language and imagery of God make people think of God as a male and father (Oduyoye 1995c:194; Kassian

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<sup>34</sup> According to Russell, the use of the traditional male language for God, conceptualizing God primarily as Father, makes the church run the ‘risk of making God too small’ and ignores ‘many rich, inclusive biblical metaphors’ of God. Thus, the believer’s concept of the person and character of God is limited and is reduced to male metaphors and masculine imagery (Kassian 2005:164). Russell rejects androcentric language and patriarchal imagery of God (Mandew 1991:137).

Mollenknott argues that the feminine imagery of God portrayed in the Bible allows feminists to call God ‘Mother’ as well as ‘Father’ (Kassian 2005:164). Both Mollenknott and Russell maintain that the images of God would become wider by using both feminine and masculine metaphors for God (Kassian 2005:164).

For Ruether, people who believe God to be male are guilty of idolatry. She asserts that ‘the male has no special priority in imaging God. Christian theology has always recognized, theoretically, that all language for God is analogical or metaphorical, not literal. No particular image can be regarded as the exclusive image for God. Images for God must be drawn from the whole range of human experience, from both genders, and all social classes and cultures. To take one image drawn from one gender and in one sociological context as normative for God is to legitimize this gender and social group as the normative possessors of the image of God and representatives of God on earth. This is idolatry’ (quoted by Kassian 2005:165). From Augustine to Thomas Aquinas, according to Ruether, women were considered by nature to be ‘defective physically, morally and mentally’ whereas ‘the male represents the fullness of human potential’ (quoted by Kim 2006:37). God’s maleness was crystallized when Jesus, the son of God, came into history as a male Jewish person (Kim 2006:37).

Elizabeth Johnson constantly refers to God as ‘She’ (Ormerod 1997:185-186). She argues that the domination of male symbols is both ‘oppressive’ because it legitimates patriarchal structures and relegates women and children to the margins, and ‘idolatrous’ because the exclusively used male-dominated language ‘absolutizes a single set of metaphors and obscures the height and depth and length and breadth of divine mystery’ (quoted by Ormerod 1997:187). She feels that the use of male symbols for God is not a problem. Rather the problem is the use of these male terms ‘exclusively, literally, and patriarchally’ (quoted by Ormerod 1997:187). Johnson, therefore, seeks to relativize traditional androcentric language about God and replace it with a solid dose of female language in an attempt to free people’s imaginations from centuries of patriarchal domination (Ormerod 1997:192). If women are truly the *imago Dei*, then it is erroneous to suggest that female language cannot be used of the divine (Ormerod 1997:192).

Krister Stendal argues that ‘the masculinity’ of God and of Christ is a ‘cultural and linguistic accident’ (quoted by Kassian 2005:165).

2005:166) and reinforce male authority and superiority in society and alienate women (Jeong 2002:2; Kassian 2005:162). Consequently masculine language for God limits the believers' image of God and the exclusive male image of God diminishes God's mystery. Moreover, the male image of God is used as a tool for perpetuating the patriarchal system (Oduyoye 1995c:194).

The patriarchal ideology of African culture strengthens the male imagery of the Christian God, and Christianity gives sanction to African culture as a divine order given by God. Feminist theologians, therefore, attempt to alter or nullify the masculine language and patriarchal imagery of God in liturgy, theology, and the Bible, and substitute feminine metaphors and terms (Achte-meier 1988:55).

According to Oduyoye, if God is 'spirit' and transcends 'gender', the masculine language of Christianity needs to be reexamined (1986a:129-130). To feminists, the masculine language of God as Father has no theological significance, but is a cultural and linguistic limitation only (Cochrane 1991:24). There must be a new attempt to use new language instead of using the masculine language for God. African women theologians, therefore, search for a possibility of God as female.<sup>35</sup> Some feminist theologians have pointed out that the 'Source-Being' (God) in some African languages is female, and in others both male and female (Oduyoye 1994a:180). The Bible symbolizes God as possessing 'feminine' characteristics, and this inspires feminists to take the liberty of calling God 'She' or 'Mother' (Kassian 2005:169).

Most African societies practically apply motherhood to God, but few directly call God Mother (Kumi 1996:204).<sup>36</sup> Among Africans, there is rarely a female God.

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<sup>35</sup> African theologians suggest the possibility of the notion of God as female in ATR(s). According to Nyamiti (1981:269), many African ethnic groups believe in a God who is connected with the birth of children, fecundity of the earth or an abundant harvest. Such a God is sometimes connected with the earth and femininity: The Ashanti have faith in an earth-goddess, *Asase Yaa*, and the Igbo respect the earth-mother, *Ala*. This implies the close connection between the divine motherhood and the earth goddess. One finds androgynous divinities among the Bambara, and also married couples: *Nyami* (God of the sun) and *Assiye* (earth-goddess) among the Baule and the Agni, and the male *Kulo Tyolo* and his wife *Kulo Tyelo* among the Senufo.

<sup>36</sup> The Azande address God as 'Father' during moments of crisis. The Bambuti speak of God as 'Father' or 'Grandfather'. The Nuer speak of God as 'Our Father'. The Gikuyu call God 'My Father'. For the Akan people, God is truly Father to all people because God created them (Kumi 1996:204). According to Mbiti (1970a:92-93), to the Banyoro, God is the Creator and the Father; the Suk call God the universal Father; God is the Father of the divinities for the Ganda; the Akamba do not normally speak of God as Father, but they visualize him as the One who 'fathered' the universe; the Lunda speak of God as the Father Creator; the Bemba think of him as a universal Father; For the Herero, God is seen as the Father of their forefathers; the Tswana, the Urhoho, the Nuba, and the Sonjo call God Father.

Russell affirms that in the androcentric cultures of the biblical traditions, masculine characteristics are ascribed to God as a projection of male authority and superiority in society. Russell exemplifies some bible verses; Ex 20:19; Dt 5:21; 1Cor 11:3; Lv 12:2,5; 21:9; Jdg 9:53-54; 1Ki 1:1-4; Pr 31:10, 16-18; Pr 27:15; 5:3-4; Jr 31:33; Hs 4:14 (quoted by Jeong 2002:2). Phyllis Bird points out that 'the Old Testament is a Man's book' and she offers examples such as 1Cor 1:3; 11:4-5; 14:34-35; Ep 5:22-24 (quoted by Jeong 2002:4).

According to Mbiti (1970a:92-93), only a few examples of the concept of God as Mother are available. The southern Nuba refer to God as ‘the Great Mother’; The Ovambo say that ‘the Mother of people is God’, even they speak of God figuratively as Male. Both are matrilineal systems of descent; The Ndebele and the Shona think of God as Father, Mother, and Son, although there is no information concerning a situation in which people call God Mother (Mbiti 1970a:92; Kumi 1996:204).

Taringa (2004:175) searches for female images of God by investigating the Shona concept of God. According to Taringa, although some of the metaphors depict the image of God as male, there is a parallel feminine image of God which is often suppressed. Taringa (2004:178) observes that the traditional Shona metaphors for God are much less sexist than the way in which God is portrayed in current African Christian theology.

According to Nyamiti (1981:273), it is commonly observed that both maternal and paternal images, such as acceptance, love, tenderness, authority, help, support, comprehension, leadership, and patience, attribute to God, although one or the other parental attribute is often emphasized through different factors and circumstances, such as times, places, cultures or individuals.

The Ewe understand God as both female and male (Oduyoye 1995c:158). Almost every Akan Christian who stands up to pray publicly addresses God as *Agya Baatana Pa*, that is, ‘Good Father-Mother God’ (Kumi 1996:203). The Akan consider God as primarily a non-gendered Spirit who is essentially one, while encompassing both male and female; yet, in reality, is neither male nor female. The Akan show belief in the motherhood of God, which is characterized by care, nourishment, protection, shelter, patience, affectivity, receptivity, warm tenderness, and life (Kumi 1996:204).

The Akan use of the image of God as Father and Mother is not an experimentation, but a way of conceptualizing God (Kumi 1996:205). Some African theologians acknowledge that ‘sweeping generalization’ in the association of maternal and paternal attributes of God should be avoided. But they also note that the one-side emphasis or suppression of either of both parental images minimizes the rich attributes of God or leads to a wrong perception of God. Therefore, they admit that both parental values in God’ attributes function to complete each other reciprocally. The paternal images of transcendence, otherness, the legislator, and severe judge can be filled up by the maternal images of consolation, protection, nearness, and forgiveness (Nyamiti 1981:273).

On the basis of the above mentioned researches that have been done, African women theologians reject the exclusive connection between God and maleness and use female language about God. They seek possibilities of conceptualizing God as female, aiming to deepen the truth of God’s mystery (Kumi 1996:221). Nyamiti (1981: 274) also agrees to use the application of maternal attribute to God.

Our religious attitude suffers when we do not discover either the paternal or maternal values in God. In either case the true image of God is deformed, and the religious behavior towards Him becomes either childish, unrealistic, egoistic and sentimental or it degenerates into unwholesome fear, servile attitude, mistrust, and arid legalism.

Hierarchical and oppressive terms like Omnipresent, Omniscient, Ruler, or all Mighty have been facilitated for strengthening the androcentrism and the image of God as male (Oduyoye 1995c:180). Oduyoye (1986a:136), therefore, suggests the use of a third way to speak of God; the call for relational language about God.

If male language about God has resulted in our imaging God in male terms and if we feel uncomfortable about female language concerning who God is we have to try a third way. Relational language about God may provide us with integrated models of community.

#### **5.5.2.4 Toward the trinitarian anthropology**

Oduyoye (1995c:214) investigates the unexamined norms and taboos that simply function as the means to sustain the dominant view of life, and challenges the ‘traditional gender based dicta’ by which women and men are forced what to do or not to do. According to Oduyoye (1986a:130), the male image of God that has been shaped with an exclusive masculine pronoun in speaking of God causes women to be considered as inferior to men. In consequence, mutuality that enriches all is destroyed (Oduyoye 1986a:134).

Although African women need to be liberated from patriarchal dominance in both church and society, Oduyoye (1995b:487) does not perceive men as the enemy of women; rather liberation must be viewed as men and women walking together.

Oduyoye lays the fundamental base for establishing equality and mutuality between women and men on the fact that all people were created in the divine image of God (2001a:86), and all people are equally the objects of God’s love (1986a:136). Therefore, any form of discrimination, domination or oppression among the creatures of God cannot be justified. Both women and men have been called by God to serve Him with the various charismas which they have received from God (Oduyoye 2001a:86).

Anthropology and feminism, to Oduyoye, are closely related to each other. Anthropology is ‘a

particular way of addressing itself to what it means to be human' (Oduyoye 1986a:120), and feminism is described as 'part of the whole movement geared to liberating the human community from entrenched attitudes and structures that can only operate if dichotomies and hierarchies are maintained' (Oduyoye 1986a:120). Feminism is a precondition for doing a Christian anthropology (Oduyoye 1986a:120).

Oduyoye argues that the assumption that 'the concept of maleness encompasses the whole of human being' should be discarded (quoted by Koopmann 2004:191). But feminism is not the word of females or for females only. Feminism emphasizes the wholeness of the community that consists of male and female (Oduyoye 1986a:121). According to Oduyoye, sexism can be overcome when men and women become conscious of 'the true nature of the human community as a mixture of those things, values, roles, temperaments, etc, that we dichotomise into feminine and masculine' (quoted by Koopmann 2004:191).

In order to live together in a partnership of equal and non-oppressive ways to one another, Oduyoye proposes a new Christian anthropology using the Trinitarian unity - 'trinitarian anthropology'. Oduyoye (1986a:140) finds a model of new relationship between men and women from 'the community of the three in one Godhead.'

Oduyoye cites Mar Osthathios and Lochman for clarifying the Trinitarian unity. Mar Osthathios says that

the unity of humanity is to be modelled on Trinitarian unity...the mystery of the unity of humanity in Christ, patterned on the mystery of the triune unity in the Godhead, has light significance for our social goals.

(quoted by Oduyoye 1986:142).

According to Lochman, the mode of 'the unity-in-diversity' of the triune God, who has relationships among the three persons, points to true community (quoted by Oduyoye 1986:142).

The Trinitarian unity implies a constant and perfect mutual relationship (Oduyoye 1986a:140), and this unity is generated by love, participation, and sharing. This Trinitarian model gives unique meaning to human beings as created in the image of God (Oduyoye 1986a:142).

Oduyoye focuses more on immanent Trinitarian thinking in the establishment of a Trinitarian anthropology. According to Oduyoye, a renewed investigation of what the early church tried to articulate in the doctrine of the Trinity may produce models for building the human community, specifically male-female relations. These relationships do not rest on a hierarchy of being, but on the



diversity of gifts that operate in the spirit of compromise and inclusiveness (Oduyoye 1982:207; 2001a:125).

Oduyoye (1986a:136) pleads that God should not be viewed as a monad but as a ‘centre of relations’ in which Father, Son and Holy Spirit act and inter-act without ‘subsuming’ or ‘subordinating’ any of the persons.

The model of three persons in one Godhead may suggest a model of the integrity of persons within a community and their interrelatedness (Oduyoye 1986a:136). This understanding of the divine life paves the way to describe the status of humans as the image of God in terms of human relations of mutuality, reciprocity, interdependence and mutual responsibility (Koopman 2004:197).

When relational language is used in speaking of God, it provides us with integrated models of community (Oduyoye 1986a:136). Trinitarian anthropology, according to Oduyoye, would imply that human beings are essentially relational beings (Koopman 2004:197). The unity of humanity patterns on the triune unity. Oduyoye urges to ‘return to the God-intended relationship’ (1986a:137) and that men be more holistic in their perception of community (1994a:168). There is no sexual distinction in the Trinity (Oduyoye 1986a:137). Therefore, it can be said that true humanity and relationship will be enhanced by following the Trinitarian relationship.

AWT searches for a new partnership of men and women and a new anthropology in relation to a new understanding of God. Its goal is to promote ‘a non-negotiable fact’ - the principle of giving and sustaining life, of building community and upholding the dignity of the human person (Oduyoye 2001a:126). In this context, Oduyoye pursues a two-winged theology:

No bird flies with only one wing, therefore African men theologians cannot alone make African theology fly. Men in theology much realize that it is only as women are empowered to provide the second wing that theology will fly.

(quoted by Pemberton 2003:161).

I never lost sight of the fact that a bird with one wing cannot fly and that the foot that stays to crush another cannot move either.

(Oduyoye 2001a:122).

The critical point of departure, to Oduyoye, is the ‘two-winged theology’ in which women work in co-operation with men as colleagues to establish a ‘humane Africa’ (Pemberton 2000:98).



### 5.5.3 Evaluation of Oduyoye's understanding of God

Oduyoye who proclaimed 'irruption within irruption' has been instrumental for the articulation of women's voices and the promotion of the women's role within the male-dominated church and society. Oduyoye has mainly discussed issues of inculturation, liberation, and transformation of the African society.

As Pemberton (2000:96; 2003:65) points out, Oduyoye has searched the celebration of Africa's commitment to human life and harmony, and addressed the matters of 'the cultural displacement of Africa's identity' and of 'the continued economic bondage' under the control of the Western economic order, and demanded 'peace and inclusivity' for Africa's future.

Oduyoye has 'an almost ethiopianist dream of a reconstituted black Africa with a culturally gathered but physically mobile diaspora' (Pemberton 2003:22). Oduyoye attempts to recover the African identity, rehabilitating ATR(s) and African culture that were rejected by the early white missionaries.

As Kwok (2004:7) points out, 'culture can provide women their communal identity and sense of belonging, while at the same time it can be manipulated and used as a tool of domination.' African culture, for Oduyoye, has both oppressive and liberative elements to African women (Oduyoye 1991a:70; 1995a:85). Therefore, religion and culture are experienced as a two-edged sword; a weapon that can liberate African women as well as domesticate them (Oduyoye 1991a:70; 1994a:173; Chitando, A & Chitando, E 2005:32).

Although Oduyoye maintains the enhancement of African cultural identity, she does not claim the glorification of the African cultural past. Instead, through suspicion of African culture and critique of the 'uncritical cultural retrieval and glorification' of ATR(s) and African culture, Oduyoye challenges the gender-based norms and taboos that have often denied women's dignity, wholeness, and equality and have justified African women's alienation, domestication, and victimization in both society and church.

By re-reading and re-interpretation of the folktalk, which operates to socialize women into the norms of the community, Oduyoye exposes how some cultural forms are 'man's games of competition played on the field of women' (Oduyoye 1994a:174).

Instead of 'lamentation for the past', Oduyoye actively engages in the search for ways and means to transform the socio-economic, political and cultural structures that sustain the inequalities between men and women. She attempts to reconstruct a 'critical non-hierarchical involvement with the other'

(Oduyoye 1995c:34) and calls for an equal partnership between men and women within the domestic and the public realms (Oduyoye 1995c:93; Pemberton 2003:91; Kwok 2004:10). Oduyoye (1995c:34) explicitly articulates equal partnership:

Our search should be focused on what it means to be human, not to be feminine or masculine. Neither patriarchy nor matriarchy alone can transform the relationship between men and women.

Oduyoye's pioneering voice for the liberation of women from the patriarchal - hierarchical society and her theological reflection on 'mutuality between men and women' in the church and society should be evaluated positively. However, her methodology and theological reflection of the understanding of God also need to be critically reviewed.

### **5.5.3.1 Tendency to generalize**

There is no question that the word 'African culture' should not be used in the meaning of a homogenous or one unified system because the communal way of life has a variety of manifestations on the continent (Oduyoye 1995a:78). A generalized and universalized African culture or cultural identity in the singular for the whole African continent is not realistic, except in the broadest way. Oduyoye agrees not to use the universalized 'African culture' in the singular.

However, Oduyoye shows a tendency of generalization, which shoves differences into sameness, neglecting the diversity of cultures in Africa. Oduyoye takes a particular ethnic myth - usually of the Akan or the Yoruba - as an example to investigate the African view on women's status. She seems to generalize the particular of the Akan or the Yoruba to be that of the whole Africa (1979; 1994a; 1995a; 1997-1998, etc.).

Her dependency on the particular merits of the matrilineal Asante culture creates difficulties when she proposes women's empowerment for the whole Africa continent. In many parts of Africa, the matrilineal culture is not familiar. Oduyoye seems to overlook the fact that her suggestions are primarily based on Asante models (Pemberton 2003:91).

Oduyoye is caught in a dilemma, because she generalizes a particular cultural aspect to present a model which can be applied to the whole African continent, while she simultaneously agrees that there is no universal culture which can be applied to the whole of Africa. Like Mbiti, Oduyoye

commits the error of generalizing a particular case.

Yet she agrees that the use of African culture as a homogenous system across the continent is not possible, a particular example among African culture cannot be regarded as the general aspect of African culture.

### **5.5.3.2 The biased critique of Western Christianity and missionaries**

Oduyoye rigorously criticizes Western missionaries' enterprises. The mission churches denounced 'life-giving aspects' of traditional African culture, and they rejected the ATR(s) and African religious practices as 'heathenism' and 'evil' (Oduyoye 1995a:82). This resulted in 'the missionary period of wholesale cultural occupation' (Oduyoye 1986a:33). The Western missionaries introduced new gods into Africa to be worshipped: 'individualism', 'the West' and 'foreign exchange'.

In the eyes of Oduyoye, Western Christian culture is considered as 'a hydra-headed' monster (Oduyoye 1995a:80). She states that the missionaries were foreigners, and mostly of 'a different human-type', and they were ill equipped 'to protest' against 'incipient racism, exploitation and other injustices' which were part of Western colonialism (Oduyoye 1986a:43; Pemberton 2003:66).

If only Western missionaries decried the ATR(s) by neglecting traditional religious practices, how can the Kimbangu church and the Kimbanguists who criticized ATR(s) be understood and evaluated? The Kimbangu church and the Kimbanguists emphasized monogamy (by contrast to the polygamy of Shembe). They prohibited the attendance of pagan dances, had no anti-White tendencies, and obeyed the authorities. They considered their traditional objects of faith as idols, and burned them (Daneel 1987:60-67).

African culture is criticized by Oduyoye in relation to the fact that it is oppressive to African women, and at the same time African culture is idealized by the very same Oduyoye in reference to the reaction against Western Christianity.

When Oduyoye criticizes Western Christianity in relation to the establishment of the African identity, Oduyoye are not suspicious of African culture, and she considers it as a source of African theology. Oduyoye seems to overlook or ignore some aspects of African culture that were once criticized by her due to its oppressive factors to women. Rather, Oduyoye seems to give her full commitment to African culture as a whole, and campaigns to idealize and even beatify African culture. It is inconsistent with her argument that African male Inculturation theologians show a

tendency to insist that the past of Africa and African culture are beautiful.

According to Oduyoye (2001a:28), Western Christianity that was coupled with the patriarchal ideology, oppressed African culture that was favourable to women. The Western missionaries implanted Western patriarchal systems into African culture, so that Western Christianity endorsed more power and authority to African males and male culture.

However, in ancient Africa, was there no African culture or cultural aspect that was oppressive to African women? Before the arrival of Western Christianity, Oduyoye seems to have thought that Africa was a place of mutuality and accountability. However, has there ever been an Utopia in Africa? The attempts to create an Utopia that never existed before and to introduce an imaginative Utopia in the contemporary situation are nothing but an exaggerated expectation and an empty rhetoric or a rhetorical banquet. In African societies, there have been class and social hierarchies that can be recognized as 'substantial flaws' (Pemberton 2003:166).

According to Oduyoye, Christianity has done little to contribute to the change of sexism (1995c:9), the liberation of women from an oppressive system, and the socio-cultural transformation of Africa (1995c:183). Then, was there no struggle to promote the status of African women and their dignity in the Western missionaries' enterprise through education, medical care, literacy, etc? Oduyoye seems to overlook or underestimate the contributions of Western missionaries, who attempted to transform traditional African cultural aspects that were oppressive to women.<sup>37</sup>

As she admits the ambivalence of African cultural aspects that are oppressive as well as liberative to women in Africa, Oduyoye should also evaluate both positive and negative aspects of the contributions that have been made by Western Christianity and missionaries.

### 5.5.3.3 African nationalism

Oduyoye (1995a:85) pursues a Christianity 'cultured' in the African context, letting the gospel

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<sup>37</sup> Phiri, in her doctoral dissertation *Women, Presbyterianism and Patriarchy; religious experience of Chewa women in central Malawi*, demonstrates how the missionary movement imposed an oppressive patriarchal system on the Chewa women in Malawi.

However, Njoroge, in *Kiama Kia Ngo: an African Christian feminist ethic of resistance and transformation* published in 2000, mentions the four movements that motivated African women to articulate their theological reflections: (1) the missionary movement; (2) the feminist and women's movement; (3) the ecumenical movement; and (4) the liberation movement. According to Njoroge, white women missionaries helped African women to enhance their self-esteem and make their voices heard (quoted by Frederiks 2003:67-69).

speak in and to Africa. Oduyoye's methodology of accepting ATR(s) and African culture as a source of theology seems to demonstrate her theological tendencies: objection of Western Christianity; a decisive methodological break with the missionary past and from Western theology (Pemberton 2003:87).

In pre-independence years, African nationalists emphasized the traditional African religio-cultural heritage as the roots and sources of establishing African identity and Africanized Christianity. Cultural liberation from Western culture was regarded as the inevitable means to regain political liberation for the African countries. The attempts of cultural rehabilitation were characterized as 'cultural nationalism.' Oduyoye's emphasis on a 'cultural renaissance in reaction to the cultural imperialism' (1995a:85) is tied to a declaration of nationalists, who aspire for independence from the religio-cultural, political and economic rule of colonialism. It can be said that her theological work based on African traditional beliefs is a theological version of African cultural nationalism.

Oduyoye (1979:111) realizes the sense of one community and recognizes 'life' as 'life-in-community', and then she urges the expansion of 'the communal ideology of clans and ethnic groups' into nations, spelling out one of the underlying principles of Pan-Africanism that 'we prosper or perish together as a people.' In the political and religious atmosphere that has influenced the academic study of ATR(s), Oduyoye has been driven by 'conscious' and 'deliberate' apologetic intent (Ferdinando 2007:128).

In Oduyoye, there is a tendency to combine political aims and religious values, as can be seen in the following quotation: 'no problem with reconciling nationalism with Christianity' (Oduyoye 1986a:88). Pemberton (2003:67) rightly points out that Oduyoye uses 'a broad brush too similar to that used by nationalist politicians and academics' to depict Western missionary enterprises as 'hierarchical, insensitive, and derogatory' toward the African culture.

Oduyoye maintains that Western ideology has victimized Christianity in Africa. In turn, it can be argued that African Christianity and theology can be victimized by a strong coloured African nationalism.

#### **5.5.3.4 Tendency to syncretism**

Oduyoye (1979:114) maintains that African theology should interact with African religious and philosophical thought systems in order that African theology confirms African identity. According to Oduyoye (1979:113), African Christians will continue to depend on traditional religious beliefs. Oduyoye (1979:116) insists that

African Christian theologians have a duty to theologize from this context and incorporate the authentic African idiom into Christian theology. Utilizing African religious beliefs in Christian theology is not an attempt to assist Christianity to capture and domesticate the African spirit; rather it is an attempt to ensure that the African spirit revolutionizes Christianity to the benefit of all who adhere to it.

