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Facing Mount Kenya: Reflections on the Bible and African Traditional Religion

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'I used to come here as a boy, many years ago, and bring offerings of maize and beans to the prophet Kamaru. He was well known for prophesying rain and other important matters.' Geoffrey Ithiga, the Senior Student of St. Andrew's Institute, was pointing to a smallholding on a ridge over the valley. We were returning from a joyful consecration of a new church and had decided to explore a spectacular waterfall on the way home.

We climbed half way up the side of the waterfall and saw a huge tree. 'The fig tree was the traditional Kikuyu place of sacrifice' Geoffrey continued, 'and Kamaru used to come here to sacrifice and to hear God speak to him.'

John Mbiti, a Kenyan theologian, has described how when a traditional African enters the world of biblical revelation he does not 'have far to go before he begins to walk on familiar ground.'[1] To me from another culture, goats, lizards, seeds growing secretly, footwashing after journeys, oil lamps, the importance of land, burials, circumcision, genealogies and greetings – all of which I knew in my mind from the Bible – have become real, since coming here only two years ago.

Living and teaching in the foothills of Mount Kenya, in an Institute which trains both ordinands and community health workers for ministry in the Diocese of Mount Kenya East, has led me to re-explore the subject of God and other faiths in the Bible. So, the daunting, drawing presence of the mountain, only thirty-five miles away and with snow on the equator, the friendship of students whose parents worshipped God through traditional religion, and the practical training for holistic mission form the context for the following 'preliminary' reflections of a newcomer to Africa.

1 J. S. Mbiti, 'Christianity and East African Culture and Religions' in *Dini na Mila (Revealed Religion and Traditional Custom)* 3, Kampala, 1973, p 4: cited in K. Bediako, 'Christian Tradition and the African God Revisted' in D. M. Gitari and P. Benson, eds., *The Living God*, Uzima, Nairobi 1986, p 86.

Ngai or ngai?

A few years ago a Scottish lecturer in systematic theology at St Paul's United Theological College, Limuru, deliberately used to spell the Kikuyu name for God on the blackboard with a small 'n' – ngai. His students used to insist that it should start with a capital 'N' – Ngai. This focused the debate concerning African Traditional Relgion (hereafter ATR) and biblical revelation.

Samuel Kibicho, of Nairobi University, puts the question clearly:

> Was the God of ATR (known by different names such as Nyasaye, Were, Mulungu, Mungu, Asis, En-kai, Akuj, Tororut, Ngai etc.) the One True God whom we Christians worship in Christianity, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ?[1]

He goes on to say that most African Christians believe he was and the title of his paper sums up his detailed research. 'The continuity of the African conception of God into and through Christianity: a Kikuyu case study'. The students here agree: their ancestors really did worship God, the One True God, in their traditional religion. Mount Kenya was the mountain of mystery and also Ngai's main temporary abode when he came down on his regular inspection tours. People prayed facing the mountain and expressed their beliefs in various ways – Ngai lives above the skies, but also everywhere; he is powerful, invisible, the greatest mystery, unique having no father or mother or wife etc, no beginning or end; he is hidden and removed, but also close to people; he has given them reason and knowledge of right and wrong to live their lives properly, but does not want every little matter referred to him. He is one for all people – there were different rituals and names for him in different tribes, but a change from one religion to another (by a ceremony of 'new birth') did not involve a change of God.[2]

Now, the good news of Christ fills out this concept of Ngai with new meaning: Ngai has a Son who became a man, died and was raised to new life for our salvation.

Kwame Bediako, in a paper given at the inaugural conference of the Africa Theological Fraternity (July 1985, here at St. Andrew's), agreed with Kibicho on the theme of continuity but perceptively challenged him. From his context in Ghana, he stressed the importance of other 'lower', 'immanent' divinities, ancestral spirits and other powers which also were traditionally vitally important. In the facinating discussion after his paper he said:

> My argument is that African religion has an intuition of plurality which is not however explained in African ideas about the Transcendent One. At this point the African spirits occupy a place quite dif-

1 S. G. Kibicho, 'The Continuity of the African Concept of God into and through Christianity: A Kikuyu Case Study' in E. W. Fashole-Luke et al, eds., *Christianity in Independent Africa*, Rex Collins, London 1978, p 370.

2 Ibid., p 372.

> ferent from the pre-Christian gods of Europe. The spirits in Africa are joined with the name of God in traditional prayer-texts; in fact, they together share the circle of spiritual forces. The Gospel does not meet the spirits with hostility, as it once encountered Thor, Wodan et al. However it displaces and desacralises the spirits by showing that the intimations of plurality which they represent are fulfilled in God, the Christian God, who fills the whole spiritual circle.[1]

This continuity finds echoes in the Old Testament association of El(ohim) with Yahweh. 'I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob, as El Shaddai, but by my name, Yahweh, I did not make myself known to them.' (Exodus 6:3) The patriarchs worshipped the Mesopotamian and west Semitic High God, El, with several additional epithets, especially El Shaddai (God Almighty). The Priestly writer of Exodus 6:3 identifies El Shaddai with Yahweh just as the Yahwist writer in Genesis has combined Yahweh with Elohim to form the double barrelled name of Yahweh Elohim, thus focusing the continuity in a name.