Oduyoye (2003:39) distinguishes between the gospel that is the incarnate love of God and Christianity that is a cultural expression. For Oduyoye, Christianity and its practices have always interacted with the religious and philosophical presuppositions of the various periods. Evidence of this interaction is increasing in Africa (Oduyoye 1979:114). This process of interaction, to Oduyoye, can be recognized as the process of syncretism. In this sense, a practice of syncretism is not unfamiliar to the development of any religion (Oduyoye 2003:47).

The word ‘syncretism’, according to Oduyoye (1979:114), has become a ‘bogey word, used to frighten all who would venture to do Christian theology in the context of other worldviews and religions.’ Oduyoye (1995a:78) recalls how she was embarrassed when she was regarded as a person who advocates syncretism; ‘I had no idea that this was going to earn me the image of the woman who advocates syncretism.’

In Oduyoye (2003:39), syncretism is a ‘challenge to dominant Christianity and a way of establishing a separate identity’ for churches of the Third World.’ She, therefore, maintains that creative syncretism should be developed in Africa because syncretism is a ‘positive and unavoidable process’ in the inculturation of Christianity into other religious contexts (1979:114).

Some scholars, like Oduyoye, regard syncretism as a neutral blending of ideas between different religions that occurs all the time (Ott & Strauss 2010:275). If syncretism is regarded only as a natural process of conforming ideas or practices from another religious system, then the church and theology that are related to contextualization is intrinsically syncretistic (Pocock, Van Rheeën & McConnell 2005:331).

Such a definition, however, does not fit the biblical concept of syncretism. According to Moreau, syncretism is ‘the replacement or dilution of the essential truths of the gospel through the incorporation of non-Christian elements’ (quoted by Ott & Strauss 2010:275). It has to do with ‘the missing of elements of two religious systems to the point where at least one, if not both, of the systems loses its basic structure and identity’ (Schreier 1985:144). According to Bosch (1973:77), we are ‘in danger of adulterating the gospel’, if we start with ‘our own past and our own traditional

ideas’, and then search for ‘parallels and similarities’ in the Bible. ‘Syncretism’ is to decorate the traditional God, beliefs, and practices in ‘Christian robes’, while ‘indigenization’ is to clothe the God of the Bible and the Christian faith in ‘the cultural robes’ of a particular people (Bosch 1973:77).

Both the Old Testament (e.g., Deut 12:4; Judg 2:19; 2 Kin 17:16-17) and the New Testament (e.g., Col 2:8-23) clearly indicate that God’s people are strongly directed to reject their natural tendency to blend ‘God-revealed truth and God-acceptable practice’ with the dominant religio-cultural beliefs and practices of the neighbouring peoples (Ott & Strauss 2010:275). The importance of keeping the gospel message pure and unadulterated was, is, and will always have to be the constant concern of the Christian church.

### **5.5.3.5 The critique of African culture**

African women theologians, including Oduyoye, were ‘beneficiaries of the Western educational project’ that was undertaken by the mission churches (Pemberton 2003:4). As few elite groups who were extensively exposed to Western critical theories, they became to have the ability to take a critical stance on the cultural oppression of women in Africa as well as Western Christianity.

These opportunities of education have enabled African women theologians to take a considerable position within universities or in the international headquarters of church organizations, and have given them access to some external resources to support the liberation of African women (Oduyoye 1995c:183; Chitando, A & Chitando, E 2005:32).

Oduyoye vehemently desired to break with Western theology and its methodology in order to establish an African theology based on African traditional culture and religions.

However, as Pemberton (2003:90) points out, Oduyoye’s theology itself has been exposed to and influenced by post-colonial and feminist discourse. It is not to be denied that the theoretical foundation of her critique is Western feministic theories. If she was not exposed to the West, she could not have broken her perspectives from the culturally imposed androcentric and communal ideology.

It is very ironic to note that African traditions are too easily affirmed as objects that are to be eliminated. Oduyoye easily and perhaps superficially discards certain particular African cultural traditions, using the theological discourses that are rooted in Western theology that she wants to break with. Oduyoye seems to import non-African sources, and allow these to criticize her own African cultural norms.



Oduyoye cannot avoid the criticism that she accepts a specific Western feminist critique as a transcendent and timeless reality to criticize certain aspects of African culture.

A group of well-educated people, who have been helped by Western churches, recognize themselves to be acting on behalf of their kin. But they, as ‘alienated elite’ (Pemberton 2003:4, 56,166-167), have escaped the troubles of ‘ordinary’ African women, and consider ordinary African people who have not had any help from Western churches as non-critical enthusiasts. And theologians who have a sympathetic attitude to Western Christianity are regarded as agents of Western theology.

### 5.5.3.6 Revelation and salvation in Oduyoye’s theology

#### 5.5.3.6.1 Revelation

Oduyoye (1986a:64) clearly demonstrates her view on the revelation of God, when she rejects Kato’s statement on revelation.<sup>38</sup> According to Oduyoye (1986a:64), God knows the wavelength of people, and thus communicates with people in the wavelength that is appropriate to them. Therefore, it is not necessary to define people’s religious experience in the terms of the Christian experience, and also it cannot be claimed that Christianity is the only way of communication between human beings and God (Oduyoye 1986a:64).

The notion of ATR(s) as *praeparatio evangelica* is the outcome of the Christocentric tendency of Christianity, which neglects the revelation of God outside Christianity (Oduyoye 1986a:64). This tendency, to Oduyoye, reduces ATR(s) to the idolatry (Oduyoye 1986a:64). Oduyoye (1986a:62) clarifies her theological reflection on the revelation and salvation, commenting and criticizing Kato, one of the conservative African theologians;

He [Kato] enthusiastically follows the standard Western Christian attitude toward the primal worldview of African beliefs and practices. This rejection of the African worldview by Africans shows how successful the Christian missions were in alienating Africans from their ‘Africanness’.

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<sup>38</sup> Kato says that ‘it is most unlikely that either Jaba or any other non-Christian peoples have received a direct revelation from God’ (quoted by Oduyoye 1986a:64).

ATR(s), to Oduyoye, do not need any support of Christians for its survival. Oduyoye (1986a:65) says that ‘a Christian-oriented Western culture tried to suppress them, but they never died.’

Oduyoye (1979:111) says that God the Creator is the source of all that exists. She maintains that ATR(s) are similar to the revelation found in the Bible. God demonstrates His presence in traditional religions found in Africa and in other parts of the world. Oduyoye (1979:111) maintains;

The world is in need of religious tolerance, based on the recognition of one God... There is one God from whom all movements of the spirit take their origin. A belief in one God who is the source of one human race renders all racism and other types of ethnocentricity and exploitation of persons heretical and blasphemous.

‘The divine and unique Source Being’ shown in the creation story has operated as ‘the same One God of all creation’ in Africa and elsewhere by many different names (Oduyoye 2001a:40). The name has been known as Yahweh in the Old Testament, as God to Christians using English, and as Allah to the Muslim and the Arabic-speaking world.

Oduyoye seems to doubt or reject the uniqueness of the Christian revelation.

### **5.5.3.6.2 Salvation**

Her understanding of God’s revelation found in ATR(s) is associated with the meaning of salvation in Africa. According to Oduyoye, the Western missionaries in Africa focused on the salvation of the soul and taught that Jesus was the only way of salvation.

Oduyoye (1986a:62) summarizes four theological concerns of missionary theology: (1) those outside Christ are perishing; (2) theology should place less emphasis on the ‘horizontal’ and more on the ‘vertical’; (3) accepting Christ here and now settles the question of where you will spend eternity; and (4) salvation is the monopoly of Christianity, and its parameters are to be found in the Bible alone.

In missionary theology, the prevailing gospel motif is atonement, and the meaning of salvation is reconciliation with God based on the Judaeo-Christian history of salvation. The meaning of salvation is limited to salvation from sin by Christ: there is only one God, and God is to be reached and worshipped only through Jesus Christ; any other way is idolatrous (Oduyoye 1986a:56; 2003:44). Salvation has nothing to do with political liberation, humanization, the pursuit of economic justice,

and the demand for democracy. It has exclusively to do with ‘eternal redemption from sin’ and the individual’s ‘survival in bliss after death’ (Oduyoye 1986a:103: 2003:44).

According to Oduyoye, however, salvation is described in various terms and meanings in the Bible and it presents the rich images.<sup>39</sup> On this point, Oduyoye asks ‘what is sin?’ and ‘saved from where or what?’ According to Oduyoye, sin is all that ‘prevent’ people from ‘living a life of absolute trust in God’, ‘suppresses’ the full humanity of persons (1995c:186), and ‘alienates’ people from God and other human beings (1986a:103).<sup>40</sup>

Oduyoye says that God liberates all human beings who cry for mercy and salvation (1986a:100), and claims that God’s salvation is not only open to all, but also ‘sufficient to cover the sin of all epochs of history’ (1986a:105). God who acted for the salvation of Israel from Egypt in the Old Testament still acts for our own liberation. In the New Testament, Christ is presented as all things to all men, and is closely related to people’s need at all levels. The purpose of the liberation is to make people truly human (Oduyoye 1986a:105).

Unjust systems, such as political coercion and economic exploitation, are not God’s intention for the world. For Oduyoye, therefore, the political and economic liberation of those who are in bondage to political and economic oppressive situations can be understood in terms of salvation (Oduyoye 1986a:103).

The meaning of ‘Jesus saves’ should not be ‘a metaphysical analysis’ of the nature of Christ, such as His humanity and divinity, but ‘the Christological quest’ of our times (Oduyoye 2001a:63). For Oduyoye, the Christological quest is to identify Jesus’ saving acts for liberation (Oduyoye 1986a:98; 2001a:63). The life of Jesus, who is ‘a liberated and liberating one’, demonstrates how oppressive cultures are set aside to inaugurate the reign of God (Oduyoye 2001a:54). Christ liberates women from the burdens of disease, poverty, marginalization, racism, and taboos that prohibit women’s participation in their communities (Oduyoye 2001a:55).

As products of the African holistic world view, African women have recognized Jesus as one who responds to the totality of life (Oduyoye 2001a:64). There is no separation between ‘forgiving sin’ and ‘healing physical ills’ (Oduyoye 1986a:101). The human being in Africa is recognized as an

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<sup>39</sup> Oduyoye (1986a:104) enumerates various meanings of salvation: (1) salvation of nation from other nations; (2) salvation from national sin; (3) salvation of individuals from other peoples; (4) salvation from a dehumanized situation and poverty; (5) salvation from distorted relations with others and with God that are caused by personal actions; (6) God’s act to restore people who have been tempted into idolatry to the right religion.

<sup>40</sup> According to Ruether ([1983]1993:18), ‘promotion of the full humanity of women’ is the principle of feminist theology. Whatever denies or distorts the full humanity of women is, therefore, appraised as not to reflect the divine or an authentic relation to the divine. Instead, ‘what does promote the full humanity of women is of the Holy’ (Ruether [1983]1993:19).

integrated person. The private and the political are integrated (Oduyoye 1986a:101). Oduyoye (1986a:101) declares that ‘Jesus worked for the soundness of persons and structures both religious and social.’

In African Christianity, therefore, spiritual and material needs cannot be divorced (Oduyoye 1986a:98). There is no distinction between salvation and liberation. God eliminates the socio-political, economic chaos in order to provide a situation in which people might have the wholeness of life that has been God’s purpose for them (Oduyoye 1986a:86; 2001a:54). Salvation as totality is not ‘a private matter’; rather ‘the repair of the chaotic and inharmonious’ and ‘the reconciliation of creation with God’ (Rogers 1972:257). Salvation is, therefore, seen as liberation from all evil, including individual and structural and political, sociological and religious evil, and ‘our salvation theology has to feature the questions of racism and liberation from material need’ (Oduyoye 1979:115).

In the history of Africa, especially during the declining days of the slave trade, African Christians experienced redemption in its precise meaning (Oduyoye 1986a:102). Oduyoye asserts that the African concept of ‘redemption’ is the same as the Jewish one.<sup>41</sup> ‘To redeem’ is not only ‘to buy back’, but also to illuminate ‘God’s action of taking off our chains so that we may be free to be fully human’ (Oduyoye 1986a:104).

According to Oduyoye, Africans converted to Christianity with traditional connotations of redemption and gave their lives to Christ (Oduyoye 1986a:102).

Liberating Israel from slavery in Egypt was a salvific act born out of God’s grace (Ex 15:13). This is what makes the historic exodus so fascinating. It is clear from that political deliverance that the redemption of a community from unjust systems is not outside God’s providence, that what God found necessary to do for Israel God has found necessary to do for the colonized peoples of Africa, and is doing for those held in bondage inside Africa.

(Oduyoye 1986a:103).

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<sup>41</sup> Oduyoye gives examples: In primal societies ‘the *ponfo*’, the one who pays back a loan for someone in debt, is appreciated and revered. ‘Redeeming’ is also experienced through the custom of shaving off the hair of the widow and children at the death of their husband and father. If they wish to keep their hair they have to ‘buy it back’ by paying a sum of money (Oduyoye 1986a:102).

‘The *Agyenkwa*, the one who rescues and holds one’s life in safety, takes a person out of a life-denying situation and places the person in a life-affirming one. The Rescuer plucks the person from a dehumanizing ambiance and places that person in a position where the person can grow toward authentic humanity. *Agyenkwa* gives a person back his/her life in all its wholeness and fullness’ (Oduyoye 1986a:98).

Oduyoye (1986a:104) maintains that ‘God snatches us away, separates us from the oppressive environment, breaks off unjust relationships, and tears down dehumanizing structures.’ For Oduyoye (1995b:484), salvation is understood in the terms of ‘wholeness, well-being, shalom, and healthy living.’

Although Oduyoye mentions both the external liberation of human beings, such as socio-political and economic liberation (1986a:103), and the internal liberation of the psychic life of human beings (2001:54), she usually emphasizes external liberation.<sup>42</sup>

She criticizes the spiritualization of sin, and even argues that Paul spiritualizes the Exodus event in 1 Cor. 10:1-5 (Oduyoye 1986a:80). Oduyoye seems to ignore or overlook the spiritual dimension of sin which is clearly described in the Bible.

She cites and interprets the text in a way in which the liberation of women can be articulated. Oduyoye is interested not in the exegetical method for the text, but in a context to which the text should be conveyed. Oduyoye does the same error as male theologians who use the biblical text to justify the oppressive situation to women.

The oversimplified equation of biblical ‘salvation’ with socio-political liberation from oppression ignores all those biblical texts that refer to the justification by faith and salvation from sin through Jesus Christ. In Oduyoye, the unique relation of the Old Testament to Jesus Christ is not adequately recognized. If the liberating activities in the world are regarded as God’s redemptive action in history, where is the significance of the Cross?

### **5.5.3.7 Authority of the Bible or authority of women’s experience?**

The Bible has been traditionally recognized as the authority in the life of Christians. Feminist theologians, however, place emphasis on the value of women’s experience and use women’s experience as the criterion of the truth for biblical study and theological interpretation (Ruether [1983]1993:12; Oduyoye 1986a:121-135; Hauge 1992:9; Kassian 2005:199).

The feminist theologians’ criterion for accepting the Bible as the Word of God is whether the text

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<sup>42</sup> Oduyoye’s view of salvation is very similar to the view of Latin American Liberation theology. In her book, *Hearing and Knowing: Theological reflections on Christianity in Africa* (1986a), Juan Luis Segundo, Gustavo Gutierrez, and Severino Croatto’s books are mentioned in her bibliography, but not mentioned in endnotes. Oduyoye (1986a:103), however, says that salvation as the overcoming of external physical enemies in war does not exclude the inner battle against an evil tendency. Oduyoye (2001a:54) relates salvation to a new beginning, a new life and the full experience of the reign of God.

aligns with women's vision of equality and struggle for freedom or not (Achte-meier 1988:50). The Bible loses its authority and validity when it is used to deny the equality of women and men (Ormerod 1997:168; Kassian 2005:197) and reinforces patriarchal structures of domination (Letham 1992:5).<sup>43</sup>

Fiorenza,<sup>44</sup> a key figure within feminist theology, maintains that the Bible was written in a strongly patriarchal sexist culture and language and has functioned throughout its history as a support of the androcentric-patriarchal codification of Christianity, while the Bible simultaneously has served as a resource to inspire and authorize women in their struggles against dehumanizing oppression (Fiorenza 1996:99; Kassian 2005:131).

The Christian tradition was recorded and studied by theologians who consciously or unconsciously have an androcentric-patriarchal point of view (Fiorenza 1979:195). In most cases, biblical and theological interpretation has adopted a patriarchal perspective, and attempted to perpetuate the patriarchal-androcentric dominance (Letham 1992:4, 5). Some biblical texts of the Bible, therefore, have perpetuated violence, alienation, and patriarchal subordination against women.

Within this framework, the Bible becomes not an authoritative and revelatory canon for Christian feminism, but a resource for recovering the liberating impulse of God's action in the world (Ormerod 1997:169). For this reason, contemporary interpreters are required to 'read the silences' of the androcentric texts (Maddox 1987:214). Fiorenza<sup>45</sup> states that only the nonsexist and nonpatriarchal traditions of the Bible and nonoppressive traditions of biblical interpretation become the locus of authority (Achte-meier 1988:48).

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<sup>43</sup> Concerning the authority of the Bible in feminist theology, there are various spectrums. Letha Scanzonia and Nancy Hardesty have a commitment to the authority of the Bible and a belief in the significance of the personal relationship with Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord. For them, the Bible is the starting point and the primary source of theology (Masenya 1999:231-232).

For Renita J. Weems, the Bible has been able to seize the imagination of Africa-American women because it speaks to the deepest aspirations of oppressed people for freedom, dignity, justice and vindication. For her, the authoritative passages are those that appeal to the lives of African-American women in a liberating way (Masenya 1999:232).

Phyllis Bird points out that 'the Old Testament is a 'men's book' (Jeong 2002:4).

For Russell, the Bible was written in a patriarchal culture. The interpretation and translation of the Bible through the centuries has been carried out in societies and Christian communities that are male-centered, or androcentric. Therefore, women must 'seek to liberate the interpretation of God's word from male bias' (quoted by Kassian 2005:161).

<sup>44</sup> Fiorenza seeks to discover the role of women within the history of the Church and to trace a genuine 'her-story' of women in the Bible (Fiorenza 1994; Kassian 2005:131; Ormerod 1997:165). The role of women in the life of the early church was oppressed, even though not completely eliminated, by the developing ecclesiastical patriarchy (Maddox 1987:214). Fiorenza attempts to reconstruct the early Christian origin from the women's perspective not only to put women back into history but also to 'restore the history of Christian beginning to women' (Dube 2000:27). Fiorenza places women at the centre of the early Christian history, not as subordinates but as equal partners to reclaim Christian history as a women's history (Fiorenza 1994; Dube 2000:27).

<sup>45</sup> Fiorenza (1994:34) proposes the use of the Bible as an 'historical prototype', or 'a formative root model' of biblical faith and life. The use of the Bible is not to find a 'mythical archetype' that establishes unchanging forms, but to uncover a prototype, a first model, from which examples and insights are taken and to find solidarity with those women that are recounted in the Biblical religion (Scholer 1987:410).



According to Oduyoye, since the Bible has been interpreted or misconstrued by men as a way to ignore women's positions and to justify African patriarchal and hierarchical system (Oduyoye 1995c:174), Biblical patterns of human relationships, which are closely akin to the African traditional norms, have been regarded as an unchanging model for all times and all peoples (Oduyoye 1995c:173).

Oduyoye (1995b:480) says that 'uncritical reading of biblical texts' is problematic. Not everything written in the Bible is good news for women (Oduyoye 2001a:11-12). Oduyoye (2003:43) maintains that the gospel is good news only when it serves for the liberation of women from oppressive circumstances. She (1995c:176) laments the alien theological terminologies on which African theology builds and urges African women to break with the outmoded exegetical methods that sanction a naive use of biblical text against women.

Oduyoye (1995c:186) urges African Christians to use the Bible not as an oracle, but to read and study the Bible with historical-critical methods that consider both the circumstances of the original writers and hearers as well as contemporary social, politico-economic situations. By doing so, women may reach a better understanding of women's issues.

Oduyoye asserts that the lack of contextual reading of the Bible makes people misunderstand and misconstrue the Bible. She offers examples: the interpretation of Genesis chapter 3 and Paul's language about women.

According to Oduyoye (1995c:190), Paul's teaching about women was not part of 'an exclusive revelation' to Paul and exclusively 'Christians.' It was most educated people's prevailing language in Paul's time. This means that Paul's comments on women are not necessarily 'a direct message from God to the church.' Rather, Pauline language has been used to legitimize 'a theology of order and of gender' (Oduyoye 1995c:190). Oduyoye says that there is inconsistency between Paul's teaching concerning women and his original former message of freedom in Jesus which is described in Gal 3:28. Paul's early liberative thought is regressed to a language of subordination of women. According to Oduyoye (1995c:190), Paul confirms the ideas of his contemporaries.

Concerning Genesis chapter 3, Oduyoye rejects a literal reading of the creation stories. According to Oduyoye, a Bible centered reading ignores all other aspects of revelation (Oduyoye 1986a:97). A literal reading suppresses the theological content and blows away 'the chance for real reflection' (Oduyoye 1986a:95). Instead of a literal understanding of Genesis chapter 3, Oduyoye suggests that the creation stories unmask 'the sin in patriarchy, in matriarchy, and hierarchy.'

Judging from the above, Oduyoye seems to reject the traditional view of the authority of the Bible



that is closely associated with ‘the centrality of the Bible in Christian theology’ as well as ‘the inerrancy of the Bible in the original manuscripts.’ Oduyoye (1986a:63) proclaims that the concept of ‘inerrancy’ of the Bible is ‘beginning to die the death of a thousand qualifications.’

If Oduyoye accepts a text of the Bible as authoritative only when the text is described in liberative language for women, it is very easy to ignore or discard anything in the Bible, which is considered as unpleasant to women. And if women’s liberation is considered to be the criterion of what is or what is not the Word of God, where can we find the authority of the Bible, the role of tradition and community in interpreting the Bible? Anything is acceptable if one has no standard of judgment.

It is not surprising that Oduyoye seems to not deeply get involved in the exegesis of the biblical text. She criticizes the fact that the Bible has been used for supporting male domination of women. She, however, uses the Bible for legitimizing liberation of women. As male theologians have their bias to interpret the Bible, Oduyoye also brings her own bias to her understanding of the biblical text. In this sense, both ‘a theology from above’ that ignores the context and ‘a theology from below’ that highlights the context use the Bible to legitimize a certain position that is favourable to them, and both are, therefore, erroneous and dangerous.

The problem is not the matter of the authority of the Bible and of the text itself. The problem is rather a matter of biblical interpretation. Therefore, it will be better to learn the ways of interpreting the text than to simply reject the authority of the biblical text.

AWT as a contextual theology proves its error because it absolutizes experience that is relative and situational in nature. There is a danger of falling into subjective relativism. Therefore, the authority of the Bible and the relevance of the biblical interpretation in the context should be balanced.

#### **5.5.3.8 The emphasis of experience**

Although women’s experience is not to be regarded as a normative text and an independent source of knowledge of the divine, women’s experience functions as a source of new questions and the base of Oduyoye’s interpretative departure in doing theology (Oduyoye 1986a:132).

However, women’s experience itself is an ambiguous concept and is rarely defined. Is there a common women’s experience across cultural, religious and political borders? Can the homogeneity

of the experiences of African women be asserted?

Women's experience is not a monolithic system. Women's experience is diverse and complicated by divisions of cultures, religious traditions, race, class and sexual orientation (Jakobsen 1994:150; Keane 1998:123).

It cannot be denied that women are also sinful and selfish human beings who always look after their own interests first and sacrifice others in order to protect their own interests. Women also experience an oppressive situation to women by women themselves. Women theologians, however, talk very much of an oppressive structure to women by men, but they do not talk about the sinful nature that is in women themselves (Achte-meier 1988:55).

It should be noted that women's experience is not a transcendental criterion that simply rejects the authority of the biblical text; rather it also is an object of criticism.

#### **5.5.3.9 The feminine language for God**

According to feminist theologians, the use of female pronouns to address God would de-sexualize a male God. However, it should be noticed that, in effect, the use of feminine pronouns will sexualize language about God.<sup>46</sup> The symbolic words such as 'Father', 'Ruler', 'Judge', 'Master', 'Lord', and 'King' are not merely figurative, but reflect true aspects of God's character and ontological realities of who God is. The switch from the masculine to the feminine, as Kassian (2005:169, 171) points out, reduces God to sexuality and attacks the very essence of God's character. Therefore, a certain term cannot be used on the basis of one's own inner feeling, experience, or perspectives.

The Bible indicates that God is Spirit, not male, and his fatherhood is exclusively nonsexual. However, there is a proper masculinity about God. God is depicted consistently and uniquely as being masculine in a way that transcends biological sexual categories of male and female or goes far beyond human fatherhood, sonship, and maleness (Achte-meier 1988:55; Hook & Kimel 2001:70-72; Mankowski 2001:40).

God's attributes can be expressed in male and female characteristics or maternal and paternal attributes. His love is compared to that of a mother. However, the God of biblical faith has not been

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<sup>46</sup> Some theologians object to the authenticity of God's image as female. Robert Jensen argues that the name, 'Father' given by Jesus is not a metaphor, but a definite name of God. According to Gerhard Forde, naming God as Mother is 'idolatrous' because it is an image that is projected by what they hope and want. Thomas Torrance maintains that God as Mother is an alteration of the Trinitarian format (quoted by Kumi 1996:222).

known or has not been referred to as a Goddess (Hook & Kimel 2001:78). God is never called 'Mother' in the Bible. If God is called Mother, the metaphor system of birthing, suckling, carrying in the womb comes into play; and the divine Mother is then portrayed as giving birth to creation (Achte-meier 1988:56). Achte-meier (1988:57) rightly points out that

it opens the door to corruption of the biblical faith in the transcendent God who works in creation only through his Word and Spirit. Worshippers of a Mother Goddess worship the creation and themselves, rather than the Creator.

The effort to change the biblical language about God - referring to God as she or as both female and male - will inevitably sexualize and misrepresent the God of biblical tradition. And the use of neutral references would have the result of depersonalizing the understanding of God, and so in the same way be false (Hook & Kimel 2001:82).

Although women theologians contributed much to 'a new appreciation of the richness of biblical language' about God (Achte-meier 1988:55), it should be critically questioned whether feminine language about God truly represents the God of the Bible and Christianity or not. If the new language fails to provide satisfaction with all people, the attempt will be just an attempt.

## **5.6 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

In this chapter, Oduyoye's understanding of God from the African woman's perspective has been assessed theologically in reference to Oduyoye's methodology, the status of African women in ATR(s) and African Christianity, her appreciation of the salvation, of the Bible, and of the locus of experience.

Oduyoye argues that Western Christianity is not relevant to African people because of its foreignness to them. She, at the same time, critically analyzes the elements of ATR(s) and African culture that are oppressive to and dehumanize African women. She maintains that the oppressive socio-political and economic system to women has been caused, sustained and reinforced by patriarchy and stereotypical gender structures of African culture.

The imaging and visualization of God as male and a men-centered interpretation of the Bible have misrepresented God and provided a religious justification for the oppression and marginalization of

women throughout Christian history, and thus obliged women to accept the male as the superior created being and coerced women to be subordinate to men (Oduyoye 1995c:176, 184).

As Pemberton (2003:90) points out, Oduyoye has developed a theological methodology which motivates African women to affirm African identity in reaction to Western Christianity and claims the liberation of women from the traditional and contemporary oppressive culture against African women. Thus Oduyoye (2001a:18) seeks ‘a theology characterized by a struggle to make religion relevant to the challenges of contemporary Africa,’ aiming to transform the oppressive structure in both society and church.

Oduyoye desires to establish a women-centered theology that placed women and women’s experience at the center of the theological process.

Oduyoye, however, does not exclude males from theologizing. Oduyoye (1986a:133) urges both women and men to reexamine some aspects of Christian tradition that justify the domestication of women. Oduyoye attempts to find out ‘methodologies and strategies’ to recover ‘mutuality between men and women’. Therefore, she pursues a ‘two-winged theology’ by emphasizing male and female partnership. Only then, says Oduyoye, the church will be the home for both men and women.

However, as a product of the Western mission church, which she has criticized, Oduyoye is dependent on ‘many contemporary Western-minted theological approaches’ in order to establish her own theoretical foundation (Pemberton 2003:90). When Oduyoye criticizes the oppressive situation of African women, she easily criticizes or discards some aspects of ATR(s) and African culture, using Western theories. Oduyoye seems to use Western theological discourses as a transcendental norm in order to criticize her own cultural heritage that had once been used by herself to affirm African identity. It seems an irony.

The emphasis on the women’s experience led to the critique of the realities of society. However, it should be questioned whether the authority of experience, that are varied and relative in nature, can replace the authority of the Bible.

AWT focuses on ‘locality’ and ‘culture’ as primary framework for theological work. Focusing on the context and ethnographic considerations, African women theologians are in continuity with their male counterparts on many points of the theoretical tasks to establish an African theological identity (Pemberton 2003:180).

The questions now arise: how can the ‘new’ churches and ‘contextualized’, ‘inculturated’ and ‘indigenized’ theologies be related to the universal Christian identity? How can African theologians, including both African male Inculturation theologians and African women theologians, articulate their theological reflection in their own context and simultaneously speak to the universal church? How can cultural identity that has been expressed in a particular cultural context and Christian identity that has been claimed to be presented universally be balanced?

In the next chapter, a critical-comparative and dialogical study between Mbiti’s understanding of God and Oduyoye’s understanding of God will be carried out, aiming to discover important principles for developing a biblically faithful and practically relevant theology in Africa.

## CHAPTER 6

# A CRITICAL COMPARISON OF MBITI'S UNDERSTANDING OF GOD AND ODUYOYE'S UNDERSTANDING OF GOD

## 6.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapters, the research attempted to investigate how Mbiti and Oduyoye articulate the understanding of God respectively.

In this chapter, a comparative and dialogical study of Mbiti's and Oduyoye's theological articulation of God will be carried out. The aim is to explore the similarities and differences between the understanding of God in the works of Mbiti and Oduyoye, and to discuss a possibility of developing a relevant method for a Christian theology that keeps both 'the African quest of preserving one's own authenticity' and 'the universal message' (Vähäkangas 1999:10).

With this aim, the research will deal with the following questions: are the two theologians' understandings of God fundamentally irreconcilable and exclusive? Is there a common ground that makes the dialogue between the two possible? A possible direction in which African theological reflection should go will also be suggested.

## 6.2 SIMILARITIES BETWEEN MBITI'S AND ODUYOYE'S UNDERSTANDING OF GOD

### 6.2.1 The influence of African nationalism

During a time of 'intense nationalism' or of 'the ideology of independence' (Rogers [1972]1994:245, 246), with the growing air of nationalistic ideologies,<sup>1</sup> such as the rehabilitation of

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<sup>1</sup> In a general sense, ideology is sets of ideas, beliefs and values held by particular groups in support of or for legitimating 'certain hidden motives' that serves the interests of the group (Baker 1984:467-468; Scott 1994:37). When the Third World theologians use the term, ideology is regarded as a tool for analyzing the context. The ideology urges people to become the 'agents' who are capable of resistance within the context, and proposes alternatives for transforming the context (Richard 2005:103). It seems clear that, whether ideology is regarded as a tool effecting revolutionary changes or

the African traditional religio-cultural heritage, the reaffirmation of African identity, African unity, and cultural autonomy (Westerlund 1985:44; Mudimbe 1988:79), African scholars emphasized cultural liberation as an inevitable means of regaining political liberation.

Even in the post-colonial era, traditional African religio-cultural heritage was regarded as root and source for establishing African identity. African theologians also have sought to find African identity by being rooted in the African religious past.

Mbiti and Oduyoye resist colonial forms of domination and call for a rehabilitation of African culture. Both share the view that African religio-cultural history is deeply connected with African identity. The identity crisis in Africa may be attributed to the loss of being African and their Africanness, which comes from knowing and living one's religio-cultural heritage and history (Oduyoye 1986a:54; 2003:41).

Mbiti and Oduyoye show their theological cultural nationalistic tendency by glorifying the African traditional religio-cultural heritage (Mbiti 1975a:2-9) and by reconciling nationalism with Christianity (Oduyoye 1986a:88). Oduyoye reacts to 'the cultural imperialism' and pursues a Christianity 'cultured in African context' (1995a:85). In this regard, Ferdinando (2007:128) points out that Oduyoye has been driven by a 'conscious' and 'deliberate' apologetic intent.

When the unity of the 'nation' and of 'Africa' was needed in tribal and pluralistic African countries, 'common factors' of African culture and religious practices and beliefs across the African continent (Mudimbe 1988:79) were emphasized, because it functioned as a useful and decisive element for unifying different religio-cultural factors (Westerlund 1985:89).

In this atmosphere, the diversity of ATR(s) was neglected; instead, the common aspects of ATR(s) were overemphasized.

Under the influence of nationalism, Mbiti and Oduyoye 'unite' diverse beliefs and practices systems - African religions - into a single or common African belief system - African religion (Shaw 1990:183; Westerlund 1985:48). In this sense, Mbiti and Oduyoye follow 'the hypothesis of African unity' in the religious field (Mudimbe 1988:79).

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a tool perpetuating the *status quo*, people passively are influenced by a certain ideology, and choose an ideology positively for understanding / interpreting the context to which they belong. African theologians are no exception.

The point to observe is the fact that theological reflections are not only dependant on a certain ideology but are also influenced by the ideology that operates in the context to which a theologian is deeply related. It is reasonable to assume that the different understanding of God among the theologians can be explained due to the different ideological frameworks on which theologians depend.



## **6.2.2. Continuity between the gospel and ATR(s) and African culture**

Mbiti and Oduyoye appraise African traditional religio-cultural heritage theologically and use it as one of many viable tools that determine their theological articulation in the African context (Mbiti [1969]1975; 1968; 1970a; 1970b; 1971; 1975a; 1975b; 1977; Oduyoye 1979; 1986a; 1995c; 2001a). Oduyoye (1979:110) strongly maintains that African Christian theology should take into account the various African traditional beliefs and practices in order to escape being a fossilized form of 19<sup>th</sup> century European Christianity.

### **6.2.2.1 Monotheistic notion of God in ATR(s); African monotheism**

The most obvious and important transcultural element in ATR(s) is the belief in One God (Westerlund 1993:56; Muzorewa 1985:8-11; Idowu 1975:140). African monotheism that has been politically linked with the nationalistic inspiration has provided a theological ground for a ‘Pan-Africanization’ of African religions (Westerlund 1985:44; 48).

Mbiti ([1969]1975:36; 1970a:xiii; 2004:222; 2009:147) maintains that the African Traditional Religion is ‘a deeply monotheistic religion’, and all African peoples and languages clearly recognize God as the one supreme God. Mbiti thinks that many basic African concepts of God are similar to those in Christianity, and many of the attributes ascribed to God in Christian theology also fit the description of God in ATR(s). There is identification between the God who is known in ATR(s) and the God who is revealed in the Bible (Mbiti 1988-1989:61).

Oduyoye (1979:111; 2001a:40) also asserts that God is the one God, the Creator and the Redeemer, although God has been called with different names throughout the world. The God of all creation demonstrates His presence in Christianity as well as in ATR(s) and in other traditional religions (Oduyoye 2001a:40).

Both Mbiti and Oduyoye emphasize the monotheistic notion of God in ATR(s) as an essential point of continuity between ATR(s) and Christianity.

### **6.2.2.2 Rejecting the distinction between ‘general revelation’ and ‘special revelation’**

Mbiti rejects any distinction between the natural knowledge of God and the revealed knowledge

of God. To Mbiti, making a distinction between general revelation and special revelation is fostering a false dichotomy (Nieder-Heitmann 1981:109). Mbiti (1980:817; 1986b:200) claims that all revelation has the same value, since all revelations belong to one God.

According to Oduyoye (1986a:64), God who knows people's 'wavelength' has communicated with people in the wavelength that is appropriate to them. Christianity should not claim its monopoly concerning the way of communication between human beings and God. On this ground, Oduyoye maintains that God has revealed himself elsewhere by many different names: Yahweh in the Old Testament, God to the Christians using English, and Allah to the Muslim and the Arabic-speaking world (Oduyoye 2001a:40).

### **6.2.2.3 ATR(s) as God's revelation**

On the basis of African monotheism and of the rejection of the traditional distinction between general and special revelation, Mbiti and Oduyoye view ATR(s) as a field or an instrument of God's revelation, and assert that the revelation in the ATR(s) is essentially the same as the revelation of God in the Bible (Mbiti 1980:818; 1986b:201; Oduyoye 2001a:40).

God as the subject of all revelations constantly reveals Himself, not only to the Jewish people in the Old Testament, but also to African peoples in and through ATR(s) (Mbiti 1970b:436; 1979:111).

According to Oduyoye (1979:111; 2001a:40), 'the divine and unique Source Being' shown in the creation story of the Bible is 'the same One God' revealed in ATR(s) because the God as the Creator is 'the source of one human race.'

### **6.2.2.4 Distinction between the gospel and Christianity**

For Mbiti, the gospel is God-given and eternal and Christianity is the result of the encounter between the gospel and a certain local culture, and thus culture-bound. There is 'no single form of Christianity which dominates another' (Mbiti 1977:29).

According to Oduyoye (2003:40-41), the gospel is 'the incarnate love of God' and is universal, while Christianity is 'a cultural expression' of the universal gospel. Christianity in Africa, therefore, can be said as an African expression of the gospel, and can also be described as an 'indigenous', 'traditional' and very much an 'African' religion (Mbiti [1969]1975:277; 1970c:19).

For this reason, Mbiti and Oduyoye make a distinction between the gospel and Christianity, and reject the equation of Christianity and the Western culture.

By affirming the diverse cultural expression of the gospel, these two theologians reject a direct implantation of Western Christianity and theology into Africa. They maintain that African Christianity should be coloured by the African context.

### **6.3 DIFFERENCES BETWEEN MBITI'S AND ODUYOYE'S UNDERSTANDING OF GOD**

In spite of the significant similarities between Mbiti's and Oduyoye's theology, there are some clear and undeniable differences between their theological interpretation of African culture and the contemporary African situation in which they engage in theological reflection.

Mbiti, a male African theologian, has tended to celebrate African culture, whereas Oduyoye, an African woman theologian, regards African culture as yet another site of the struggle.

The difference is not how they interpret the Bible, but how they understand and use African culture and the contemporary situations in their theological work. The difference that comes from a different analysis of the traditional religio-cultural context shapes the two theologians' understanding of the interplay of the gospel and the African culture and of their understanding of God.

African theology emerged and developed out of the need to 'Africanize' Christianity and theology, and to root it in the African soil. In the process of Africanizing Christianity, contextualization has functioned as a key component.

The two theologians' view on the interplay between the gospel and African culture, and their theological articulation of the understanding of God will be discussed in terms of contextualization.

#### **6.3.1 Models of Contextualization**

The Biblical revelation is not acultural. The Bible, God's unchanging, eternal Word itself is presented in cultural clothing. The understanding of the gospel is inevitably coloured by the person's own culture and personal background. Therefore, there is the need for 'a genuine translation' of the unchanging message of the gospel into forms that are relevant and meaningful to peoples in their

cultural settings, using appropriate terms that ‘convey the authenticity of the message’ (Nicholls 1979:29).

If the local context is ignored when the gospel is presented, much of the culture and life will not be touched by the Biblical truth, and the gospel will remain on a superficial level (Ott & Strauss 2010:266).

For this reason, by the proper process of contextualization, the original message and effect of the gospel can be clear and communicated to the people. Therefore, the process of contextualization is essential in order that the gospel message is to take deep root in the cultural context. By contextualization, the foreignness of the gospel dressed in Western clothes will lessen (Hiebert 1994:84), and universal truths will be expressed in a diverse and changing culture (Pocock, Van Rheenen & McConnell 2005:321; Ott & Strauss 2010:266).

### **6.3.1.1 A definition of contextualization**

The word ‘contextualization’, which was first coined and used by Shoki Coe and Aharon Sapsezian in the early 1970s among the circles of the Theological Education Fund (Nicholls 1979:21; Bosch 1991:420), generally indicates the process in which people wrestles to relate ‘the never-changing truths of Scripture’ to ‘ever-changing human contexts’ (Ott & Strauss 2010:266).

Contextual theology, therefore, attempts to articulate their theological reflection in different ways from traditional Western theology that is little interested in issues being brought up in local contexts (Schreiter 1997:1).

According to Bevans (1992:5-9), there are external and internal factors that stimulate contextual theology. External factors are the following: a general dissatisfaction with traditional Western theological methodologies; the oppressive nature of traditional Western theologies; the growing identity of local churches; and the understanding of culture that is provided by contemporary social sciences. Internal factors are: the incarnational nature of Christianity; the sacramental nature of reality; and a change in understanding the nature of revelation.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Sociology of knowledge claims that ‘our conceptions of meaning, value, goals, truth, reality, duties... are not out there as external entities. They are products of human creativity in the social order’ (Larkin 1988:67). In this perspective, there is no possibility of a ‘revelation’ which transcends the context culturally and historically, and thus ‘the message of the Bible’ is not already out there and cannot be used as authoritative (Larkin 1988:68; Bevans 1992:1); interpretation of the text, therefore, should always be done in one’s own context, and the meaning of the text will be changed according to the context (Larkin 1988:68); eventually it can be said that ‘there is no unified world-view, no commonly accepted preunderstanding which both the writers of the ancient text and the modern interpreter embrace’ (Larkin 1988:69). The

Wan defines contextualization as an attempt to formulate, present and communicate the Christian faith and the gospel in such a way that it is relevant to the cultural context of the people in terms of conceptualization, expression and application (quoted by Tennent 2010:347).

According to Peters, contextualization tries to ‘discover the legitimate implication of the gospel in a given situation’ (quoted by Hesselgrave & Rommen 1989:149).

When the contextualization takes place in ways that are relevant to the cultural context, the gospel message will make sense to people within their local cultural context, meet people’s deepest needs and penetrate their worldview (Whiteman 1994:44). Hesselgrave and Rommen (1989:200) define contextualization as:

the attempt to communicate the message of the person, works, word, and will of God in a way that is faithful to God’s revelation, especially as it is put forth in the teachings of Holy Scripture, and that is meaningful to respondents in their respective cultural and existential contexts.

These two concepts, ‘faithful’ to the Word of God and ‘meaningful’ to cultural respondents (Hesselgrave and Rommen 1989:200), or ‘scripturally sound and culturally viable’ (Hesselgrave and Rommen 1989:xii) are the two fold focus of contextualization.

### 6.3.1.2 Models of contextualization

It is not easy to categorize Mbiti’s and Oduyoye’s way of relating the gospel and African culture into a simplified model of contextualization, because there is no single model which fits precisely to describe the process of their work of contextualization.

The term, ‘model’<sup>3</sup> can be defined as simply a systematic delineation of, or a simplified

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text is regarded as an object that will be and should be interpreted in one’s own thought forms in the one’s culturally and historically conditioned context (Bevans 1992:1). In the process, the interpreters’ cultural and historical contexts influence their understanding of God and the expression of their faith. In this sense, there is only a theology that makes sense in a particular place and in a particular time (Bevans 1992:1).

<sup>3</sup> Barbour defines ‘model’ as ‘a systematic representation of selected aspects of the behavior of a complex system for particular purposes’ (quoted by Bevans 1992:24). According to Dulles, ‘model’ is ‘a relatively simple, artificially constructed case which is found to be useful and illuminating for dealing with realities that are more complex and differentiated’ (quoted by Bevans 1992:24). Bevans says that a model is ‘a case that is useful in simplifying a complex reality, and, although such simplification does not fully capture that reality, it does yield true knowledge of it’ (Bevans 1992:26).

representation of a complex reality that can be used for capturing the reality (Bevans 1992:24). ‘Model’ suggests not only a procedure for engaging in theological reflection, but also some specific principles that help to guide the procedure of their theological reflection (Schreiter 1985:6). In this study, the term, ‘model’ means a simple description or representation of a way and procedure in which a theologian understands the relationship between the gospel and culture.

Bevans (1992:1) mentions four elements that are involved in contextual theology: (1) the spirit and message of the gospel; (2) the tradition of the Christians; (3) the culture in which one is theologizing; and (4) social change in the culture.<sup>4</sup> Depending on the emphasis, several distinct models of contextual theology can be formed. There have been many studies of different ways in which the church and theologians understand the relationship between the gospel and culture.

In his *Christ and Culture* (1951), Niebuhr illustrates five different models: opposition (Christ against culture), agreement (Christ of culture), fulfillment (Christ above culture), polarity and tension (Christ and culture in paradox), and conversion (Christ the transformer of culture).

Bevans has presented the five major models of contextualization.

The first model is the translation model in which ‘the essential content of Scripture’ as revelation from God can be separated from a non essential ‘culturally bounded mode of expression’ (Bevans 1992:27, 33, 68) and ‘fidelity to church tradition’ is stressed (Bevans 1992:27). The proponents of this model attempt to translate the message of the gospel that is conceived as the supra-cultural and unchanging ‘deposit of truth’ into cultural context (Bevans 1992:33; Ahonen 2003:35).

The second is the praxis model. In this model, God reveals His presence in the events of everyday life, in social, politico-economic unjust and oppressive situation, and invites human beings to participate in his healing, reconciling and liberating work (Bevans 1992:68). The praxis model gives priority to the need of social change in doing theology (Bevans 1992:27). For this reason, theology can be defined as a ‘process of faith seeking intelligence and action’, while traditional theology pursues ‘faith seeking understanding’ (Bevans 1992:66).

The third, the anthropological model<sup>5</sup> emphasizes cultural identity and its relevance for theology more than the Bible or tradition (Bevans 1992:27). God has left his footprint of existence in any

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<sup>4</sup> Instead of these four elements, in his 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (2002), Bevans speaks of two elements that are involved in contextual theology: ‘the experience of the past’ (the Bible and tradition) and ‘the experience of the present’ (context). Bevans (2002:xvii) says that ‘contextual theology is done when the experience of the past engages the present context.’

<sup>5</sup> Bevans (1992:48) prefers the term ‘anthropological’ to describe the importance of culture in the construction of a true contextual theology, while there are other expressions such as ‘indigenization model’, ‘ethnographic model’, and ‘inculturation model’.

culture and at any generation, therefore other faiths can contribute to finding the grace and love of God in a different perspective (Bevans 1992:49, 68). The Bible is not supracultural and unchanging, but the ‘product of socially and culturally conditioned religious experiences’ that have arisen from Israel’s life and the early Christians (Bevans 1992:49).

The fourth, the synthetic model <sup>6</sup> tries to preserve the importance of the gospel message and the heritage of traditional doctrinal formulations, simultaneously acknowledging the vital role of culture in doing theology. In the synthetic model, every culture has its unique aspect and common elements with other cultures (Bevans 1992:83; Ahonen 2003:36). However, a particular culture is considered as incomplete in itself and supplementary to others (Bevans 1992:83; Ahonen 2003:36). Therefore, this model attempts to learn from other cultures and other theological expressions, and to engage in true dialogue with an open-minded attitude (Bevans 1992:82, 87).

The fifth, the transcendental model does not focus on the articulation of the content, but on the subject who is articulating (Bevans 1992:27; Ahonen 2003:35). In the transcendental model one begins to theologize contextually not by focusing on the essence of the gospel message or on tradition, not even by translating the message into a particular culture, or by trying to thematize or analyze culture or expressions of culture in language. Rather the starting point is concerned with one’s own religious experience as a converted religious and cultural subject - as a Christian and as a participant in a particular context (Bevans 1992:98; Ahonen 2003:36). A person exists at a particular point in time, and is determined by one’s context. From this transcendental starting point, theology is conceived of as the process of ‘bringing to speech’ who I am as a person of faith as a product of a historical, geographical, social, and cultural environment (Bevans 1992:98). The biblical message and theological tradition are explained by a person who points to the relevance of the traditional doctrines for one’s own community (Bevans 1992:108).<sup>7</sup>

Schreiter (1985:6-16) categorizes the varieties of local theology into the following contextual models: (1) translation model; (2) adaptation model; (3) contextual model: (a) ethnographic approach that puts emphasis on cultural identity; (b) liberation approach that stresses the need for social

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<sup>6</sup> The synthetic model attempts to keep each of the four elements in perfect balance and to synthesize their insights into a skillful, ‘even artistic’ blend (Bevans 1992:27; Ahonen 2003:34). Other explanatory expressions for this model are dialectical model, dialogical model, conversation model, or analogical model (Bevans 1992:83).

<sup>7</sup> Bevans, in his 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (2002), adds the sixth model: the countercultural model of contextualization (2002:117-137). This model recognizes that theological articulation exists in historically and culturally conditioned contexts. At the same time, this model takes the strong critical stance against human context. It considers the context seriously, and claims that the context needs to be challenged, purified, shaped and formed by the gospel. In this sense, this model is not anticultural or Niebuhr’s description of ‘Christ against Culture.’ It recognizes seriousness of context and emphasizes fidelity to the gospel (Bevans 2002:126). Bevans mentions ‘the Gospel and Our culture Network’ and Michael J. Baxter as examples of this model, although George Hunsberger insists that the perspectives of ‘the Gospel and Our culture Network’ should not be considered as countercultural (Bevans 2002:xvi).



change.

Thomson (2009:347) groups the models into two categories: the text based models and the context oriented models.

Bevans (1992:16) categorizes contextual theology into two categories according to theological attitude to culture and to human experience: a creation-centered theology and a redemption-centered perspective.

Basically a creation-centered theology is characterized by the conviction that culture and human experience are generally good, and are areas of God's activity and therefore sources of theology (Bevans 1992:16, 17). Revelation is not limited to particular places; rather the world is the place where God reveals Himself. Grace builds on nature. Rahner's anonymous Christianity or Panikkar's unknown Christ in Hinduism (Christ who is to be discovered in a culture) can be classified under this category (Bevans 1992:16).

A redemption-centered theology maintains that nature is corrupt and that the world distorts God's reality. Therefore, culture and human experience are either in need of 'a radical transformation' or in need of 'total replacement.' Grace replaces nature (Bevans 1992:16).

Bevans contrasts a creation-centered theology, which regards the world as sacramental with a redemption-centered theology, which sees the world that rebels against God's reality.<sup>8</sup>

According to Ukpong, there are the two types of contextual theology, that is, the indigenization model and the socio-economic model. The indigenization model is divided into a translation model and an inculturation model, and the socio-economic model is categorized into an evolutionary model and a revolutionary model (quoted by Bosch 1991:421).

Qualifying Ukpong's categorization in general, Bosch identifies two major types of contextual theology: the inculturation model (inculturation theology) and the revolutionary model (liberation theology) (Bosch 1991:421).

Martey (1993:69) categorizes African theology into two major trends, a 'theology of Inculturation' and a 'theology of Liberation.'

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<sup>8</sup> Concerning this categorization, Ferdinando (2007:143) criticizes that this categorization does not have 'a sufficient biblical foundation' and does not deal with an 'adequate account of the radical state of human fallenness' that is portrayed in the Bible. 'The revolutionary character of the gospel of Jesus Christ', therefore, may not be thoroughly grasped.

Based on its emphasis, Mbiti's theological model of contextualization can be categorized as an 'ethnographic approach' (Schreiter), an 'anthropological model' (Bevans), or an 'inculturation model' (Ukpong, Bosch, and Martey), and Oduyoye's theological model of contextualization can be classified as a 'praxis model' (Bevans) or 'revolutionary-liberation model' (Ukpong, Schreiter, Martey, and Bosch).

Both Mbiti and Oduyoye have attempted to discover a way in which they can articulate the relevant concept of God in the African context. Aiming at clarifying each theologian's emphasis, in the research, Mbiti's way of contextualization is labeled as a 'gospel-culture oriented model', and Oduyoye's way of contextualization is categorized as a 'gospel-liberation oriented model.'

### **6.3.2 Mbiti's gospel-culture oriented model**

#### **6.3.2.1 The emphasis on African cultural identity**

A particular culture shapes the way in which the gospel message is understood and articulated in the cultural context (Ahonen 2003:36).

In Mbiti's view, African Christianity failed to root the gospel message in the African soil, because the Christian faith that missionaries brought into Africa was implanted in the form of Western culture.

Mbiti, therefore, is primarily concerned with the continuity between the African traditional religio-cultural heritage and the Christian faith, and has consistently used ATR(s) and African culture as a formative factor for his theological articulation, asserting that the universal Christian faith should be expressed and rooted within a particular cultural context.

#### **6.3.2.2 The African concept of God as *praeparatio evangelica***

Mbiti views ATR(s) as the place of divine revelation and the source of theology. Through his studies of the concepts of God in Africa, Mbiti (1979b:68) concludes that the God revealed in the Bible and the God worshipped in ATR(s) is the very same God.

From this conclusion, Mbiti tries to relate Christian faith and African religiosity, and maintains that Christianity can be the fulfillment of ATR(s). According to Mbiti (1979b:68; 1980:818;

1986b:201), before the coming of Christianity to Africa, there had been an universal activity and revelation of Christ through ATR(s).

Therefore, Mbiti ([1969]1975:277) sees ATR(s) as parallel to the role of the Old Testament for Israel and affirms the ATR(s) and African religiosity as the African preparation for the coming of the gospel. Within this framework, his approach to ATR(s) tends towards inclusivism; the gospel is the saving truth, but that truth has been known partially in and through ATR(s) (Ferdinando 2007:124).<sup>9</sup>

### 6.3.2.3 Cultural domination of the past over the present

Mbiti (1971:24-32) has shown that the African concept of time is predominantly oriented towards the past (*zamani*), rather than to the future. This understanding of time, which puts the ‘center of gravity in history’ in the past, causes African people to have problems in the understanding of New Testament eschatology. Mbiti (1971:25) says that

It [history] points to the roots of their existence, such as the origin of the world, the creation of man, the formation of their customs and traditions, and the coming into being of their whole structure of society. The ‘present’ must conform to the ‘past’ in the sense that it is the ‘past’, rather than any distant future, by means of which people orientate their living and thinking.

As Turaki (1999:111) points out, in the traditional African concept of time, ‘the orientation is toward the glorious, perfect, primordial state of the past and less to the unknown, uncertain future.’

For Mbiti, God is not only the creator of the world and human society, but also the sustainer of the religio-cultural societal orders and structures. This understanding of God leads people to accept God as a giver and a sustainer of the current structure of society, including relationships between the living and the dead as well as political organizations and modes of economic systems (Young III 1992b:95). Therefore, it seems that to maintain African cultural identity by rehabilitating the

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<sup>9</sup> The area of theology of religions in which the relationship between Christianity and other religions is currently the focus of a lively debate (Ferdinando 2007:124). Briefly, *exclusivist* approaches argue that salvation and/or truth is found only through an explicit knowledge and confession of Christ; *inclusivist* approaches argue that salvation/truth is found only in Christ but may be mediated through non-Christian religions or philosophies apart from any explicit knowledge of him; and *pluralist* approaches see Christ as simply one means of salvation and truth among many others (Ferdinando 2007:124).

traditional African religio-cultural heritage is to keep a God-given culture. The traditional cultural heritage is regarded as the foundation of the current cultural and societal system.

Mbiti tends to focus exclusively on the articulation of the Christian faith in the African religio-cultural heritage and speaks of the world of the ancestors who legitimize the traditions and customs of the present society and punish breaches of the order the ancestors established (Ferdinando 2007:139).

On the contrary, he is more or less reluctant to speak to the world of their contemporary offspring, and also unwillingly criticize the current socio-political problems and economic exploitation and injustice.

In this regard, African culture that has been accumulated in male perspective should be maintained, and God can and/or should be understood as the sustainer of order who prefers the *status quo*. Many African theologians have kept silent concerning African political leaders' dictatorship and their corruption.

Critics regard theologians who work for the 'cultural identity recovery project' (Carney 2010:550) as people who have 'romantic fantasies' of a culture that does not exist (Bevans 1992:20).

In this sense, Mbiti cannot be free from the criticism that his gospel-culture oriented model anchors theological reflection not on 'a culture that does exist today', but on 'a fossil culture' that existed in the past (Bevans 1992:20). He can easily become prey to a cultural romanticism (Schreiter 1985:14). Bevans (1992:20, 21) rightly points out:

[If] theology is to really be in context, therefore, it cannot deal with a culture that no longer really exists...A strong but realistic cultural identity is necessary for a theology that really speaks to a context in its particularity.

Concerning African Inculturation theology, Oduyoye (1998:362) evaluates the situation as follows:

It does not pay its attention to the actual experience of living in Africa with its poverty, and wars that cause famine and the displacement of people, and the so-called international debt that has turned Africans into slaves on their own continent.

Mbiti's gospel-culture oriented model makes him unable to see the contemporary issues, including African women's issues, in African context. In this sense, Mbiti is far from a prophetic theology.

### 6.3.3 Oduyoye's gospel-liberation oriented model

#### 6.3.3.1 Ambivalent attitude to African culture

Both Mbiti and Oduyoye celebrate traditional African culture and religions in response to the dominant influence of Western Christianity in Africa and the legacy of colonialism that denigrated African culture.

Like Mbiti, Oduyoye (1986a:54) pays much attention to the African religio-cultural heritage, because it is conceived of as 'the deepest element in Africa's living culture' (Oduyoye 1986a:54). Therefore, Oduyoye uses the African religio-cultural elements in order to root Christianity in the African context, and maintains that Christ should become 'domesticated' in Africa (Oduyoye 1986a:69).

However, even though Oduyoye emphasizes the close relationship between the gospel and African culture, Oduyoye rejects ATR(s) as *praeparatio evangelica*, which is strongly supported by Mbiti. According to Oduyoye, the notion of ATR(s) as *praeparatio evangelica* is to have a negative view of African culture. This notion, as the outcome of the Christocentric tendency of Christianity, ignores the revelation of God outside Christianity, and reduces ATR(s) to the idolatry (Oduyoye 1986a:64; cf. Maluleke 1996a:16).

African women theologians are especially concerned about uncritical cultural retrieval and glorification of African religions and culture that continue to erode women's dignity and wholeness (Njoroge 1997:81). They make a clear hermeneutical break from 'male theological contemporaries' who have not paid attention to African customs and traditions that put women in a state of inferiority and subjugation alongside men (Pemberton 2003:73; Chitando, A & Chitando E 2005:24).

Oduyoye uncovers many women's issues, such as inequality, marginalization, oppression, discrimination, poverty, and violence imposed on women by male dominated systems, in both society and church. Therefore, Oduyoye fights against the patriarchal system of African culture on the one hand, and criticizes African Christianity that reinforces patriarchal values and norms in the church on the other hand. Oduyoye clearly calls for the transformation of the prevalent patriarchal structures and male chauvinistic attitudes. She seeks justice and liberation for African women.

Oduyoye acknowledges her solidarity with African male theologians, but also identifies fundamental flaws within most male Inculturation theologians. In this regard, Oduyoye's

methodology is partly an ethnographic approach or an inculturation model, which is concerned with reconstructing an African past and cultural identity, and partly a praxis model, which is critical of aspects of African culture and shows a strong social concern. At this point, Maluleke (1997c:22) remarks: ‘African womanist theologies are teaching us how to criticize African culture without denigrating it.’

### 6.3.3.2 Emphasis on praxis

Even though Oduyoye pays attention to the matter of the identification of the God in ATR(s) with the God in the Bible, she devotes much of her interest to identify who God is. Oduyoye focuses on God as the Creator who created women and men equal and on God as Liberator who cares for the weak and delivers the oppressed. Yahweh who is involved in history is the God who challenges oppressive African cultural norms and practices and brings liberation to oppressive situations.

Not every element of African religions and culture are sacred objects that should be glorious; some elements should be criticized because the elements continue to distort, suppress and undermine the dignity of women in society and church.

Oduyoye criticizes missionary theology because it focuses only on ‘eternal redemption from sin’ by Christ and the individual’s ‘survival in bliss after death’ (Oduyoye 1986a:103; 2003:44). To Oduyoye, sin is located in the structures of society rather than in the human heart. Sin is to deny the full humanity of persons (Oduyoye 1995c:186). Salvation is, therefore, understood as total liberation from all oppressive environments and structural problems: the dehumanizing structures that ‘alienate’ people from God and other human beings (Oduyoye 1986a:103); socio-political, economic injustice (Oduyoye 1986a:86, 104); racism, sexism, and inequality (Oduyoye 1979:115). Oduyoye emphasizes ‘here and now’ that is connected to the ‘perspective from the below’.

Therefore, Oduyoye, ‘who is not anti male, but pro women’ (Pemberton 2003:73), encourages women to be free from traditional ways of interpreting the Bible that have been influenced by ‘patriarchy, colonialism, and Western cultural imperialism’ (Chung 1999:106). She motivated women to desire the liberation from all manifestations of patriarchy.

On the basis of her understanding of God, Oduyoye puts emphasis on praxis for transforming some cultural elements and ideologies that function to perpetuate the oppressive situation of women. In this sense, Oduyoye is doing theology rather than studying theology.

### 6.3.3.3 Concerns for transformation of the patriarchal-hierarchical society

Oduyoye (1995c:184-187) boldly insists that African culture that portrays women negatively or places women in oppressive situation must be transformed in order that both women and men become ‘co-creators’ of the entire community. Oduyoye (1995c:73) subsequently argue for a new vision of liberation, justice and equality for all people;

We recall history and analyze culture in order to understand how we got where we are and to see where we are heading; however, where we actually go depends on what we decide to do, or else we cease to be morally responsible agents. If women are prepared to show their pain openly and to articulate their vision for a more just and a more participatory and inclusive society, then we can begin to reshape the attitudes of society as a whole.

Oduyoye’s aim is not to eliminate men from the equation. Instead, she aims to heal the brokenness between men and women. This is not only necessary for the liberation of women but also for the sake of the liberation of men. Then, men and women are able to participate together in renewing and re-building life-sustaining relationships (Nkansah-Obrempong 2007:145).

However, she seems better to attend to the socio-political and economic issues than to listening to the gospel. She seems to regard the poor as good and the rich as evil, and shows her hospitality to the poor and her hostility to the rich.

The gospel-liberation oriented model has tended either to read the whole Bible with the aid of the political or ideological key, or to neglect those parts that are not fitted to be read in this way. This happens because this model attempts to find ‘an immediate pragmatic connection’ between the problems arising from their own interests and the Bible, and then pick up ready-made answers from the biblical passages (Bosch 1991:443).

As Bosch (1991:446) points out, ‘work for justice can easily slip into a kind of ideological dogmatism, with the result that we may be perpetrating injustice while fighting for justice.’ In this sense, Bishop Alpheus Zulu’s remark should be remembered: ‘the statement “God is on the side of the oppressed” cannot simply be turned round; “the oppressed are on the side of God”’ (quoted by Bosch 1991:444).

The Word of God is the critique of all human actions. It must not be manipulated or quoted selectively to justify oppression, or to support an ideology.



## 6.4 DIALOGUE BETWEEN MBITI'S AND ODUYOYE'S UNDERSTANDING OF GOD

Both theologians emphasize the traditional African religio-cultural heritage in order to make the gospel meaningful and relevant in the African context.

Mbiti makes the problem of cultural and religious identity as his theme, whereas Oduyoye (1986a:45, 121-135; 2001a:10, 22) addresses the oppressive system against women in a traditional socio-cultural context. In this sense, Oduyoye is often somewhat critical of male Inculturation theologians and wants epistemological discontinuity from the African male theological perspective.

The following questions arise: If Mbiti's and Oduyoye's understanding of God are different, are the two theologies exclusive from each other, or is a dialogue possible between the two theologies? If each theology argues for its relevance in the African context, which of the two theological reflections on God is more fitted to the African context than the other?

### 6.4.1 Integral synthesis - theological unity?

In the last decade, several theologians have studied the relationship between the different theological trends in African theology.

After analyzing theologies of Ela, Oduyoye, Mveng, Adoukonou, Boulaga and Cone, Young III (1992a) suggested a 'Pan-African theology' with a focus on 'a praxis of struggle and mode of African spirituality' (Young III 1993:226).

Motlhabi (1994), who focused on the reciprocity between African theology and Black Theology, proposed an 'Integral African theology' that has common concerns but responds to the particularity of different contexts. Motlhabi (1994:14) says:

[T]he logical conclusion is that if South African Black theology is to extend its scope of reflection to traditional and current religio-cultural aspects, on the one hand, and African Theology to contemporary liberation concerns on the other hand, then there would be no need to have two main, distinct 'indigenous' theologies on the African continent.

According to Motlhabi, Black and African theology would only have a different name with the

same content, scope and method (Motlhabi 1994:121). Motlhabi proposes that ‘logic would seem to demand that a relevant theology for Africa should be African theology, particularly if its primary goal is to meet the overall needs of all the peoples of the continent.’

Martey (1993:69) classifies African theology into a ‘theology of Inculturation’ and a ‘theology of Liberation.’ He (1993:xi) asserts that the two trends of African theologies co-exist in ‘tension’ or ‘polarity’ because of the contextual factors that lead to different theological emphases. However, there is a broad commonness due to the common motif in the cultural and political struggles (Martey 1993:27). Therefore, they are not ‘contradictory’ but ‘complement’ each other as ‘two sides of the same process’ (Martey 1993:xi, 27). Consequently, Martey (1993:5) intends to resolve this tension or polarity with a ‘synthetic interpretation’ of inculturation and liberation.

According to Munga (1998:334), Martey’s aim is to ‘reconcile’ a tense relationship involving the ‘hermeneutics of inculturation’ and the ‘hermeneutics of liberation’.

Martey suggests an ‘integral synthesis approach’ as a means to overcome tension in the two trends of African theologies. On pursuing an integral synthesis of the two African theologies, Martey attempts to promote ‘new theological insights’ or ‘a new theological direction’ (1993:4, 141) and aims to form a ‘theological unity’ in Africa (1993:xi). As a result of synthesizing or integrating the two theologies into a new theology, Martey (1993:121-137) proposes ‘Black African theology’ as a unified theological system in Africa.

What is immediately apparent in the suggestions of Young III, Motlhabi and Martey is that many theologians have investigated the possibility of an integral method that overcomes the tension among the different trends of African theology.

Can the integral synthesis model, that tries to integrate two theologies into a new theology in order to form a ‘theological unity’ in Africa, be applied to AIT and AWT? Can Mbiti’s gospel-culture oriented model and Oduyoye’s gospel-liberation oriented model be integrated into a unified theological model as the integral synthesis model suggests? Or, do these two theologies remain two particular and independent trends which can simply not be synthesized?

Munga (1998:336) says that

It appears to me that Martey’s integral synthesis approach is developed from a negative understanding of ‘tension’ that leads him to direct his efforts towards uniting the two African theologies. However, I understand ‘tension’ not necessarily as negative. Contrary to Martey’s view, I would see ‘tension’ as a challenge that invokes urgent need for a

detailed and critical understanding of those factors that cause tension, and at times to allow the differences to remain.

According to Munga, ‘this approach not only undermines the creativity of African theologians, but also reduces the existing African theologies to what he calls ‘Black African theology’ (1998:339), even though Martey’s approach can be spoken of as an approach rooted in the African ‘wholistic conception of reality’ (Munga 1998:338).

Munga, therefore, does not attempt to solve the tension by melting the two theologies into one Black African theology. Rather Munga admits the tension and contradictions between theologies and attempts to pursue diversity, keeping each theology’s characteristics (Munga 1998:339).

Mbiti’s gospel-culture and Oduyoye’s gospel-liberation oriented model cannot be melted into a new united model. The difficulty of uniting the two theologies becomes clear when the two theologians’ different views concerning marriage and procreation are dealt with.<sup>10</sup>

Oduyoye contributed an article in a Festschrift for Mbiti (Olupona & Nyang 1993), in which she criticizes Mbiti’s view on marriage and procreation in detail. It demonstrates a striking contrast to Mbiti’s understanding of marriage and procreation.

For Mbiti, marriage is ‘a religious obligation’, ‘the center of existence’ (Mbiti [1969]1975:133; 1975a:104), and ‘a sacred duty’; a person who refuses to get married is to committing ‘a major offense’ to society (Mbiti 1975a:104). A person who is not married is not considered to be fully adult,

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<sup>10</sup> Mbiti and Oduyoye have different views on the practice of the gifts given in exchange for the bride. According to Mbiti ([1969]1975:140), this practice has been wrongly called ‘bride-wealth’, ‘bride-price’, or ‘bride-gift’, which are ‘inadequate’ or ‘misleading’. The terms used in African languages do not connote a commercial transaction.

Mbiti explains that ‘it is a token of gratitude on the part of the bridegroom’s people to those of the bride’ ([1969]1975:140) and ‘the legal instruments’ which authorize the marriage contract (1975a:108). In her home, the gift ‘replaces’ her, reminding her people that she is not dead but given away under ‘mutual agreement’ between the two families (Mbiti [1969]1975:140). Mbiti ([1969]1975:140) regards the marriage gift not as the economic exchange that indicates the economic worth of a woman in the market place, but as ‘the most concrete symbol of the marriage covenant and security’.

Oduyoye (1995c:133) also regards the marriage gifts not as an economic transaction, but as a part of a religious and spiritualizing ritual and as ‘a bonding factor that binds two families together.’ What Oduyoye concerns is the fact that the gifts are not reciprocal; the men’s family gives the gifts to the women’s family. There is no consideration of women’s personal biological or psychological needs in their life (Oduyoye 1995c:134).

As Musopole (1994:89) points out, to those who pay, the women are regarded as property. The custom of presenting a gift, therefore, becomes virtually a commercial transaction (Musopole 1994:88). Patriarchy, capitalism, and the desire of immortality are factors that abuse the marriage covenant. In the end, the marriage ceremony symbolizes the transfer of the control of a woman’s sexuality from her father or maternal uncle to her husband (Oduyoye 1995c:137).

Therefore, Oduyoye maintains that women become objects through the presentation of marriage gifts (1993b:356). Women see their worth according to the value of the marriage gifts in their marriage, and men are more confident of their control of women and secure ‘possession of the fruits of the wombs as well as of the women themselves’ (1993b:358). This cultural practice dehumanizes a woman, placing her in bonds to culture (Oduyoye 1995c:136).

but as ‘a rebel’, ‘a law-breaker’, ‘a curse’ to the community, ‘abnormal’ and ‘under-human,’ because he hinders ‘the flow of life through the individual’ (Mbiti [1969]1975:133; 1975a:104).

God commanded people to get married and bear children (Mbiti 1975a:105, 110). Procreation is the most important factor governing marriage and one of the most essential functions of women in Africa. Without procreation, marriage is not considered to be perfect (Mbiti [1969]1975:133; 1975a:112; cf. Oduyoye 1993b:344). Marriage and procreation are a unity. Therefore, the position of a woman is secured by her fertility. In his *Love and Marriage in Africa* (1973) Mbiti says that a woman’s ‘failure to bear children is worse than genocide’ and a childless marriage is ‘an irreparable humiliation’ and can become ‘a most painful and embarrassing situation’ in which ‘there is no source of comfort in traditional life’ (quoted by Oduyoye 1993b:349).

In most African societies, a marriage is linked to immortality. Mbiti (1975a:111) maintains that marriage and procreation are ‘intimately linked up with the religious beliefs about the continuation of life beyond death.’ By marriage and procreation, ‘the rhythm of life’ is extended (Mbiti 1975a:110), ‘the living torch of human existence’ is handed down (Mbiti 1975a:110), and thus human life is preserved (Mbiti 1975a:104).

Through procreation, the departed are in effect ‘reborn’ (Mbiti 1975a:111), and through ‘remembrance’ of the departed, the lost gift of personal immortality is regained (Mbiti [1969]1975:133, 134). Procreation fulfills the ancestral line. Therefore, marriage and procreation in Africa are considered as ‘a devise to beat death’ (Oduyoye 1993b:349) and as the meeting-point for the departed, the living and those to be born (Mbiti [1969]1975:133; 1975a:104).

It is the channel by which men reproduce themselves and continue the family name, and it is the channel by which women actualize their psycho-religious need to be the sources of life (Oduyoye 1995c:142).

Contrary to Mbiti’s view on marriage and procreation, Oduyoye notes that the African idea of marriage has been largely dictated by patriarchy. Oduyoye (1993b:352) rejects the marriage relationship as complementarity because the idea suggests that the men determine only what they cannot do and take wives to supply for their deficiency. This idea, to Oduyoye, entirely ignores the women’s own need to fulfill themselves.

Mbiti’s view on love and marriage comes from a man’s concern with marriage (Oduyoye 1993b:360-361). Marriage in Africa, therefore, seems to place women in the biological procreation and nurturing role at the expense of companionship between husband and wife.

Oduyoye (1993b) criticizes the male construction of African identity. According to Oduyoye (1993b:341-365), there are three special features of primary importance in the traditional view of marriage in Africa: the larger kin-group, or what is often called ‘extended’ family system; lesser focus on ‘companionship’ between husband and wife in the marriage; and the principal concern for children.

According to Oduyoye (1993b:346), the central focus of marriage in African society is immortality of kin-group and group solidarity. When descendents remember their father or mother who has died physically, they enter his or her ‘personal immortality’ (Mbiti [1969]1975:142). As Mbiti puts it, through marriage and procreation a person becomes immortalized. However, if African marriage and procreation are understood as a means of attaining a lost immortality, says Oduyoye (1995c:142), women are simply ‘objects of genetic and social transmission.’ Oduyoye (1993b:355) laments that ‘as long as procreation is linked directly with immortality and with the remembering of one’s forbearers, I do not see a way out.’

Oduyoye (1993b:347), therefore, criticizes the connection between immortality and procreation. An African context in which procreation is linked with immortality will keep polygyny<sup>11</sup> going in Africa (Oduyoye 1995c:143). Oduyoye (1993b:348) continues to ask whether procreation is the absolute way of insuring that a person is not cut off from personal immortality.

According to Mbiti ([1969]1975:133; cf., Oduyoye 1993b:348), a person who has no a descendant to remember him/her after his/her physical death becomes forever dead and simply disappears out of the world of the living-dead. Therefore, it is a religious obligation and responsibility for everyone to get married and bear children.

Rejecting Mbiti’s view on the procreation as a device of immortality, says Oduyoye, if

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<sup>11</sup> Among African peoples polygamy is a custom found all over Africa (Mbiti [1969]1975:142), while Western Christianity condemns it as immoral, undignified, and an outrageous exploitation of women (Musopole 1994:89).

Mbiti does not condemn polygamy on Biblical grounds and he rejects the formula that monogyny is good and polygamy is bad and totally sinful (Musopole 1994:91). Mbiti ([1969]1975:143) does acknowledge the problems in polygamous relationships: quarrels and fights among the wives and the children. Nevertheless, he points out that the problems of polygamous marriages are human problems and are not necessarily created by the polygamous marriage itself. Mbiti understands a polygamous arrangement as a partial regaining of a lost immortality.

Mbiti ([1969]1975:142) says that ‘the more wives a man has the more children he is likely to have, and the more children the stronger the power of ‘immortality’ in that family’. This arrangement provides an opportunity for most people to have more children. Many children improve the social status of the family, because the more productive a person is, the more he contributes to the existence of society (Mbiti [1969]1975:142). Polygamy helps to prevent or reduce unfaithfulness and prostitution (Mbiti [1969]1975:143). For economic reasons, this system provides abundant labour in time of need (Mbiti [1969]1975:142). However, it should be noted that polygamy is or can be an abuse and an exploitation of women’s sexuality and labour (Musopole 1994:90).

Surprisingly, Oduyoye agrees with Mbiti that polygyny does not necessarily rate lower than monogamy. It is a matter of choice. The critical issue is ‘progeny and inheritance’ that are linked with the issue of the immortality factor which stimulates the exploitation of women in African societies (Oduyoye 1993b:359). The procreation for ‘immortality and material possessions’ dehumanizes women (Oduyoye 1993b:359).

immortality is the matter of remembering the living-dead, the biological continued existence in one's descendant faces a fundamental problem. The necessity of connecting immortality to procreation reduces a person's immortality to a mere genetic survival in descendants' physical resemblance and characteristics (Oduyoye 1993b:350). If one's immortality is based on the remembering and naming by one's descendants, then when one's descendants die before one dies, who can guarantee one's immortality?

Oduyoye strongly claims that the oppressive elements concerning women in African culture and ATR(s) should be denied, refused, abolished, changed or transformed, while she recognizes the importance of the African religio-cultural heritage and still attempts to continue the dialogue between the gospel and culture. The criterion for abolishing or keeping a certain African cultural aspect is whether the cultural aspect has a liberative element for women or not.

In sum, different theologies cannot be and should not be integrated into one unified theology or 'a theological unity in Africa' because it has been conditioned by different existential contexts. Therefore, each theology's characteristics should be maintained, opposing unity in sameness and allowing mutual understanding and dialogue between the two.

#### **6.4.2 Mutual understanding - theological reciprocity**

The very nature of contextual theology recognizes a plurality of context and particularity of perspective. This particularity, however, does not mean isolation and does not exclude the characteristics of others (Bosch 1991:457; Munga 1998:360); a particular theology needs to listen to others and to have a dialogue with other theologies (Munga 1998:358), while maintaining its own starting point as well as its own primary purpose in African Christianity (Munga 1998:356).

There is tension between Mbiti's and Oduyoye's theology. But it is not necessary to think of the tension as mutual exclusiveness. It can rather be 'a creative tension' in the process of a mutual understanding of theology. The aim of mutual understanding of theology is 'unity within reconciled diversity' rather than uniformity (Bosch 1991:457). Therefore, instead of a total integration of the two theologies or mutual neglect by them, there is a need for a mutual exchange of perspectives between the two theologians (Maluleke 1996a:17; Munga 1998:354).

Munga (1998:354) insists that 'mutual neglect' has to be transformed into 'mutual acceptance' or



‘mutual understanding’ between the two African theologies. This exchange of perspectives between the theologies is to develop mutual understanding between the participants to promote authentic critique of each other, and to critically and adequately define their problems, aims and approaches in the context of the African Christianity (Munga 1998:369).

Creative interaction between different local theologies is necessary in order to avoid isolation, which leads to distortion and heresy (WCC 1999b:226; Ahonen 2003:169). This exchange of perspective among theologies at local level should be broadened to a dialogue with theologies in other parts of the world at global level. A particular contextual theology should be part of the theology of the universal church.

This does not mean that one theology has guidance over any other, but that all willingly have dialogue with persons and theologies of other cultures or other periods of time for the good of all and the glory of one Lord (Taber 1991:178).

Mbiti (1976b:16-17) once asked; ‘we [Africans] have eaten theology with you [European]. The question is, will you eat theology with us?’ Western theology needs a non-Western theology. African theology needs other perspectives on theology in order to avoid theological isolation and, as Newbigin points out, prevent ‘an illegitimate alliance with false elements’ in the African context (quoted by Walls 2001:69). African theology should not limit its attention to its own immediate issues, even though these will be primary concerns.

African Inculturation theology and African Women’s theology need each other to correct one another. Certain elements of African culture may help African Christians to enhance the understanding of God. Theological concerns with the contemporary African situation may help reflect the issues of socio-political injustice, economic exploitation, and gender inequality.

A truly contextual theology does not exclude other theologies (Bevans 1992:100; WCC 1996b:226); it rather opens a door to dialogue or an interaction between different theologies. This dialogue, says Newbigin, must be ‘open to the witness of churches in all other places, and this saves from absorption into the culture of that place’ (quoted by Goheen 2000:361).

According to Kombo (2003:206), inculturation puts the emphasis on ‘my culture.’ However, one should take a step that moves beyond cultural boundaries, and acknowledge ‘the other person’s culture.’ Therefore, the continuous task of all African theologians is to construct an African theology that is meaningful to the African people contextually on the one hand, and relevant to the world Christianity ecumenically on the other.

Interaction between theologies both at local and global level will be discussed in connection with the intercultural model of contextualization.



## 6.5 INTERCULTURATION MODEL OF CONTEXTUALIZATION

### 6.5.1 A definition of interculturalization

‘Inter-cultural,’<sup>12</sup> which implies a plurality of cultures, refers to the space as ‘a contact zone’ between different cultures (Küster 2005:417). Interculturalization, therefore, describes the process of interaction between multiple cultural orientations (Küster 2005:417). This term is very helpful to depict ‘the dialogue which is taking place in development between theology and culture’, putting emphasis on ‘a relationality beyond relativism, while refusing the standardization inherent’ to it (August 2006:15). Therefore, interculturalization is relational by nature and admits of differentiation. Interculturalization does not abandon the concept of inculturation; it rather widens the concept of inculturation to speak across cultural boundaries (Schreiter 1997:28).

In the intercultural process, therefore, traditional Western theology is not conceived as a privileged one over others. Even though theological reflection operates within a particular cultural context, it does not absolutize the context; it rather tries to build a bridge between diverse groups or cultures (Ustorf 2008:237).

In interaction and dialogue between the various sets of cultures, instead of legitimizing one’s own set of values and of competing with each other, the different cultures or groups try to communicate with each other (WCC 1999a:191), and each culture is required to be willing to embrace, listen to, and learn from the other (Akper 2006:7). The insider of a certain culture, therefore, can profit from the outsider, and the outsider has something to participate in constructing a local theology (Schreiter 1985:26-28; Bevans 1992:85).

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<sup>12</sup> ‘Inter’ means ‘between,’ ‘from one to the other.’ Inter-cultural refers to the space between cultures, or the culture in-between (Küster 2005:417).

In the terms, multiculturalism and multicultural, the prefix ‘multi’ means ‘having many of.’ Multi-cultural refers to several cultures that exist side by side in a society. It recognizes explicitly the existence of cultural differences (Küster 2005:417). Multiculturalism suggests, according to Balcomb, that there are different sets of values, belief systems, ways of life or ideologies, and the different groups express ‘different sets of values based on their own beliefs, understanding of the society within which they live, and on various myths that support their convictions’ (quoted by Akper 2006:1, 2). Therefore, ‘multicultural’ often emphasizes the heterogeneity of different ethnic groups in society (August 2006:15), and believes that there is no common ground, no interaction and no dialogue (quoted by Akper 2006:2).

Cross-cultural, which may describe the combination of different styles, illustrates the crossing of cultural boundaries for either comparing several cultures or for blending them with each other (Küster 2005:417). Cross-cultural refers to generalization that can be made about intercultural communication, based on the analysis of different intercultural encounters (Schreiter 1997:29).

Trans-cultural assumes anthropologic constants, which exist beyond cultural differences; trans-cultural hermeneutics moves beyond the existence of particular cultures or culture. Consequently one can state that ‘cultures do not exist’ (Küster 2005:418).

Therefore, the theological giving and receiving or theological mutual understanding should be done at the level of the process of the local incarnation of the gospel (inculturation) and the ecumenical dialogue with the other local incarnations (intercultuation) (Bosch 1991:457; Ustorf 2008:232). All theologies are also in need of ‘interculturation’, ‘exchange of theologies’ (Bosch 1991:456), or ‘dual identification’ (Wijsen 2003:274).

Then, what are the conditions for dialogue between those who hold to different perspectives across cultural boundaries?

De Wit suggests a brief summary of basic conditions to facilitate successful intercultural Bible reading. According to him, fruitful interaction needs (1) an attitude of openness to different perspectives and critique of oneself, and regarding one’s own faith insight as relative, (2) a basic knowledge of how these cultural differences can be acknowledged and understood, and (3) the insight that enables participants to discover the connection between the group’s own reading attitude and interpretation method and the partner group’s method and the results of their interpretation (quoted by Jonker 2006:27).

This insight can be applied to the interculturation model of contextualization for productive interaction between different theologies. One recognizes and accepts the others in and with their differences, and one will be challenged by the other and *vice versa* (Küster 2005:430).

The interculturation model of contextualization is concerned with the conditions that make communication of the different theological trends possible across cultural-theological boundaries. In this sense, the interculturation model of contextualization can be defined as consisting of the following elements: an open-minded attitude, with the habit of respect to the holders of different views (this ‘openness’ does not mean ‘a mere juxtaposition of ideas’ that do not improve another; Bevans 1992:88); the creation of dialogue with others; self criticism; be bridge-builders between different theological orientations.

## **6.5.2 Need for an interculturation model of contextualization**

The survival and durability of each theology depends on how clearly a particular theology argues for its relevance in the context (Munga 1998:358). However, contextualization or contextual theology is not a remedy for every ill, and the context is not to be taken as the sole and basic

authority for theological reflection (Bosch 1991:431). There are also dangers of contextualization, such as ethnocentrism, relativism, syncretism, and contextual priorities over Biblical authority. It is neither desirable to go back to ‘the ethnocentrism’ and ‘foreignness of noncontextualization’ nor to accept ‘the relativism’ and ‘syncretism’ (Hiebert 1994:86). In order to escape from the dangers of relativism, absolutism of contextualization, and syncretism, there is a need of a mutual process of theological giving and receiving.

### **6.5.2.1 Danger of relativism**

Christians cannot think about the gospel without its engagement within a cultural context. Therefore, the role of the context cannot be played down in doing theology.

In contextual theology, all aspects of human experience are understood as culturally determined, and then all value judgments are also recognized as culturally conditioned (Larkin 1988:21). The context of a person affects the person’s understanding of reality. In consequence, each context that exists in a particular time and space forms its own theology for the particular context, and each theology has its own right to articulate theological reflection for the context in which the theology is brought up. On this situation, Bosch (1991:457) remarks:

We may be tempted to over celebrate an infinite number of differences in the emergence of pluralistic local theologies and claim that not just each local worshipping community but even each pastor and church members may develop her or his own ‘local theology’.

If so, what and where is the theological criterion for judging among theologies to determine the truth? The result is theological relativism. According to Larkin (1988:18), relativism is the view that

beliefs and principles, particularly evaluative ones have no universal validity but are valid only for the age in which, or the social group or individual person by which they are held.

Therefore, ‘values and morals are relative to their socio-cultural context’ and one culture cannot be considered to be superior to another (Larkin 1988:21).

However the most critical issue of contextualization is that it is not easy to comprehend what people mean by the term ‘context’.

Taber (1991:177) paraphrases Stackhouse' expressions of 'How big is a here?' 'How long is a now?' 'Is Africa a context?' 'Is West Africa a context?' 'Is Ghana?' 'Is Ashanti?' and 'is Kumasi?' The answer can be 'yes' in each case. Concerning the context's scale and scope, both in space and in time, Taber's remark (1991:177) is worth mentioning:

For that matter, for the same purposes, the whole world, or some apparently arbitrary set of places in the world, can be a context that needs to be taken into consideration in missiology. How big the context is and exactly what it includes all depends on what issue you are talking about.

Theology should not only represent the reality of a particular people situated in a particular time and space, but also keep the faith traditions which all Christians share and which should be respected and preserved (Bosch 1991:427).

### **6.5.2.2 Danger of absolutism of contextualization**

When theology only emphasizes the context, it becomes linked to the danger of 'absolutism of contextualization' (Bosch 1991:428) or 'contextualism'<sup>13</sup> (Stackhouse 1988:10).

According to Bosch (1991:432), contextualization has a constant danger that attempts to allow the context to determine the nature and content of theology for that context. There seems to be no 'text' outside the context that tends to be all-determinative (Ahonen 2003:177).

However, the context itself is not normative and absolute. When a group or context is regarded as privileged or absolute, another is excluded or ignored (Bevans 1992:100).

A deep motive for their hope of de-Westernizing the gospel and of keeping their own cultural identity stimulated African theologians to attempt to 'indigenize' Christianity. However, their over emphasis on African context and African cultural superiority in doing theology may encourage ethnocentrism that African theologians vehemently have criticized and rejected, criticizing Western theology as a product of Western ethnocentrism.

The gospel is not spoken by the context but to the context (Smit 2003b:147). Theology must not be reduced to a product of its surrounding context.

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<sup>13</sup> 'Contextualization' stands in the sharpest tension with 'contextualism'. Contextualism is the view that anything we can say, believe, think, or claim is, and must be, understood as a reflection of the context in which it is found, and that anything we can say, believe, think, or claim must be directly pertinent to the needs of the context. Otherwise, it is judged to be 'abstract' (Stackhouse 1988:10).

### 6.5.2.3 Danger of syncretism

In the encounter of the gospel with culture, the gospel must be translated in such a way that people may understand its true meaning (Nicholls 1979:28; Hiebert 1994:49). The interactions between the gospel and culture inevitably raise the question of syncretism (Hiebert 1994:86).

For anthropologists, who do not have a notion of traditions as ‘purity’, the term ‘syncretism’ has been understood as neutral and positive (Shaw & Stewart 1994:1). According to Berlin, this term is ‘a transparent, descriptive term’, referring to the ‘borrowing, affirmation, or integration of concepts, symbols, or practices of one religious tradition into another by a process of selection and reconciliation’ (quoted by van der Veer 1994:196).

Therefore, some modern scholars redefine syncretism as a natural or neutral mixture of elements between religions (Ott & Strauss 2010:275). In this case, the basic meaning of syncretism refers neutrally and descriptively to the mixing of religions (Droogers 1989:7).

In African Christianity, the term is usually either avoided because it has been generally regarded as a betrayal of truth (van der Veer 1994:197), or employed in a neutral way to designate the mixture of Christianity and indigenous elements as diverse ‘local versions of Christianity’ or ‘local interpretations’ that are articulated in independent churches (Meyer 1994:45).<sup>14</sup>

According to Oduyoye, African Christianity as a cultural expression of the gospel has interacted with ATR(s) during various periods (2003:39), and this process can be recognized as the process of syncretism that is common to the development of any other religion (2003:47). Oduyoye maintains that syncretism is a ‘positive and unavoidable process’ in the inculturation of Christianity into the African religious context (1979:114) and, therefore, creative syncretism should be encouraged and developed in Africa (1979:110).

If syncretism is defined as a natural system adapting and conforming ideas or practices from another religious system, then any cultural expression of the gospel and everything related to contextualization can be inherently syncretistic. In consequence, the church and theology that are related to contextualization are intrinsically syncretistic (Pocock, Van Rheenen & McConnell 2005:331).

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<sup>14</sup> Some members of mission churches interpret ‘syncretism’ to imply ‘inauthenticity or contamination, the infiltration of a supposedly pure tradition.’ Critical African intellectuals see them as ‘victims of Western missionary dominance’, who are not capable of synthesizing African traditional religions and Christianity and who live in a divided consciousness. Therefore, they ‘slide back’ into traditional religion when Christianity is not successful to give them an adequate solution for their existential problems (Meyer 1994:45).

Such a definition, however, ignores the Biblical emphasis on God's absolute truth, which is the foundation and measure of all interaction with culture (Ott & Strauss 2010:275). Both the Old Testament (e.g., Deut 12:4; Judg. 2:19; 2 Kings 17:16-17) and the New Testament (e.g., Col. 2:8-23) clearly direct God's people to reject their natural tendency to blend 'God-revealed truth and God-acceptable practice' with the dominant non-Biblical beliefs and practices (Ott & Strauss 2010:275).

A real danger in contextualization, therefore, is that one could mix the gospel and local tradition in a way that compromises, distorts and betrays the essence of the gospel in a local context (Loewen 1981:127; Schreiter 1985:102; Bevans 1992:17).

According to Luzbetak, syncretism is 'a theologically untenable amalgam' (quoted by Schreiter 1985:146). Syncretism attempts to blend diverse or conflicting religious practices, beliefs, systems or tenets into a unified system that is 'a new thing, neither one nor the other,' not succeeding to maintain its basic element and identity (Tippett 1975:17; Nicholls 1979:29; Schreiter 1985:144). Moreau says that syncretism is 'the replacement or dilution of the essential truths of the gospel through the incorporation of non-Christian elements' (quoted by Ott & Strauss 2010:275).

Even though one of the causes of syncretism is a failure of the gospel to penetrate the inner culture of people, other causes should not be ignored: an overemphasis on the role of context and a corresponding underemphasis on the role of the Bible (Ott & Strauss 2010:275-276). It should be noted that the importance of keeping the gospel message pure and unadulterated has been a constant concern of the Christian church.

#### **6.5.2.4 Overcoming provincialism**

Historically, there has been the swing of the pendulum in doing theology in Africa. According to Hiebert (1994:69-70), during the colonial era, theologians spoke of theology as a universal, objective system of truth, while in the anticolonial reaction, they spoke of 'theologies' as particularist, subjective understandings of truth. During the colonial era, the text was emphasized, and the cultural and historical context was ignored. In the anticolonial era, the context was emphasized, while the text was given little attention.

In fact, there is no eternal theology, no *theologia perennis*, which may take reference over 'local theologies' (Bosch 1991:456). When the gospel is communicated to people, the gospel speaks to the people in and through their way of expression, such as through their language and symbols. Mbiti (1970b:431) states that

Christianity is a universal and cosmic faith. Our duty now is to localize this universality and cosmicity. We must Africanize it. It belongs to the very nature of Christianity to be subject to localization, otherwise its universality and cosmicity becomes meaningless.

Evangelization is primarily an act of proclaiming Christianity's universality and cosmicity; africanization is an act of localization. Localization means translating the universality of the Christian faith into a language understood by the peoples of a given region. Evangelization and localization went hand in hand.

However, what contextual theology requires is particularity or uniqueness that comes from one's own particular place or context, not isolation from 'the wider community of faith,' both around the world and throughout history (Mostert 2003:196).

Therefore, 'a dilution and loss of the Christian message in the local context' should not occur (Schreiter 1985:102). Contextual theologies that are rooted in concrete contexts must relate 'the community-based nature of theology' to the large contexts of the church (Schreiter 1985:22). Catholicity is not the destruction or overwhelming of the local (WCC 1999a:190).

Bosch (1991:427, 428) maintains that both 'the essentially contextual nature of all theology' or '*theologia localis*' and 'the universal and context-transcending dimensions of theology' or '*theologia oecumenica*' should be affirmed simultaneously.

According to Bosch (1991:457; cf. Ahonen 2003:170), therefore, one has to be 'de-provincialized' and act locally but think globally, combining 'a micro-perspective with a macro-perspective' in order to nurture the contact with the wider church. For this reason, Bosch pleads for a 'truly catholic theology' that is not a new monolithic superstructure but a zone in which people can communicate creatively with one another (Ahonen 2003:169).

Therefore, it should be avoided to have the ingrown 'homogenous unit' churches and an infinite number of individualistic local theologies (Bosch 1991:456). In order to overcome theological provincialism, contextual theology must open itself to the judgment of other theologies and enter into a process of dialogue and interaction with the heritage of the church and the larger number of Christians (Mostert 2003:189; Schreiter 1985:37).

As Berkhof (1985:72) suggests, the theology that transcends its contextual limitation can be promoted by applying the truths that have been formulated in other cultural contexts.

In this sense, theology should have 'an ability to speak beyond its own context, and an openness to hear voices from beyond its own boundaries' (Schreiter 1997:4).



### 6.5.2.5 Balancing Christian identity and cultural identity

Küster (2005:423) says that there is a ‘relevance-identity dilemma’ between the gospel and the context in doing contextual theology.

With regard to the context, ‘the relevance’ of the gospel for each particular context should be stressed (Küster 2005:423). Indeed, it cannot be disputed that the gospel is always embodied in the concrete context, and all theology is essentially contextual. For theologians who emphasize a particular historical or cultural identity, ‘authenticity of expression of one’s religious and cultural identity’ is more important than a particular content that exists in the ‘transcultural realm’ (Bevans 1992:100, 101).

Therefore, African theologians employ indigenous ideas and language in order not only to communicate the gospel message, but also to affirm their identity through their own cultural forms and value systems.

With regard to the gospel, the contextual theology needs to be continually evaluated by the identity of the Christian message (Küster 2005:423). The context and the needs or interests of people do not determine what is believed; rather the gospel speaks to the context and the needs or interests of people, and the gospel even judges them (Smit 2003b:147).

According to Kombo (2000:192), it is possible to construct a Christian theology that affirms both a true cultural identity and a valid Christian identity simultaneously. The issue is that how a cultural expression of the gospel in a particular culture can be understood and interpreted in the other culture? How can the gospel be relevant to and involved in culturally different contexts, while maintaining its Christian identity?

In order to respond positively to this question, it is necessary to claim that conversion does not mean a denial of one’s own culture, or that the gospel and traditional culture are not mutually exclusive (Van den Bosch 2009:530). Christ did not bring a new culture and he did not destroy the Jewish culture; rather the gospel renews and transforms culture. Gilliland (1989:10) says:

True theology is the attempt on the part of the church to explain and interpret the meaning of the gospel for its own life and to answer questions raised by the Christian faith, using the thoughts, values, and categories of truth which are authentic to that place and time.

If a theology limits itself within a specific culture, it isolates theology from the Christian identity that has been closely connected with ‘the 2000 years of Christian heritage’ (Kombo 2003:216).

In order to prevent theological isolation and to discern whether a theology has a ‘Christian identity’ or ‘Christian character’, a contextual theology has to be consistent with ‘the shared heritage of faith’ (Mostert 2003:196). If a particular contextual theology wants to be a genuine Christian theology, the cultural identity in the theology should fit the Christian identity.<sup>15</sup>

What is Christian identity? Christian identity is the Christian character that is faithful to the Christian faith and the heritage of faith or Christian tradition. Mostert (2003:184-185) says that Christian faith is formed by the stories of and about God who revealed himself in the Bible and these stories are explicitly doctrinal that are ‘doxological in nature’ as well as ‘explicatory and regulative.’

From the early formative years of Christianity, there was ‘a rule of faith’ that was a summary of essential Christian teaching’, or, in Kelly’s phrase, ‘the doctrinal content of the Christian faith.’ It became the foundation of ‘any given teaching or theology spoken with an authentic Christian voice about the economy of salvation’ (Mostert 2003:196).

Christian theologians have articulated the basic elements in the heritage of faith, including the doctrine of the Trinity, and the economy of salvation, from creation to eschaton. Christian doctrines as the teaching of the church have been formulated and tested from the end of the first century onward and have formed the backbone of the theology of the church (Mostert 2003:196). In this sense, the essential Christian doctrine is a constitutive part of the church’s heritage of faith (Mostert (2003:196).

The heritage of faith can be called, by a variety of expressions, as tradition, magisterial theology, the loci of orthodoxy, the faith of the church, and the body of Christian doctrine. The heritage of faith or tradition is understood as more than Christian doctrine. It includes many diverse aspects of church life, such as the spiritual, liturgical, ethical and political wisdom of the church (Schreiter 1985:116f;

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<sup>15</sup> A genuine contextual theology is to fit the specific context without giving up the Christian identity. Schreiter (1985:118-119) names five criteria for deciding the genuineness of a particular local theological expression: (1) the cohesiveness that is one of the factors giving identity to a community (Schreiter 1985:118). Theological reflection should have an ‘inner consistency’ or ‘basic direction’ of Christianity. For example, the teaching of Arius on Jesus was not consistent with the basic direction of Christianity. If Jesus was not truly God, then we were not saved, for only God can save. So, Arius’s teaching was rejected (Bevans 1992:18); (2) a genuine expression of contextual theology should be translated into worship (Schreiter 1985:118). The way we pray indicates the way we believe. Christians prayed to Christ as God, not as a creature. Arius, therefore, was judged to be wrong (Bevans 1992:18); (3) the praxis of the community is one of the criteria (Schreiter 1985:119). A theology that justifies an oppressive *status quo* would be wrong, and a theology that calls for violent action against the oppressive *status quo* would not be right (Bevans 1992:19); (4) the judgment of other churches (Schreiter 1985:119). A theological expression should be open to criticism from other theological reflections and churches (Bevans 1992:19); and (5) the challenge to other churches. If a theology positively challenges various other contextual theologies, such vitality is a sign that it is a genuine expression of faith (Bevans 1992:19).

Mostert 2003:194-195).

Yves Congar defines tradition as ‘what is handed on or over’ by ‘the act of transmission’ (quoted by Rakoczy 2011:92). In the process of transmission, one generation hands over something that forms the identity of persons and communities to another generation. Tradition is consistently in a dynamic process because those who share tradition are in conversation with the past and in debate with each other about its meaning for the present (de Gruchy 2011:12).

In religious meaning, says Terrence Tilley, tradition can be defined as ‘an enduring practice’ including ‘a vision (belief), attitudes (dispositions, affections), and patterns of action’ (quoted by Rakoczy 2011:92).

MacIntyre defines a living tradition as ‘a historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely about the goods which constitute that tradition’ (quoted by Vosloo 2010:25).

According to MacIntyre, a living tradition as a *historically extended* argument implies the character of traditions and our views on specific matters cannot be disconnected from historical developments (Vosloo 2010:25).

A tradition as a *socially embodied* argument means that reflection on tradition should be done within communities, that is, in ‘the larger and longer histories of a number of traditions’ (Vosloo 2010:25).

By a tradition as an *argument*, MacIntyre maintains that the essential agreements in a tradition are defined and redefined in the process of conflict that comes from within and without (Vosloo 2010:25).<sup>16</sup>

With regard to ‘tradition’ or the ‘heritage of faith’ that Christians share, Schreier (1985:95) maintains that ‘any local theology that is truly Christian has to be engaged with the tradition’ and adds that, ‘without that engagement, there is no guarantee of being part of the Christian heritage.’

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<sup>16</sup> MacIntyre is deeply aware that traditions decay, disintegrate and disappear. As a tradition is confronted with new situations, established beliefs and practices may reveal a lack of resources to provide answers for the new questions that arise. Such a development ‘may open up new alternative possibilities and require more than the existing means of evaluation are able to provide’ (Vosloo 2010:26).

During a first stage the relevant texts, beliefs and authorities have not yet come into question. Then follows a second stage in which inadequacies and limitations have been identified, but not yet remedied. This situation can lead to a third stage in which there is a response to the inadequacies, resulting in reformulations and re-evaluations designed to remedy the inadequacies and to overcome the limitations. There seem to be insufficient resources within the established fabric of belief to respond to the crisis, resulting in the dissolution of historically-founded certitudes. MacIntyre describes this as an ‘epistemological crisis.’ How traditions respond to an epistemological crisis determines whether they will attain intellectual maturity (Vosloo 2010:27).

An epistemological crisis can play a positive role in the building up of a tradition, successfully enabling ‘the adherents of a tradition of enquiry to rewrite its history in a more insightful way.’ Such a history does not only provide a way of identifying continuity with the past, but also supplies the structure that underpins the justification of truth claims. Viewed from a theological perspective, this remark points to the interesting (inter-) connection between theological innovation and new projects of theological historiography (Vosloo 2010:27).

According to Schreier (1985:105), tradition provides ‘resources for identity’ with the individual and the community, and ‘cohesion and continuity’ to a culture and the individuals who live in the community, and ‘resources for incorporating innovative aspects into a community.’ Therefore, tradition has some essential aspects: ‘credibility’, ‘intelligibility to the members of a culture’ (Schreier 1985:107), and authority that could be equated with ‘normativeness’ (Schreier 1985:108).

Christian identity is closely linked with Christian tradition. Christian tradition provides Christian identity with Christian community. Without the Christian tradition, there is no Christian identity in the Christian community. Identity is not given, but achieved and agreed upon. If there is no Christian identity, Christian individual and community cease to be linked with the Christian tradition (Schreier 1985:106).

Any contextual theology cannot stand as Christian theology if it does not hold a Christian identity that is sustained by the Christian tradition.

African theology, therefore, should have the willingness to acknowledge the Christian tradition of the past, and to be bound to it and by it in order to be an African Christian theology.

Of course, there should be a difference between ‘traditionalism’ and the ‘living tradition.’ African theology should be bound to tradition and by tradition, not traditionalism. According to Pelikan, ‘tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living’ (quoted by Vosloo 2010:21).

Concerning Christian identity and cultural relevance, Bosch (1991:427) comments;

Christians find their identity in the cross of Christ, which separates them from superstition and unbelief but also from every other religion and ideology; they find their relevance in the hope of the reign of the Crucified One by taking their stand resolutely with those who suffer and are oppressed.

Even though theologies are ‘partial and they are culturally and socially biased,’ there are universal dimensions transcending the contexts. The faith tradition that is shared by all Christians should be respected and preserved (Bosch 1991:427).

In this sense, African theology should manifest its ‘transcending dimensions of theology’ by affirming the Christian tradition that has been contested from inside and challenged from outside and developed across generations and over time (de Gruchy 2011:19).

## 6.6 AFRICAN EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY: SOME CRITERIA

The discussion of the intercultural model of contextualization leads us to think about the direction in which African theological reflection should go. In the twenty first century, African theologians need to ‘shape’ and ‘redirect’ the good things that are in African culture and ‘reform’ the bad things without becoming a replica of Western theology and Western Christianity and without compromising the gospel message (Mashau & Frederiks 2008:122). Therefore, this study presents an African evangelical theology with its provisional criteria.

### 6.6.1 A definition of ‘evangelical’

Evangelicalism is a network that reflects a particular distinctive of Christian doctrine and practice (Larsen 2007:7; Nkansah-Obrempong 2010:294). David Bebbington, in his *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (1989), defined evangelicalism by identifying its four distinguishing marks: conversionism, activism, Biblicism, and crucicentrism - that is, evangelicals emphasize conversion experiences; an active laity sharing the gospel and engaged in good works; the Bible; and salvation through the work of Christ on the cross (quoted by Larsen 2007:1).

In this study, evangelicals (with evangelicalism or evangelical theology) can be characterized by four characteristics: (1) an orthodox Protestant in accordance with Nicene orthodoxy (Larsen 2007:1, 4); (2) those who accept the Bible, which is the collection of God’s written revelation to his people, as the divinely inspired and final authority in matters of faith, theological convictions, and Christian practice (Larsen 2007:1; König 1998:83; Klein 1998:321; Nkansah-Obrempong 2010:294); (3) those who stress reconciliation with God through the atoning work of Jesus Christ on the cross and faith in Christ as the means of salvation (Larsen 2007:1,7; König 1998:83; Nkansah-Obrempong 2010:294); and (4) those who stress the work of the Holy Spirit, who regenerates, effects transformation in believers’ lives, and makes believers proclaim the gospel to people (Larsen 2007:1; König 1998:83; Nkansah-Obrempong 2010:294).

African evangelical theology, therefore, upholds these three essential characteristics: the Bible as inspired, authoritative, and true for faith and practice; its commitment on the centrality of the cross of Christ for salvation; and the Holy Spirit who works in the life of an individual, proclaims the gospel and calls the world to repentance and faith (Nkansah-Obrempong 2010:294; Ott & Strauss 2010:315).

## 6.6.2 Criteria for African evangelical theology

If theology and Christianity can be deepened on the point of cultural accommodation, in Mbiti's phrase, at 'African religiosity' (Mbiti 1970b:431), or interpretation of the gospel has to be relevant to particular communities in particular contexts, in keeping with African mentality and needs, what are the safeguards against cultural romanticism and nationalistic and theological parochialism? What kind of criteria can be brought into play to discern and test whether theologians articulate a theology that is both faithful to the gospel and relevant to the particular culture?

### 6.6.2.1 Critical contextualization

In general, evangelical theology, which upholds an authoritative and normative view of the Bible, does not easily lend itself to 'culturally-sensitive contextualization' (Hundley 1993:4). However, Biblical authority and the relevance of Biblical interpretation to people's lives should be balanced.

If the church and theology reject a cultural form that the gospel is conveyed in and employ a cultural form of the gospel from another culture, the gospel will be irrelevant to the culture (Goheen 2000:365). On the contrary, if the cultural expression of the gospel is absorbed into the culture of one local place without considering God's Word of judgment, the culture is easily validated and the gospel is domesticated into its present form and structure, and syncretism will be the result (Bosch 1991:455; Goheen 2000:356).

Moltmann warns against both 'fossil theology' that keeps faithfulness without relevance and 'chameleon theology' that holds relevance without faithfulness (quoted by Goheen 2000:337).

Theology does not simply listen to, speak for or speak from a context; it also speaks to that context (Smit 2003b:148). According to Ferdinando (2007:137), 'retention of cultural identity' does not rely on 'renewal of the pre-Christian religion'; rather identity should be 'reaffirmed or recreated, and completed' through the gospel. Although conversion to Christ or Christianity does not imply a total loss of cultural identity, the gospel brings about a change in his or her culture not by 'wholesale negation' but by progressive 'transformation.'

Hiebert (1994:88-89) suggests a 'critical contextualization' in which a particular culture is to be carefully examined in light of the gospel by a group of Christians or by the universal hermeneutical community as the body of Christ. 'Uncritical contextualization' cannot stand against Biblical and

theological distortion (Hiebert 1994:84).

According to Hiebert (1994:88-89), as the first step of critical contextualization, it is necessary to study the local culture phenomenologically. This exegesis of the culture is to understand the full meaning and implications of the practices.

Secondly, the Bible should be studied in relation to the question. By exegesis of the Bible, an understanding of the original meaning of the text will help people grow in their abilities to discern the good and bad things in their culture. Without this, Biblical meanings will often be forced to fit local cultural categories, distorting the message. The gospel cannot simply be identified with culture, nor can the culture be regarded as something merely to be rejected.

The third step is to critically evaluate their own beliefs and customs in the light of the new Biblical understanding, and to make responses and decisions about their past practices based on the teaching of the Bible and the new truths they discovered. The gospel is not simply information to be communicated, but a message to which people must respond.

Finally, a new contextualized practice is to be developed.

Bavinck (1960:178-179) maintains that the Christian life takes the old cultural forms ‘in possession’ and changes them:

Within the framework of the non-Christian life, customs and practices serve idolatrous tendencies and drive a person away from God. The Christian life takes them in hand and turns them in an entirely different direction; they acquire an entirely different content. Even though in external form there is much that resembles past practices, in reality everything has become new, the old has in essence passed away and the new has come... [Christ] fills each thing, each word, and each practice with a new meaning and gives it new direction. Such is neither ‘adaptation’ nor accommodation; it is in essence the legitimate taking possession of something by him to whom all power is given heaven and on earth.

Critical contextualization is a process of ongoing critical interaction in which certain elements of culture might continuously be challenged, criticized, and transformed so that the Biblical elements are retained while non-Biblical elements are judged and rejected (Hiebert 1994:186-190; Thomson 2006:40).



### 6.6.2.2 Catholic

Although the church in every context has the right and the privilege of self-theologizing, no local theology can be separated from the theology of the whole church around the world and throughout the centuries (Ott & Strauss 2010:276). Contextualization takes place not as an individual affair, but in a congregation that seeks to embody the Christian faith (Goheen 2000:360; Pocock, Van Rheenen & McConnell 2005:322).

Contextualized theology, therefore, is the creation of the particular church that reflects on its own life in light of God's Word and of the whole church (Gilliland 1989:12). The 'privatization of faith' and 'personal misinterpretations' of the Bible should be corrected and remedied by the 'corporate nature of the church' as 'a hermeneutical community of interpretation' (Hiebert 1994:48, 71, 91).

The 'corporate nature of the hermeneutical task' extends not only to the church in every culture, but also to the church in all ages, and Christians and theologians from different cultures test one another's cultural biases (Hiebert 1994:48, 91). This mutual process of correctness will demonstrate that how one's particular biases have distorted one's understanding and interpretation of the Bible (Hiebert 1994:48, 91). Therefore, theology must not be the task of individuals but of the whole church.<sup>17</sup> Bevens (1992:18) maintains that

When the church as a whole seems to accept a particular theological teaching, one can trust that the *sensus fidelium* is in operation and that the expression is a genuine one.

Any contextual theology, therefore, should be directed in the same direction as other key repositories, such as the ancient creeds, the confessions and the faith statements of the church (Bevens 1992:18; Ott & Strauss 2010:288). It can be said that we are catholic because we share a unity in the same formulation of faith or doctrine with all members of the body of Christ around the world (Ott & Strauss 2010:315).

Any authentic understanding of the gospel is both contextual and catholic.<sup>18</sup> The gospel is

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<sup>17</sup> It should be noted that public theology strongly repudiates the notion that theology is simply a self-expression of the church's own self-understanding. Theology ought not to remain exclusively in the church. It has responsibilities to the wider culture. Consequently, it belongs as much in a modern university and in the wider culture and not simply within the churches (Gener 2009:121).

<sup>18</sup> Catholicity does not mean a universality that sweeps away particular identities, but is the expression of the fullness of the faith or truth that has been handed down from the apostles (Schreiter 1997:xi) and has been experienced in each particular context (WCC1999b:226). According to Siegfried Wiedenhofer, 'catholicity' can be understood as 'wholeness and fullness through exchange and communication' (quoted by Schreiter 1997:128); 'wholeness' that refers to the physical extension of the church throughout the world and 'fullness' that refers to orthodoxy in faith through 'exchange and communication' that corresponds to 'the mode of universality communication' (Schreiter 1997:128).

contextual in that it is inevitably embodied in a particular culture; it is catholic in that it expresses the apostolic faith handed down from generation to generation within the one catholic church in every culture and through all ages (WCC1999b:226).

African theology should be relevant to the Africans and should also prepare a way of sharing theological reflection with the whole church around the world. Smit (2003b:153-154) rightly points out:

Contextual interpretations can contribute to a fuller interpretation of the Gospel and can thereby speak to the Christian community as a whole. ... Accordingly, catholicity binds all local communities together, thereby allowing them to contribute to one another's understanding and to broaden their horizons.

Any contextual theology should be developed in harmony with the doctrinal content of the Christian faith and church's heritage of faith or Christian tradition.

Therefore, the theological task that African theology faces is to keep the balance of practicing relevant theology to the local church and of keeping reciprocity with the universal church and theological environment.

### **6.6.2.3 Biblical**

In the atmosphere that emphasizes cultural rehabilitation as a step to regain political independence, African scholars have studied ATR(s) and culture and used the findings of their studies as prerequisites to do African theology, and elevated ATR(s) to be comparable to Christianity. It seems that some African theologians strive to make an impression that 'the only good Christianity or theology for Africa' is the one that has been expressed through the African culture and thought system. African theological scholarship has not reflected its theological works from the perspective of 'Biblical accuracy' and 'Christian theological soundness' (Turaki 1999:17). Therefore, the centrality of the Bible and the process of biblically examining the African traditional religious heritage have been rather overlooked.

Mbiti says, 'as long as African theology keeps close to Scripture, it will remain relevant to the life of the church in Africa and it will have lasting links within the theology of the church universal' (Mbiti 1979a:90). However, by rejecting the distinction between the general revelation and special

revelation and stressing the ontological continuity and identification between the African God and the Christian God, Mbiti betrays his own intention to remain close to the Bible, and undermines the sufficiency and finality of the Bible and the uniqueness and centrality of Christ in African theology.

Oduyoye locates her starting point in the needs of the people, more specifically the experience of African women who suffer. She seems to read the Bible in order to find answers to the problems arising from her own concerns. Reading the Bible in this way can be dangerous because it can manipulate the Bible to justify her own view. In consequence, the context has priority over the text. When a theological expression is clearly un-Christian such as 'hatred of the oppressor', this theological articulation cannot be regarded as orthodox, even though the articulation might be meaningful in the context.

Both Mbiti's gospel-culture oriented model of contextualization and Oduyoye's gospel-liberation oriented model of contextualization have paid little attention to the 'supracultural standard' by which they should evaluate the interaction they attempt to construct between Biblical revelation, African beliefs and the contemporary African situation.

They are opposed to absolutizing theology. However, they seem to absolutize their context and contextual theology. Mbiti and Oduyoye emphasize African traditional religio-cultural heritage and the experience of women in Africa.

Context functions as an important role in doing theology to make the gospel relevant to culture. However, the context cannot be the decisive and final factor in the process of doing theology.

Contextualization that replaces the Bible with culture or the most recent analytic methods of social science will eventually result in a relativism in which communities merely apply standards meaningful or useful to them rather than God's standards (Pocock, Van Rheenen & McConnell 2005:322).

According to Newbiggin, faithful contextualization involves three things: faithfulness to Scripture; a dialogue with the local culture that avoids syncretism and irrelevance; and a dialogue with the ecumenical fellowship that avoids ethnocentric absolutism and relativism (quoted by Goheen 2000:353). Bosch (1991:187) indicates the epistemological priority of the Bible as the point of orientation of the dialogue between Christians.

Theology must undoubtedly always be relevant and contextual, but this may never be pursued at the expense of God's revelation in and through the history of Israel and, supremely, the event of Jesus Christ. Christians take seriously the epistemological

priority of their classical text, the Scriptures.... I am, however, suggesting a ‘point of orientation’ all Christians (should) share and on the basis of which the dialogue between them becomes possible. No individuals or group has a monopoly here.

Too much clinging to cultural identity and political agenda weakens a Biblical examination of ATR(s) and makes African theology distant from the Biblical teaching that is held as supreme and final. Turaki (1999:25) rightly comments that

African traditional religions and culture must be rehabilitated, but its pursuit cannot ignore the primacy and authority of the Bible. The quest for integrating the biblical data and the gospel of Christ with the pre-Christian heritage must be done in the light of the overriding authority and the guiding light of the Bible and the Holy Spirit.

The claim that the Bible is the Word of God is the heart of the Protestant Reformation (Smit 2003b:149). The Christian’s ultimate loyalty is to the Bible, and all theology must begin with the Bible and take the Bible seriously as the final authority in all matters of faith and practices.<sup>19</sup>

Therefore, the cultural context should constantly be brought under, measured, and reinterpreted by the authoritative Word of God, and this authoritative Word of God must always have priority over the cultural context (Hiebert 1994:91; Goheen 2000:360).

#### **6.6.2.4 Centrality and finality of Christ**

Along with *sola scriptura*, the axiom of *solus Christus*, the uniqueness and centrality of the cross of Christ for salvation, has been a hallmark of theologies after the Protestant Reformation. ‘The centrality of Christ and the principle of canonicity’ is the foundation of ecumenism that strengthens the whole church (Ott & Strauss 2010:315). According to Mashau (2003:134), the uniqueness of Christ guarantees and secures ‘the priority of divine revelation’ and ‘the sovereignty of divine grace in incarnation and redemption.’

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<sup>19</sup> The Lausanne Covenant; ‘Culture must always be tested and judged by Scripture ...The gospel does not presuppose the superiority of any culture to another, but evaluates all cultures according to its own criteria of truth and righteousness and insists on moral absolutes in every culture’ (The Lausanne Covenant # 10, quoted by Bevens 1992:122).

Manila Manifesto; ‘We must understand the context in order to address it, but the context must not be allowed to distort the gospel’ (Manila Manifesto # 10, quoted by Bevens 1992:122).

As a Christian, Mbiti seems to be convinced that the revelation in Jesus is God's ultimate revelation. At the same time, Mbiti, as an African, is convinced that God revealed himself to the African long before Christianity arrived in Africa.

Even though Mbiti is vague and inconsistent, and even antinomic concerning the question of the relation of ATR(s) to the gospel, Mbiti mainly gives the impression that ATR(s) are the true revelation of God and have a salvific power. By this claim, Mbiti betrays a Christocentric understanding of revelation; instead, a universalistic theocentric view, as a stepping stone to religious pluralism, seems to have taken root. The issue of universal salvation does not directly connect to religious pluralism, but is compatible with religious pluralism as a motive. When African monotheism is stressed, the acceptance or even a tendency towards universal salvation opens the door to religious pluralism.<sup>20</sup>

If Christ is the ultimate revelation of God, the distinction between special revelation and general revelation should be maintained, and the abolition of the distinction should be abolished.

Oduyoye (1986a:105) claims that God's salvation is not only open to all, but also 'sufficient to cover the sin of all epochs of history.' For Oduyoye, first of all, sin is understood as the oppression of the dignity of human beings, including socio-political and economic injustice and exploitation. Therefore, the purpose of liberation is to make people truly human (Oduyoye 1986a:105).

In this sense, Oduyoye understands salvation as liberation from all oppressive situations, such as disease, poverty, marginalization of women, racism, and sexism (Oduyoye 2001a:55). In this context of the meaning of sin and salvation, Oduyoye (1986a:98) asks that what are the salvific implications of Christ's death and resurrection, especially in relation to Islam? What does humanity of Christ mean in view of sexism and racism? Oduyoye seems to consider traditional theological discourses or a metaphysical analysis of the two natures of Christ - humanity and divinity - as irrelevant and futile.

In modern socio-political terms, the concept of salvation is understood as 'humanity's newfound freedom' to change the world and take part in 'God's saving activity by struggling against "sinners" on behalf of the "sinned against"' (Hesselgrave & Rommen 1989:173).

Sensitivity and awareness of socio-political injustice, economic exploitation, and the oppressive situation of women are very important concerns of Christians. However, as Hesselgrave and

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<sup>20</sup> In Africa, more specifically in Tanzania, where I have been working as a missionary since 1997, 'indigenous religious pluralism' seems to have prevailed at the grass roots level before the theological discourses on religious pluralism appeared in the African theological field. One of the reasons, I think, is the long term process of indoctrination with African monotheism, '*Mungu ni moja*' ('God is one' in Kiswahili) in the atmosphere of Pan-Africanism and African nationalism.

Rommen (1989:173) point out, the overemphasis of the socio-political concept of salvation will finally result in the following: salvation will be offered by faith not in ‘the salvific work of Christ’, but in ‘the implementation of political theory’; salvation will be an aggressive action or deed for obtaining one’s rights more than accepting undeserved grace; salvation will be allowed only to the oppressed, the poor, and the marginalized.

Concern for the oppressed cannot be the basis on which to theologially validate the ‘hatred of the rich or the oppressors.’ It is explicitly opposed to the Lord’s command to love one another (Hesselgrave & Rommen 1989:174). By focusing on sin as socio-political injustice and economic exploitation and on salvation as liberation from such oppressive situations, the spiritual dimension of sin and salvation from sin through the atoning work of Jesus Christ are dealt with indifferently.

The oversimplified equation between Biblical revelation and the African belief system, and between God’s redemptive action in Christ and the liberative activities in the world, lead people to weaken or to deny the uniqueness of Christ and his salvation, and undermine the fundamental Christian teaching on ‘reconciliation with God through the atoning work of Jesus Christ on the cross’ (Larsen 2007:1, 7; König 1998:83).

The theological hypothesis of this notion is that salvation is not exclusive to Christianity only; instead there is a possibility of salvation outside of Jesus Christ. This view ultimately leads to belief in the equality of all religions and undermines evangelism and mission, and eventually brings on the demise of missiology (Hiebert 1994:63).

African theology must be ‘Christological’ or ‘Christ-centered’ and the uniqueness of Christ for salvation should be maintained.

## **6.7 UNDERSTANDING GOD IN AFRICAN EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY: SOME GUIDELINES**

### **6.7.1 Reconsidering *praeparatio evangelica***

Ferdinando (2007:131), on the concept of *praeparatio evangelica*, says:

By responding to the gospel, the new believer is completing or realizing what he or she

already knew and worshipped previously in some obscure and misty way: Jesus Christ comes to complete pre-Christian religious experience, not to negate it.

The concept of *praeparatio evangelica* is mainly connected with the thoughts of Clement of Alexandria who conceived of it: like the Old Testament prophets prepared Jews for the gospel, Socrates and Plato prepared the Greeks for it. Likewise Mbiti sees that ATR(s) prepared Africans for the coming of Christ (Ferdinando 2007:131).<sup>21</sup>

Many African theologians argue that one of the reasons African Christianity has grown so rapidly can be attributed to the monotheistic belief in God that is regarded as an essential point of continuity between Christianity and ATR(s). Mbiti (1970a) and Idowu (1962) especially affirm that the God of the Bible is the same as the God worshipped in ATR(s). And this God was already known to African people before Christianity came to Africa.

According to Mbiti (1980:818), all revelations have the same value and Jesus Christ had been presented outside the boundaries of the Judaeo-Christian tradition and the historical Jesus before the coming of Christianity to Africa. The logical conclusion of this position is that the Africans have been saved through the ATR(s) (Mbiti 1992:21-30).<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Concerning Clement's and Bediako's, and even perhaps Mbiti's view that Socrates and Plato prepared Greeks for the gospel and ATR(s) prepared Africans for the coming of Christ, Ferdinando (2007:131) raises a question on the converts' status or social position in the early church: did converts of the early church belong to the intellectual milieu in which the 'positive' tradition was supposed to be prevailing?

Among early Gentile converts, there were mainly God-fearers who were interested in the Jewish faith and participated in the synagogue without becoming proselytes or converting to Judaism. According to the Acts, many people who responded to the gospel acquired the knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures through synagogue worship (Ferdinando 2007:131).

However, in the New Testament, there are also indications that many converts came from a polytheistic background, the 'negative' tradition (Ferdinando 2007:131). Paul's speech at Athens seems to be delivered to 'polytheists rather than to Platonic monotheists.' Greek poets were quoted not for building an argument from Socrates or Plato. In such polytheistic and mystery cultic religious situation, it is difficult to regard the Socratic tradition as *praeparatio evangelica*, except possibly a small number of people.

In the New Testament, conversion is described as an 'act of radical transformation' (Acts 19:23-41; 1 Thess 1:9; Gal 4:8), not just as 'the realization of a process already underway in the convert's pre-Christian religious experience' (Ferdinando 2007:134). All potential Christians of the New Testament have to be confronted with and encouraged to fundamental transformation from the pattern of sinful life and abandonment of former religious commitments (1 Thess 1:9; Acts 14:15) (Ferdinando 2007:133).

Justin and Clement attempted to defend the Christian truth against the intellectuals who criticized Christianity. They contributed to demonstrate 'the intellectual credibility of the Christian faith' (Ferdinando 2007:131). Their contribution, however, should be appraised not as a standard that gives theoretical validity to the concept of *praeparatio evangelica*, but an example of the contextualization for the educated critics such as Celsus.

<sup>22</sup> Bediako mentions 'the universal nature and activity of Christ among the "heathen"' (Bediako 1992:245) and also tends to see ATR(s) as *praeparatio evangelica*. Bediako agrees with Mbiti's assertion that the God who was proclaimed by the missionaries had been already known to African people. According to Bediako (1992:245), Paul's encounter with the Greeks in Athens can be interpreted as 'the symbolic summit of the Apostle's mission.' Bediako (1992:245) interprets Paul's speech at Athens (Acts 17:22-31) in order to support his understanding of African 'heathenism':

The apostle who grasped most firmly the significance of Christ for the entire universe, and who strenuously preached Jesus to Jews as the fulfillment of the promises of the Old Testament, proclaimed with equal conviction that Jesus was to Gentiles also the fulfiller of their deepest religious and spiritual aspirations.



In this sense, ATR(s) take over the role of the Old Testament, and ‘traditional religions, Islam and the other religious systems’ are considered as the God-given ‘preparatory’ and ‘essential ground’ for searching ‘the Ultimate’ (Mbiti [1969]1975:277).

In a certain sense, according to Kraemer, Christ can be called ‘the fulfillment of some deep and persistent longings and apprehensions that everywhere in history manifest themselves; yet this cannot be the perfecting of what has gone before’ (quoted by Goheen 2000:358).

Certain good and positive elements of ATR(s) and other religious systems can be regarded as *praeparatio evangelica*. It cannot be denied that there are beliefs of other religions that are consistent with the Christian faith. However, in those cases, the elements do not function to reveal the will of God or guarantee that people of other religions will accept the gospel. Rather, it provides a contact point or a ‘meeting place’ for ‘communicating God’s revealed will’ (Ngewa 1987:371). A certain religion that confronts people with the ‘issues of ultimate concern’ or ‘the fundamental questions’ can help produce a milieu in which the gospel can be positively comprehended. It might be a response to the general revelation of God. However, this is far from saying that the religion has prepared its believers to accept the gospel or that it has salvific power (Ferdinando 2007:132).

According to Gehman (1989:12), ‘truth and error’ in ATR(s) are typical examples that are found in all non-Christian religions throughout the world. It does not mean that some elements of ATR(s) are uniquely in error or unusually rich in religious insights. The important elements of ATR(s) are not unique to Africa, but have been believed and practiced by peoples around the world from ancient times up to the present. Therefore, ATR(s) can be one with other non-Christian religions that distort and rebel implicitly and explicitly against the will of God.

For this reason, ATR(s) cannot be regarded as *praeparatio evangelica* in the same way as the Old Testament that stands in a unique relationship to Christ.

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According to Bediako (1992:247), the New Testament recognized the problem of ‘the possible positive meaning of Christ for the pre-Christian religious past’ and attempts to solve the problem on ‘the basis of the universality of Jesus Christ’ (Rom 2:11ff).

Concerning Bediako’s claim, Ferdinando’s critique and comment deserve mentioning. Ferdinando (2007:125) maintains that Paul’s speech at Athens does not support the notion of ‘the universal nature and activity of Christ among the heathen.’ Ferdinando (2007:125) argues that Paul’s statement in Rom 2:11-16 must be understood in the broad context in which the ‘law,’ whether written on hearts or in texts, is not able to obtain righteousness (Rom 3:20). The knowledge of God among the Athenians may have been theoretically possible, but, according to Conrad Gempf, ‘there is little or no hope that this hypothetical possibility will be or has been translated into an acceptable relationship with God. It is hard to imagine a stronger contrast between the God who is in control of all (Acts 17:24-26) and the ironic pathetic state of the human predicament as here described (Acts 17:27)’ (quoted by Ferdinando 2007:125).

Ferdinando (2007:126) criticizes that Bediako supposes that the ‘universality’ of Christ has significant implications for ATR(s), referring simply to John 1:9 in a footnote. In the New Testament’s teaching, however, Christ’s universal role is associated with sustaining the universe (Col 1:17; Heb 1:3).

The notion of *praeparatio evangelica* raises several issues.

Firstly, ATR(s) as *praeparatio evangelica* is presumably based on the assumption that ATR(s) had a 'positive' tradition in which Christ was somehow at work.<sup>23</sup> Of course, ATR(s), like other religions, have a number of elements that are positive as well as negative (Ferdinando 2007:126).

When African theologians regard ATR(s) as *praeparatio evangelica*, it seems that they identify some of these positive elements of ATR(s), while the 'negative' elements such as superstition, this worldliness, and anthropocentrism (Nyamiti 1977:9-12) in ATR(s) are not identified and even remain unevaluated. Ferdinando (2007:132) rightly points out that

In fact, by indoctrinating their adherents into an alternative total belief structure, non-Christian religions by their very nature and existence tend rather to constitute a barrier to conversion, a rival paradigm into which practitioners are enculturated from birth.

Secondly, *praeparatio evangelica* is based on the continuity between Christianity and ATR(s) that is attributed to the monotheistic notion of God. Most African people, says Mbiti, have a belief in the existence of one God as creator. However, how do the attributes of *Olódùmarè* or of the Supreme Being of the 300 ethnic groups that were surveyed in Mbiti's research actually correspond to those of the Christian God? If some descriptions of the concept of God are contradictory among the different ethnic groups, which concept of God among them is the most trustworthy?

The fact that African people may have worshipped the same Supreme Being does not mean that the God whom African people have worshipped can be simply identified with the God and Father of Jesus Christ (Ferdinando 2007:127).

For instance, the Central Luo do not have any belief in a Supreme God and also do not have the notion of a God who created the universe *ex nihilo* (p'Bitek 1971:50). According to p'Bitek (1971:45), 'the idea of a high God among the Central Luo was a creation of the missionaries.'

Bosch (1991:485) maintains that 'religions are worlds in themselves, with their own axes and structures.' The elements of different religions, therefore, cannot be immediately comparable.

Thirdly, although African scholars maintain that most African people have the belief in one God who is commonly conceived of as the Creator of all things (Uchendu 1963:94; Thorpe

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<sup>23</sup> However, Maluleke (1996a:16) who rejects ATR(s) as *praeparatio evangelica* gives more a positive and independent position of ATR(s). To Maluleke, even though Christianity provides the most valid framework for a full and complete life for Christians, it does not verify that everything in African life can be regarded as something that has been waiting for its fulfillment in Christianity.

[1992]1994:31), the question is whether African peoples actually worshipped God as such (Ferdinando 2007:127).

According to Mbiti (1975a:40), God is ‘at the center of African Religion and dominates all its other beliefs.’ However, concerning the characteristics of the religio-cultural identity of the African people, scholars and some African theologians focus on the anthropocentricity of ATR(s) rather than the centrality of God (Ferdinando 2007:129).

God is conceived of as being remote and not involved in everyday life, and not worshipped directly (Uchendu 1963:94; Ferdinando 2007:128). For the Igbo (Uchendu 1963:94) and the Bobo of Mali and Upper Volta (Tienou 1982b:445), God is a withdrawn God. There are no regular prayers, cults, temples, priests, sacrifices and formal acts of liturgy dedicated to God (Parrinder 1968:37-39; Adeyemo 1979:37; Tienou 1982b:445), except few cases, such as the Dogon, the Ashanti, and the Kikuyu (Parrinder 1968:37-39).

Evans-Pritchard (1956:315) says that ‘the test of what is the dominant motif is usually, perhaps always, to what a people attribute dangers and sickness and other misfortunes and what steps they take to avoid or eliminate them.’

From this perspective God is certainly not a central focus of religion for his own sake and he is conceived to have little practical influence on human affairs. Instead, divinities and other spiritual beings including ancestors are the objects of prayers and are thought of as more responsible for everyday life (Dammann 1969:81; Sawyerr 1970:6). Therefore, the divinities and ancestral spirits are considered as a source of life and welfare as well as a significant potential factor in cases of suffering and disaster.

Nyamiti and even Mbiti assert that ATR(s) are mainly concerned with human life and welfare. Man is at the centre of the anthropocentric African ontology (Mbiti [1969]1975:16), and man’s acts of worshipping God are pragmatic and utilitarian rather than spiritual (Nyamiti 1987:58–66; Mbiti [1969]1975:5). Nyamiti (1987:60) maintains that

African religious behaviour is centred mainly on man’s life in this world, with the consequence that religion is chiefly functional, or a means to serve people to acquire earthly goods (life, health, fecundity, wealth, power and the like) and to maintain social cohesion and order.

Obviously, for adding blessings and avoiding death, illness, infertility, drought, accident, and other misfortunes, people keep ‘living together with the ancestors’, remembering their names and making the appropriate offerings for them.

It is evident at this point that the idea of a radical continuity between the African concepts of God and the Christian concept and teachings of God are incompatible.

The continuity between the gospel and ATR(s) runs the risk of understating the unique and extraordinary nature of the gospel (Ferdinando 2007:134). As Parratt (1995:198) remarks, ‘the central aspect of the Christian faith has no real parallels or points of contact in African traditions.’ It seems quite probable that the concept of *praeparatio evangelica* has been motivated by a ‘conscious and deliberate apologetic intent’ (Ferdinando 2007:128) to see the African traditional religio-cultural heritage as the key element for establishing African Christian identity.

For the reasons mentioned above, the notion of ATR(s) as *praeparatio evangelica* is unsustainable.

## **6.7.2 Clarifying the African notion of God**

### **6.7.2.1 Problems in the comparative study of the concept of God**

African theology has discussed the concept of God with regard to a number of religio-cultural and theological-ideological propositions, such as African monotheism, African nationalism, and the Christianization of the African God. Mbiti begins his study on the concept of God not from the God who has revealed himself in the Bible, but from anthropological, phenomenological-comparative research on what the African peoples say about God. Firstly, the concepts of God were collected from various African ethnic groups, and then the concepts were lined up in comparison to the concept of God as seen in the Bible. In doing so, however, Mbiti does not critically evaluate some negative attributes of the African God that are irreconcilable with the God of the Bible.

Oduyoye also agrees with Mbiti’s belief that the African God is the same as the God whom Christians worship. In addition, she reads the Bible and depicts God’s image from a woman’s perspective, and thus elaborates the attributes of God according to her gospel-liberation model of contextualization. Oduyoye emphasizes God as the loving liberator of the oppressed and the rescuer of the marginalized. For Oduyoye, God is empowering women with a spirituality of resistance to the dehumanization in their own lives.

However, there are basic problems of using the comparative method in studying the concept of God in African theology.

In the first place, according to Kombo, the comparative method does not draw attention to the vast difference between the concept of God in the Bible and the concepts of God in ATR(s). If theologians only deal with the generalized attributes of the African God that might be comparable with those of the Biblical God, the other negative attributes of the African God will not be displayed and critically evaluated. In ATR(s), there is no belief in a God that reveals Himself in the Son and of God the Holy Spirit who is ‘a distinct hypostasis but of an equal divinity with God’ (Kombo 2000:189). Therefore, by using the comparative method to study the concepts of God in African theology, the abundant attributes of the Biblical God will be overlooked, and the corrective role of the Bible to ATR(s) will be ignored.

Secondly, the exclusive use of the method makes African theologians regard the theological developments and controversies concerning the doctrine of God that have been accumulated in the last 2000 years as irrelevant in the African context (Kombo 2000:189). In the African theological situation, the debates on traditional theological subjects seem to be undesirable, because sometimes African theologians think that ‘the theological issues the church debated over the centuries are way too abstract for the African mind’ (Kombo 2000:190). Kombo complains of the African Christological articulation, because Christ who is articulated as ‘Friend’, ‘Liberator’, ‘elder Brother’ and ‘Ancestor’ has not been discussed in the context of *homoousios*, and thus the divinity of Christ is not dealt with properly (Kombo 2000:191). Instead of avoiding participation in the theological debates, the African church as a part of the universal church should take part in the theological debates.

Thirdly, by employing Christians theological categories, ATR(s) can be offered ‘some slight consolation’ that ATR(s) have similarities with Christianity. However, the similarities are mostly surface similarities, and the surface similarities between the two religious phenomena may be found to be radically different in content (Nieder-Heitmann 1981:81).

Therefore, it is not a proper way to attempt to discover similarities and differences between the two concepts in order to know whether the God of the Bible is the same as the God of ATR(s). This process of comparison and contrast, says Bosch, results in a superficial assessment; it is easily caught up in the simple comparisons of the religious structures, such as religious phenomena, images, myths, systems, etc., without recognizing the existential realities at the root of these phenomena. Thus, there will be no real encounter, but only a kind of superficial adaptation (quoted by Verstraelen 1996:16).

### 6.7.2.2 Clarifying the African notion of God

There are certain religious concepts and ideas which are common to both Christianity and ATR(s). Through the vehicle of religious commonality in concepts and ideas, the Biblical and Christian concepts and ideas can be conveyed to an African context, and thus the Biblical God becomes relevant to a certain African ethnic group. Bosch (1973:73) says that

Yahweh or Elohim is the same as Nkulunkulu or Modimo and yet he is not the same. Nkulunkulu is the ‘meeting-place’ between Yahweh and the Zulu people. He is the ‘picture’ of Yahweh. He is the ‘soundboard’ which makes Yahweh understandable to them. He is the place when Yahweh becomes relevant to them in their traditional existence. In Nkulunkulu God through Christ enters into the world of the Zulu.

However, the similarity of concepts or ideas of the religious framework does not mean that the two religions have the sameness of the theological foundation or that the two religions have the same theological message or meaning (Turaki 1999:148). The various concepts of God and his attributes as found in ATR(s) should be critically examined. Every ethnic group has its own religious system that is closely interrelated with a particular religio-cultural, social, political and economic structure. It implies that there are actually many different concepts of God due to the diverse and myriad of ATR(s).

For instance, when African theologians articulate the African God as Creator, it should be noted that the meaning of the word, ‘creation,’ differs among the various African ethnic groups as well as from Christianity.

Among the Sotho-Tswana, there is no story of creation *ex nihilo*. MODIMO as ‘*Montshi*’ (enabler or midwife) did not create men and animals, rather helped the things that existed in the bowels of the earth to come out onto the surface of the earth (Setiloane 1976:81).

For the Central Luo, there are no words for ‘creation,’ ‘creator,’ or ‘to create’ (p’Bitek 1971:45).

In the Yoruba cosmogony, the works of creation were assigned to lesser gods, *Orishanla* and *Oduduwa* by the supreme God, *Olódùmarè* or *Olorun* (Booth 1977:163).

According to Schebesta (1936:168-170), it is believed among the Bambuti Pygmies that the sacred chameleon created the water on the earth, and the celestial goat molded the animal world.

It is not possible to categorize the various concepts of God in ATR(s) into the systematic description of a homogenous or the one unified concept of God. To claim that all traditional African peoples across the continent think identical about God is to force every one of them to believe in the

non-existent or unrealistic concept of God as one's own God.

In the ATR(s), there are a variety of lesser gods or divinities, spiritual beings, and ancestors. African religious prayer and worship are not directly dedicated to God, but to many divinities and spiritual beings who are regarded as the helpers of man in time of danger or need. Therefore, in the African concepts of God, God is conceived of as a God who is far away, a *deus absconditus*, *deus otiosus*, *deus remotus*, and *deus absens*.

Idowu and other African scholars invented various ways of interpreting this phenomenon, rejecting the notion of *deus otiosus*. For them, to pray to the divinities or ancestors is to worship or pray indirectly to God, probably with preoccupation of African monotheism or under the intension of Christianizing the African God.

The African concepts of God should be understood on its own terms and by their worldview, not by 'a theologically devised synthesis of traditional and Christian elements' (Meyer 1994:46). Mazrui (1970:125) writes;

Why should there be a constant search to fit African conceptions of God into notions like omnipotence and omnipresence and omniscience? Why should there be a constant exploration for one super-god in African societies, as if one was trying to discover an inner monotheism in the traditional African belief systems? Why should African students of religion be so keen to demonstrate that the Christian God has already been understood and apprehended by Africans before the missionaries came?

Concerning the African theologians' attempt to identify the Christian God with the African God, Wiredu (2006:320) maintains that the attempt is to give a kind of satisfaction to them that they have not abandoned their ancestors' religion.

Mbiti and other African theologians interpret the African concepts of God using a Christian theological framework and presents relatively 'new African constructs' about God (Turaki 1999:28, 149) or 'a new God of philosophers and scholars' (Turaki 1999:146).

In ATR(s), worship of God or the lesser spiritual beings is not differentiated, but is inclusive and



mixed.<sup>24</sup> This inclusive and mixed worship of the African intermediaries is idolatry and contrary to the Christian worship of God (Turaki 1999:153). When the concept of God in Africa is understood in the traditional African way, the African concept of God can be clarified and it might clearly be differentiated from the concept of God in the Bible.

### 6.7.2.3 Uniqueness of the Biblical God

Some African attributes ascribed to God cannot and should not be accepted: A God who has wives, a plurality of gods, and the African identification of God with the elements of nature are not to be paralleled with the Biblical concept of God (Nyamiti 1977:19).

The Biblical God is the God of the covenant who stands at the center of religious experience and who demands the rejection of all other gods.

In contrast to the African God who has been portrayed mainly as the Creator, the Biblical God is not only the Creator but also the God of redemption, the Redeemer. In his redemptive activity, the Biblical God does not withdraw but discloses himself and continually seeks the withdrawing people. In the Bible, the redemptive power and authority of God over his entire creation has been mediated through Christ and his redemptive work on the cross (Turaki 1999:28).

For this reason, the understanding of God in Christianity is, in essence, Christocentric: Christ reveals a new relationship between God and man, and this aspect is completely absent in ATR(s) (Nyamiti 1977:7-8). Therefore, it is necessary to stress the fall, sin, and redemption in African theology.

When African theologians make an unreasonable attempt to equate the African concept of God with the Biblical concept of God, it might lead to a wrong interpretation of God and to theological syncretism. According to Bosch (1973:77), 'syncretism', as a portrayal of the traditional God in Christian robes, is to clothe the traditional God, beliefs, and practices in Christian robes, while

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<sup>24</sup> Turaki (1999:150-153), rejecting the Christianized interpretation of ATR(s), maintains that the traditional belief in God should be interpreted in relation to the other components of the traditional worldview: the African holistic worldview; the African spiritual worldview; the African dynamic/power conscious worldview; and the African communal worldview.

In the African worldview, God is 'holistic' or 'organic'. God in Africa is not differentiated from the other spiritual beings. Africans believe that when they approach the lesser spiritual beings, God is also being approached. There is no distinction between an indirect approach and a direct approach to the worship of God. Both the God and the lesser spiritual beings live together in the same cosmic community. They may have hierarchical characteristics, roles and functions, but not 'an absolutist differentiation.'

When African people worship God directly or lesser spiritual beings indirectly, they do not have any theological problem as both aspects are contained in the traditional religious worldview. In the worship of the lesser beings God is also supposed to be worshipped. God, the lesser gods, the spiritual beings, and ancestors are all members of 'the hierarchical cosmic community.' Within this context, a traditional worship is a 'mixed' one. God and the lesser spiritual beings are recognized and accepted in the same act of worship.

‘indigenization’ is to decorate the God of the Bible and Christian faith in ‘the cultural robes’ of a particular people. Bosch (1973:77) comments that;

[Syncretism] is a constant danger in any society, including the European society...Whenever we start, even unconsciously, from our own past and our own traditional ideas of what God ought to be and then look for parallels and similarities in Scripture in order to make him respectable, we are in danger of adulterating the gospel.

According to Bosch, when a theologian begins with traditional ideas, and then goes to the Bible to find similarities and resemblances, the gospel is adulterated. The unchristian God can be disguised as the Christian God with the decoration of Biblical equipments like in the ‘the Afrikaner ox wagon theology’ and ‘the Sotho theology of the kraal’ (Bosch 1973:77).

#### 6.7.2.4 New meaning in old form

The early missionaries who arrived in Africa borrowed the African names for God in translating the Bible into the vernacular languages.

The Christianization of the African names for God does not mean to use the Christian terminology for presenting, interpreting, and systematizing the African concepts of God in a set of Western Christian doctrinal systems, by presupposing a radical continuity and correlation between the Christian concept of God and the traditional African concepts of God.

The Christianization of the African names for God means that the meaning and the content of the traditional African names for God are filled with the Biblical and Christian content. The Biblical God who is articulated in the existing traditional names takes over and transforms the old content of the African names for God. *Nyame*, *Leza*, *Modimo*, *Nyambe*, *Nkulunkulu*, *Ngai*, *Mulungu*, and *Mungu* will no longer mean what they meant in their traditional contexts.

The Christianized *Modimo* for the Sotho-Tswana is no longer ‘enabler’ or ‘midwife’ in the story of creation. The name *Modimo* for God, that is baptized in the Biblical and Christian theological content and meaning will be known in the Son and be worshipped in the Spirit (Kombo 2000:219).

The name and ‘robe’ of *Nkulunkulu* are to remain but the ‘content’ of *Nkulunkulu* is to become different from the traditional meaning (Ahonen 2003:193). *Nkulunkulu* of Christianity differs from the *Nkulunkulu* of tradition. The form is old, but the old form contains absolutely new content and meaning. The names are the same, but the content is different. Bosch maintains that ‘the traditional

gods must give themselves up. The old God has to die, in order to rise again to a new life' (quoted by Ahonen 2003:200). African theology takes the names for God from the cultural context, and then must fill them with new Biblical and Christian content.

### 6.7.3 Understanding God as Trinity

Mbiti ([1969]1975:16) asserts that African people believed in One Supreme Being who is responsible for the existence of spirits, men, animals and plants, and the objects without biological life such as stones. This God is regarded as the God of creation and the God who sustains the universe, both visible and invisible and all forms of life.

While African theologians attribute the rapid growth of Christianity in Africa to the African monotheistic concept of God, the concept of the divine Trinity in which God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit are One is not clearly articulated.

The only God whom Christians know and confess is the God who exists only as Father, Son, and Spirit. The three persons of the Trinity are co-equal, co-eternal, and of the same substance. This doctrine of the Trinity is the church's response to the revelation of God in history and the Bible (Vanhoozer 2007:26). Mashau (2003:133) explains the Trinity:

[C]reation is attributed to the Father, (God-above-us), salvation to the Son (God-with-us), and indwelling and sanctification to the Holy Spirit (God-in-us and working-in-us).

According to Kombo (2000:191), 'the issue of cultural identity' and 'the focus on the African concepts of God' put African theology in a paradigm in which 'the idea of the Trinity' is not easily raised and addressed with passion. Although African people know the existence of God and have a notion of God as the Supreme Being (Mbiti [1969]1975:29), the idea of God as a Trinity is an absolutely new concept, even 'revolutionary' to the African people (Kombo 2000:221). Kombo's comment is worth to be noted (2000:223):

Although God is viewed primarily as Creator-Father in the African context, it is important to indicate that the idea of Fatherhood in the context of the Trinity means that God is the Father of the Son and the Spirator of the Holy Spirit, not in the sense in which he is our Father and the Ultimate explanation of the invisible created world. Fatherhood

means that the Father elementally begets the Son and the Holy Spirit eternally proceeds from the Father.

Since Christian missionaries to Africa introduced the concept of God as Three Persons in One, however, the Trinity has been misunderstood by some African Christians because traditionally, Africans could never confuse spirits with God; the spirits were always described as part of creation.

In African ontology that Mbiti divides into five categories - God, spirits, men, animals and plants, and the objects without biological life - (Mbiti [1969]1975:16), both the Son and the Holy Spirit belong to the ontological category of the spirits, and they cannot be in the category of God.

Christ as the incarnated God is simply understood as a 'superhuman being' paralleling heroes, the founders of societies, and ancestors. He can be recognized as 'divine', but still be regarded in the same way as the other beings in the ontological category of spirits (Mbiti [1969]1975:15-16, 75-91; Kombo 2000:220). For African people, God created the divinities and the spirits who are divine and have God's powers. However, they, as intermediaries, are under the control of God. Kombo (2000:220) says that

The notions of Christ as mediator can be quite confusing to an African. For us the term mediator, when used in the context of the ontological difference between God and man, conveys the idea of an intermediate being between God and man. This is the role played by divinities, spirits, the living dead, and in some cases chiefs. The mediatorship of Christ, however, is different. Christ is not a being between God and man, he is Logos who became flesh, in other words who is both God and man.

The Holy Spirit is easily confused with either the spirits, power, or the 'vital force', and this equation of the Holy Spirit with power or force is easily observable in the independent churches and the modern charismatic movement (Kombo 2000:221).

In this theological situation in Africa, therefore, the most important task in addressing the concept of God is to identify the God of the Bible who has revealed himself in Jesus through the Bible (Vanhoozer 2007:25).

As the central theme in Christian theology, the Trinity secures the divinity of the Son and Spirit as well, claiming not three Gods, but one God (Kombo 2000:221). The Trinitarian understanding of God defends the Spirit not to be divorced from the Son to be 'an itinerant deputy' and Christology not to be removed from its role as the only Way to the Father (Kärkkäinen 2007a:207).

## 6.8 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In this chapter, a critical comparison of Mbiti's and Oduyoye's theological articulation of God has been carried out, focusing on similarities and differences between the two theologians.

Mbiti and Oduyoye emphasize the monotheistic notion in ATR(s) as an essential point of continuity between ATR(s) and Christianity. Both reject the distinction between 'general revelation' and 'special revelation' and admit that God constantly reveals Himself not only to the Jewish people in the Old Testament, but also to African peoples in and through ATR(s) that are an instrument of God's revelation (Mbiti 1970b:436). African monotheism as a theological presupposition led Mbiti and Oduyoye to reach the conclusion: the God in ATR(s) and the God in the Bible is the same God.

Mbiti and Oduyoye, like other African scholars who have been strongly influenced by the ideology of independence, encourage African Christianity to find its identity by being rooted in the African religious past.

Through a long descriptive analysis of African culture and religions, both Mbiti and Oduyoye appraise the African traditional religio-cultural heritage theologically and use their data as a source for theological reflection and articulation in the African context (Mbiti [1969]1975; 1968; 1970a; 1970b; 1971; 1975a; 1975b; 1977; Oduyoye 1979; 1986a; 1995c; 2001a).

However, Mbiti's theological reflections are more oriented toward the interplay between the Christian faith and African culture within the context of the ongoing dialogue on the gospel and culture, while Oduyoye takes a critical view on certain traditional religio-cultural aspects that allow women to be marginalized, oppressed, and dehumanized as well as on the issues of socio-political injustice and economic exploitation.

Through the discussion of contextualization and of its models, this study deals with the possibility of dialogue between Mbiti's 'gospel-culture oriented model' and Oduyoye's 'gospel-liberation oriented model'. Then this study suggests a 'mutual understanding' or 'theological reciprocity' between the two, keeping a particular perspective, conditioned by a specific situation and the distinctiveness of each theology and rejecting a theological unity in Africa through a total integration of the two theologies. The dialogue between the two should be not a 'one-time event but a continuous dialogue' of 'mutual correction and mutual enrichment' (WCC1999b:229; Goheen 2000:361).

The theological mutuality and reciprocity has led to the discussion of ‘intercultural’, which aims at avoiding the dangers of relativism, of absolutism of contextualization, of syncretism, overcoming provincialism, and pursuing a balance between locality and universality and of Christian identity and cultural identity.

On the discussion of the intercultural model of contextualization, the study maintains that African theology is to be critical-contextual, catholic, Biblical, and faithful to the centrality of Christ.

Finally the study maintains that African theology should reconsider the concept of *praeparatio evangelica* that can undermine the unique and extraordinary nature of the gospel. The study clarifies the African concept of God that is in many aspects incompatible with the Biblical and Christian concept and teaching of God. Therefore, the study claims that African evangelical theology should theologize the doctrine of God within a Trinitarian context, even though the idea of God as Trinity is an absolutely new concept to African people.

From what has been discussed above, the following remarks can be presented.

Mbiti’s theological reflections regard the gospel as the fulfillment of ATR(s), while Oduyoye is keen on the socio-political and economic aspects of life and against any oppressive elements to women in the traditional religio-cultural context.

Mbiti fails to deal with some critical issues of contemporary society, such as social, politico-economic injustice, racism, sexism, and inequality with regard to the theological articulation of God. It seems to Oduyoye that the point of reference is the needs of the people rather than the commandments of the Bible. She often gives more attention and interest not to the text but to the context.

As Bediako (2003:65) points out, in order to make the gospel remain meaningful and relevant in the contemporary African context, the gospel should be allowed to engage in mutual interaction with the cultural, religious and socio-economic experiences of Africans. And furthermore, the gospel should ‘function as a positive social and political element for the enhancement and consolidation of those values and attitudes that make for wholesome social cohesion and in this way promote harmonious and integral human development’ (Bediako 2003:65).

However, it should be noted that the African religio-cultural heritage and contemporary African problems should not be taken as the dominant roles above the Bible (Eitel 1988:330). An uncritical acceptance of traditional elements in African culture and of the method of social science in analyzing the context leads to a reversal of priorities. The standard truth is neither cultural identity nor the

political agenda, but the uniqueness of Biblical revelation.

Inherently there is a possibility of ideological misuse of the gospel to serve a particular interest (Smit 2003b:144). Therefore, all theological articulation should be judged by the Bible. If any articulation is contrary to the Biblical authority and norm, it should be criticized and rejected or transformed, even though it seems meaningful to the context.

In this sense, African theological discourses must move beyond the mere cultural-political identity debate. The African church as part of the universal church must identify, listen to, and clarify ‘what has been believed everywhere, always and by all’ for the benefit of the African people (Kombo 2000:256).

In the framework of African evangelical theology that is centered around the critical-contextual, catholic, Biblical, and the centrality of Christ, African theologians should work hard to reveal all the richness of and the whole mystery of the Trinity and articulate the understanding of God within a Trinitarian context.



## CHAPTER 7

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

#### 7.1 GENERAL SUMMARAY

African theologians primarily intended to formulate ‘a theology cooked in an African pot’ (Ukpong 1984:19) so that theology becomes intelligible to African Christians and helps them ‘feel at home’ in their new faith (Sawyerr 1987:26).

This study has investigated the way in which Mbiti and Oduyoye respectively articulate their understanding of God in their own context, aiming to make their theological reflections on God relevant to African Christians. This study has analyzed Mbiti’s and Oduyoye’s methodology, made a critical comparison between Mbiti’s and Oduyoye’s understanding of God, and evaluated their contributions.

The comparison of Mbiti’s and Oduyoye’s views on the understanding of God reveals not only similarities that are based on a shared common experience of being African, but also differences emanating from the different contexts within which they theologize.

Through an investigation of each theologian’s way of understanding the interplay of the Christian gospel and African culture, this study categorizes Mbiti’s model as a gospel-culture oriented model of contextualization and Oduyoye’s model as a gospel-liberation oriented model of contextualization.

This study has compared these two models of contextualization in order to find a better model in which a dialogue between the two theologies can take place, and has suggested an intercultural model of contextualization.

On the basis of the discussion of the intercultural model of contextualization, this study has proposed some criteria for African Evangelical theology in which African theologians can articulate the understanding of God that has theological relevance and legitimacy to African Christians as well as to Christians worldwide.

**Chapter 1** briefly presented the background of the study, the problem statement, the purpose of the study, the research hypothesis, methodology, delimitation, and structure of the study.

**Chapter 2** described a typology of African theology and a historical sketch of its origins and development. This chapter maintained that, from the early stage of African theology, African theologians resisted the evolutionary anthropologists' work and the missionaries' attitude that degraded African traditional religio-cultural heritage. They also reacted to the imposition of Western ecclesiastical-cultural values on the church in Africa. African theologians showed a remarkable interest in traditional religions, and claimed that Christianity should also have an African face by reaffirming Africa's rich religio-cultural heritage.

This chapter asserted that African theology mainly emerged not only as a theological reaction to the dominant Western interpretation of the Bible in Africa, but also as a theological attempt to secure the African cultural identity by reaffirming the African past.

Chapter 2 also stated the fact that the early African theologians were inspired by Pan-Africanism and African nationalism. To Muzorewa (1985:55), some aspects of African theology have their origin in African nationalism. Mudimbe (1988:79) says that the Africanization of Christianity was a response to the nationalists' ideological urges for political and cultural emancipation. Even though these assertions reduce the theological motivations of African theologians as well as the various factors that contributed to the emergence of African theology to the political sphere, these assertions are partly correct.

Therefore, this chapter pointed out that the overemphasis on the African traditional religio-cultural heritage in doing theology caused some problems in African theology and its direction. In fact, African theologians seem to pay more attention to reaffirming the African cultural identity than to securing the Christian identity.

Since most African theologians have attempted to articulate their theological reflection in connection with the African traditional religio-cultural heritage, it needs to clarify the issue of the close link of the African concepts of God with the African theologians' articulation of the understanding of God. Therefore, **Chapter 3** examined the basic elements of ATR(s) in general and the different ethnic groups' concepts of God in particular.

Through the investigation of six ethnic groups' concepts of God, chapter 3 demonstrated that each ethnic group has its own religious beliefs and practices because each has its own particular historical background in which the religious system has been developed. The Yoruba concept of God cannot be understood in the Luo religious systems and its terms. The Akan God has to be interpreted by the Akan religious system itself, not by a Christian systematic theological framework.

For this reason, chapter 3 maintained that it is not possible to speak of African culture and African traditional religion in the singular and that it is also not suitable to designate the systematic

description as homogenous or as one unified African concept of God. There are rather many different concepts of God according to the way in which each ethnic group conceptualizes its own particular concept of God in its own cultural context. One and the same God whom all Africans have worshipped is in fact not real.

This chapter reached the conclusion that African monotheism as a theoretical ground for asserting the ontological identification of the African God and the biblical God is not correct.

**In chapter 4**, Mbiti's African concept of time, his methodology, and the understanding of revelation and of God were studied.

Mbiti attempts to integrate the African concepts of God and the Biblical concept of God. He interprets data of anthropological study of the African concepts of God with a Christian systematic theological framework: i.e. a theological interpretation of the anthropological data.

However, the data from anthropological research shows that Christian theological concepts for understanding and interpreting African religious ideas are not suitable.

A comparative study of ATR(s) shows similarities and differences among the various religious phenomena in Africa. However, Mbiti intentionally overlooks the differences among them and overemphasizes the similarities among them. In consequence, by neglecting the fact that the surface similarities may be found to be very different in content, he drives the differences into the forced similarities.

Mbiti's assertion that the God whom Christians worship is the same God whom the African people worshipped long before Christianity arrived on the continent is not correct. This chapter clarified that Mbiti's abolition of the traditional distinction between general revelation and special revelation weakens the special revelation's uniqueness and harms the finality and centrality of Jesus Christ. Therefore, this chapter claimed that his theological presuppositions like African monotheism and ATR(s) as a *praeparatio evangelica* should be rejected.

**In chapter 5**, Oduyoye's understanding of God was assessed theologically with reference to her methodology, the status of African women in ATR(s) and African Christianity, as well as her appreciation of salvation, of the Bible, and of the locus of experience in AWT.

Oduyoye celebrates African culture in order to affirm the African identity in reaction against Western Christianity. At the same time, she criticizes some aspects of African culture that seem to sustain and reinforce the oppressive socio-political and economic systems against women in Africa.

She breaks a long church tradition that has kept silence on the marginalization of women in the church and challenges African male theologians to turn their eyes to the feminine side of the world as

well.

Oduyoye mainly understands sin in terms of socio-political structural evil. To Oduyoye, salvation is understood as liberation from all oppressive conditions that dehumanize human beings. The spiritual dimension of sin and the traditional meaning of salvation are relatively overlooked. Oduyoye's understanding of God is closely connected to the theme of liberation. In this regard, Oduyoye opposes the male image of God and a men-centred interpretation of the Bible, because it seems to justify the oppression and marginalization of women. However, she does not exclude males from theologizing. She pursues a 'two-winged theology' by emphasizing male and female partnership and mutuality.

Oduyoye places women's experience at the centre of the theological process. The emphasis on women's experience seems to provide a certain impetus to criticize oppressive situations against women in Africa. However, this chapter questions whether the authority of experiences, that are varied and relative in nature, can replace the authority of the Bible.

**Chapter 6** examined the similarities and differences between the two theologians' theology in general and the understanding of God in particular. There are significant similarities between the two theologians because both theologians have been profoundly influenced by the overall African context in which they have lived and worked. Both Mbiti and Oduyoye recognize the importance of African culture and have obtained theological insights from the African traditional religio-cultural heritage.

However, there are differences as well, because each of them has a different methodology and different concerns in doing theology in African context.

Mbiti stresses an interplay between the gospel and African culture and regards the gospel as the fulfilment of ATR(s), while Oduyoye takes a critical view on oppressive elements against women in the traditional religio-cultural context and the current socio-political and economic aspects of life.

By a comparative-dialogical study between the two theologians' understanding of God, chapter 6 maintained that these two theologies cannot be melted into one integral theology. Instead, this chapter asserted that each theology should keep its own theological characteristic, and have an open mind to learn from the other, expecting mutual correction and mutual enrichment.

This chapter categorized the two theologians' way of understanding an interplay of the gospel and African culture into Mbiti's gospel-culture oriented model of contextualization and Oduyoye's gospel-liberation oriented model of contextualization, and suggested an intercultural model of contextualization as a better model for doing theology in the African context.

This intercultural model of contextualization is needed not only to overcome some dangers of contextualization, such as absolutism of contextualization, syncretism, cultural relativism, and provincialism, but also to make a balance between locality/cultural identity and catholicity/Christian identity.

On the basis of the discussion of the intercultural model of contextualization, this chapter proposed some criteria for sound evangelical theology: African theology should be critical-contextual, catholic, biblical, and centered on the centrality of Christ.

In the African Evangelical theological framework, this chapter finally suggested the following guidelines to be considered when God is articulated in the African context: reconsidering a *praeparatio evangelica*, clarifying the African concept of God, and understanding God within a Trinitarian context.

**The final chapter** presented a general summary, concluding reflections and suggestions for further research related to the same subject of African theology.

## 7.2 CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS AND REMARKS

Mbiti stressed the interplay between the Christian faith and traditional African religiosity. He has regarded the gospel as the fulfilment of ATR(s) and Christian theological terminology and concepts as suitable tools for interpreting ATR(s). In a sense, Mbiti seems to be obsessed with an idea that he should relate something of ATR(s) to the gospel and Christianity.

However, Mbiti fails to deal with the oppressive situation of women as well as some critical issues of contemporary society, such as socio-political and economic injustice, racism, sexism, and inequality.

Oduyoye has developed a theological methodology which motivates African women to affirm African identity in reaction to Western Christianity and analyzes the elements of ATR(s) and African culture that are oppressive to and dehumanize African women. She has called for the liberation of women against the traditional and contemporary oppressive cultural system to African women.

Oduyoye has aimed to transform the oppressive structure in both society and church and desired to establish a women-centred theology that regards women's experience as a crucial factor for doing theology.

However, by emphasizing women's experience of oppression and the voice of the weak in society, Oduyoye makes the mistake of justifying the illustration that characterizes the poor as the good and the rich as sinners. To Oduyoye the responsibility and duty of theologians are to be with 'the poor in their struggle for liberation' (Torres & Fabella 1978:270). In Oduyoye's theology, her point of reference seems to be the needs of the people rather than the commandments of the Bible. In fact, she mainly shows her attention and interest not to the text but to the context.

African theology as a 'theological reflection and expression by African Christians' (Mbiti 1978:72) seems to attain African expression and it becomes, to some extent, relevant to Africans.

However, African theology seems not to succeed in creating genuine dialogue between the Christian faith and African culture. African theology excessively uses 'African concepts and the African ethos as vehicles for the communication of the gospel' (Pobee 1979:39) in order to meet the 'needs and mentality of the African peoples' (Nyamiti 1994:63) without considering a 'dialogue with the rest of Christendom' (Kurewa 1975:36), so that African theology becomes weak in its Christian identity.

In the process of 're-thinking and re-expressing the original Christian message in an African cultural milieu' (Ukpong 1984:30), instead of the inter-penetration between the two, African culture, African cultural expression, traditional religiosity, the language of liberation, or some ideological interests have been enlightened more than the Christian faith. In consequence, genuine dialogue and integration of the Christian faith and African culture have not taken place.

African theology seems to fail to achieve its aim, which is a theological articulation that maintains the African identity by reaffirming the African religio-cultural heritage without losing the Christian identity.

Neither Mbiti nor Oduyoye seem to succeed in maintaining the Christian identity and the African cultural identity simultaneously and in communicating the gospel message and the understanding of God to Africans so that the gospel message becomes intelligible to them. Therefore, the following remarks will be beneficial for the future of African theology.

### **7.2.1. Remark # 1**

The Bible should be emphasized as the prime source of African theology. Mbiti and Oduyoye

emphasize and approve of African culture and ATR(s) in order to affirm their African identity. They overemphasize the importance and validity of ATR(s) in doing Christian theology, accepting them as a source of theology.

Theology in Africa should be a contextualized theology. However, African theology must continually challenge and transform some elements of culture according to the Word of God. Traditional culture and the current situation should not be supposed to play dominant roles over the Bible. The African traditional religious heritage must be brought under and guided by the authority of the Bible (Turaki 1999:30). The Bible judges and corrects the errors of the old African culture.

An uncritical acceptance of traditional religio-cultural elements and of the social science method of analyzing the context leads to a reversal of priorities.

According to Achtemeier (1988:52-54), some theological matters will simply be explained when theology is faithful to the Bible. The Bible clearly teaches female equality: women's equal creation in the image of God, mutual helpfulness and companionship with men are described in the creation story; the male domination over the female is clearly portrayed as the result of sin; the recovery of full equality is expected with the appearance of the Messiah.

Therefore, Achtemeier (1988:53) maintains that 'instead of throwing out portions of the canon' and 'debunking the Bible,' it needs to pour energies into the proclamation of its liberating message, insisting on the Reformation principle of letting the Bible interpret the Bible to rightly understand any particular passage. Achtemeier (1988:53) says that

If that is done, the historical context of hierarchal texts becomes clear, and the overwhelming testimony of the Bible is to the freedom and equality of all persons in Jesus Christ, regardless of sex and social status.

The standard of truth is neither cultural identity nor the political agenda, but the uniqueness of the Biblical revelation. Therefore, the Bible and the African culture or women's experience should never be equated in doing African Christian theology (Ngewa 1987:371). If any one's theological articulation is contrary to biblical teachings and norms, it should be criticized and rejected or transformed, even though it seems meaningful to the context.

The acceptance of the Bible as the normative and final authority is the only way to overcome 'the abyss of relativism', 'endless human speculations' and the danger of syncretism (Ott & Strauss 2010:314). The adjective 'African' in African theology should not be related to source but to application (Ngewa 1987:371).



African theology needs to defend biblical authority, wrestle with biblical interpretation, and make the Bible relevant to people's lives.

### **7.2.2. Remark # 2**

African theologians study ATR(s) and look for useful means to explain Christian theology so that the gospel truth becomes relevant to African churches and to African contexts. However, it seems that they have not questioned whether ATR(s) and the studies of ATR(s) harm or affirm biblical truth.

African theologians have tended to overreact to the loss of African identity. Especially, on the assumption of African monotheism, the traditional African God, known to different African peoples by different names, is conceived of the same as the One True God of the Bible.

Some scholars (Middleton 1965:70-71; Horton 1984:402; p'Bitek 1970:47), however, argue that the term 'African monotheism' is not always proper. African monotheism is, in fact, unrealistic because each ethnic group has conceptualized their own particular concept of God within their particular historical, religio-cultural context. Therefore, African monotheism as a theological presupposition should be abandoned.

Certain characteristics of the African God are directly contrary to the God of the Bible (Kato [1975]1987:69; Nyamiti 1977:19). Therefore, African theology should be cautious of using the African traditional religio-cultural heritage without expecting negative consequences. When African theologians adopt the local names for God and traditional titles - Ancestor, Elder-Brother, Healer, Initiator, etc., - for Christological expressions, theologians are required to acknowledge the negative characteristics and attributes that are implied in the local name for God and in the traditional titles. Nyamiti (1977:56) rightly points out that African theology should purify such weaknesses of African categories if African theology wants to use them in theological reflections.

When African theologians use the African terms that have been used in ATR(s), they should not employ the terms in order to theologize something that is in ATR(s) or something that is not in the Bible. Instead, the old term should contain, convey and express the biblical and Christian meaning and thought and articulate something that is in the Bible, instead of sticking to the old meanings of the terms.

Christianity has taken the old local names which designate God and provided them with a new biblical and Christian meaning and content. Putting the new meanings in the old forms is a way to Christianize the traditional name of God.

The understanding of God in African theology should not be a syncretistic amalgamation of ATR(s) and Christianity that is neither African nor Christian. Therefore, what African Christians need is not the African concept of God, but a clear picture of the Christian view of God. Culture should not be awarded a decisive and dominant role above the Bible. Instead, Biblical revelation should be maintained as normative to avoid ‘the epistemological dangers of relativism.’ Kato ([1975]1985e:43) says:

A continuing effort should be made to relate Christian theology to the changing situations in Africa, but only as the Bible is taken as the absolute Word of God can it have an authoritative and relevant message for Africa.

The understanding of God should go beyond the mere cultural identity debate. African theology has to view the understanding of God as a theological task to address Africans and the African situation and, at the same time, to contribute to the global theological situation and the church universal (Kato [1975]1985e:42; Kombo 2000:252).

### **7.2.3. Remark # 3**

The relationship between the gospel and culture is one of the important issues to be dealt with continually: How can Christianity proclaim the gospel in different cultures? Should there be a particular theology that fits a particular culture? How can Christianity remain particular and universal at the same time?

There is no easy slide from the universality of the gospel to the universal validity of theological articulation of this gospel in a particular culture.

If universality of the gospel is emphasized at the expense of contextuality, the gospel may not be fully connected with the life of the people and may cease to be good news. If contextuality is emphasized at the expense of universality, division and instability may undermine the church as a whole (WCC 1999a:190).

Andrew Walls (1996) has observed two principles that operate simultaneously in the encounter of the gospel and culture: the indigenizing principle and the pilgrim principle.

Christians are inseparable from and conditioned by a particular time and place and continue to live as members of their own culture. Therefore, the gospel should be felt to be at home in the culture, and the culture should be felt to be at home in the gospel (Walls 1996:7).

In the indigenizing principle, Christians recognize that God is speaking to their own situation, and Christians approach the Bible wearing cultural blinkers that are determined by culture (Walls 1996:12). The gospel should be presented in such a way that people feel at home in their culture.

There is, however, the ‘pilgrim’ principle. Walls (1996:53-4) says that God accepts us in order to transform us into what He wants us to be. Christians cannot be harmonized with their cultural context and society because the gospel urges Christians to be out of step with society and encourages Christians to follow, not the logic of their culture, but the logic of the gospel.

Being a Christian is not about creating a comfortable place to feel at home, but about taking up the cross to follow Christ (Bosch 1991:455; Van den Bosch 2009:533).

Along with the indigenizing principle which makes his faith as a place to feel at home, the Christian inherits the pilgrim principle, which whispers to him that he has no abiding city and warns him that to be faithful to Christ will put him out of step with his society; for that society never existed.

(Walls 1996:8).

As Walls points out, the gospel is not only culture’s prisoner but also the liberator of culture (quoted by Bosch 1991:455). It means that the gospel should be presented in such a way that Christians speak prophetically to their context (Ott & Strauss 2010:270).

While the gospel message is understood and perceived within a culture and illuminated by that culture (WCC1999b:226), the gospel is discerned from all cultures (Ott & Strauss 2010:268), transcends every culture, and cannot be domesticated by any one of them (Schreiter 1999:74). The culture is a comfortable place in which the gospel feels at home and at the same time, a city in which the gospel cannot abide.

Therefore, the gospel has God’s word of grace and his word of judgment on culture, and speaks a ‘yes’ and a ‘no’ to culture (Goheen 2000:360).

Half century ago, African theologians felt the need to emphasize the African identity. However, nowadays, African theology seems to lose the Christian identity because of the overemphasis on cultural identity.

In this situation, African theologians should articulate distinctive African theological characteristics and perspectives. At the same time, African theologians, as members of the universal Church, need to find its root in the apostolic faith that has been held '*semper ubique ab omnibus*' (Tennent 2010:49).

In this regard, African theology will be done in a tension, maintaining a continuous dialogue between the gospel and culture, contextuality and catholicity, the cultural identity and the Christian identity, even though this process is incomplete, not a one time-event, but ongoing.

Therefore, African theology, as Tienou suggests, should be tested for both its 'Africanness' which is evaluated in terms of whether the theology is relevant to African culture and meets the need of Africans, and its 'correctness' which is evaluated in terms of whether the theology is faithful to the Bible (quoted by Rogers [1972]1994:260).

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