Modupe Oduyoye, a Nigerian exegete and Hamito-Semitic philologist, in commenting on the polytheistic mythology being replaced by monotheistic theology in Genesis 2, translates the name Yahweh Elohim: 'Yahweh-which-the-myths-call-the-gods'.[2]

He also brings his research of West African and Semitic languages to the elusive problem of the meaning of the name Yahweh: 'In the Fon language, *yehwe*, and in the Ewe language *yeve* means "spirit".'[3]

Gordon Wenham has explored the difficulties of relating Exodus 6:3 to the use of the name Yahweh in Genesis.

> The Joseph cycle, by restricting Yahweh to the narrative framework and using Elohim or El Shaddai in the dialogue suggests that the editor of this section held that the patriarchs did not know the name of Yahweh though he believed that he was their God.[4]

The Septuagint translation of Exodus 3:14 is also interesting on this theme. The translators transpose the *hayah* (I AM) to the new key of *ho On*

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1 Bediako, op. cit., pp 92-93. This book contains the findings and papers of the inaugural meeting of the Africa Theological Fraternity (a grouping of evangelical theologians parallel to the Latin American and Asian Theological Fraternities). It is available from the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies PO Box 70 Oxford, or direct from Bishop David Gitari, PO Box 185, Embu, Kenya.

2 M. Oduyoye, *The Sons of the Gods and the Daughters of Men: An Afro-Asiatic Interpretation of Genesis 1-11,* Orbis and Daystar, Ibadan, New York 1984, p 8.

3 Ibid., pp 50-51 and 97f. This may also help in the translation of Gen 4:1 RSV has 'I have gotten a man with the help of the LORD': the literal translation is 'I have gotten/created a man – a Yahweh.' This no longer sounds blasphemous if Yahweh means spirit. 'I have gotten/created a man – a spirit.' Other OT names of God are also reflected in West African languages eg, El – Yoruba 'Elu/Olu', Eloah – Yoruba 'Oluwa'.

4 G. J. Wenham, 'The Religion of the Patriarchs' in A. R. Millard and D. J. Wiseman, eds., *Essays on the Patriarchal Narratives,* IVP, Leicester 1980, p 181.

('He who exists'), which thus personalizes the Greek philosophical divine principle of their context, *to On*. Yahweh is translated as *Kurios*.

Paul and John develop this theme in their own ways. Paul takes the *Kurios* of the Septuagint and refers it to Christ: eg Joel 2:32 in Romans 10:13 and Isaiah 45:23 in Philippians 2:10-11 (though in Romans 14:11 he refers it to God). John takes the I AM of Exodus 3:14 and echoes it in the sayings of Christ eg, John 8:58.

Perhaps also the title *Christ* which eventually became a name, *Jesus Christ* is relevant here too. The Jewish tradition of the Messiah and the historical rabbi from Galilee became focused in one name.

So we can see various developments of the continuity themes:

Ngai	—God the Father as revealed in Jesus
Elohim	—Yahweh
to On	—ho On
Yahweh	—Kurios
Kurios	—Kurios Iesous
I AM	—Before Abraham was I AM
Christ	—Jesus

There is continuity of the tradition in each of the above, in different degrees, but the tradition is filled out with new meaning: this leads us into our next theme, of accommodation.

The Treasures and Wealth of the Nations

In December 1985 I was present at an amazing confirmation service amongst Turkana and Samburu tribespeople, near Isiolo north east of Mount Kenya. Through the partnership of evangelism and development many had become firm believers in Christ and that day 125 were confirmed. At the end of the service Bishop David Gitari invited a Turkana elder to lead the traditional antiphonal liturgy.

Elder:	All the devil's works,
People:	We send to the setting sun.
Elder:	All our problems,
People:	We send to the setting sun.
Elder:	All our difficulties,
People:	We send to the setting sun.

As the people joined in the responses they accompanied their words with a vigorous sweep of the arm towards the west. The liturgical committee of the Church of the Province of Kenya have been asked to consider including such traditional liturgies in their revision work. The Roman Catholic Church in Kenya have produced a Kikuyu Eurcharistic Prayer which accommodates some concepts of traditional religion.

> You, the Great Elder, who dwells on the shining mountain, your blessing allows our homesteads to spread. Your anger destroys them. We beseech you, and in this we are in harmony with the spirits of our ancestors; we ask you to send the Spirit of Life to bless and sanctify

our offerings, that they may become the Body and Blood of Jesus, our brother and your Son.[1]

In the biblical literature we can also see several examples of such accommodation. This theme seems to me to be gloriously expressed in John's final vision (Rev. 21:24-27), where 'the treasures and wealth of the nations' are brought into the new Jerusalem by the kings of the earth. George Caird comments on these verses:

> The treasure that men find laid up in heaven turns out to be 'the treasures and wealth of the nations', the best they have known and loved on earth redeemed of all imperfections and transfigured by the radiance of God. Nothing is excluded but what is 'obscene and false', that is, what is totally alien to the character of God.[2]

Since the exciting discovery of Ugaritic Canaanite hymns at Ras Sharma in 1929, various early Hebrew psalms have been seen against a new background. Songs of creation (Ps. 19:1-6) which are brilliantly transformed into praise of the Torah (vv 7-14), reinterpretations to celebrate the Davidic dynasty (Ps. 89:9-18) or to solemnize (Solomonize!) the Jerusalem Temple (Pss. 46-48), are interesting examples of accommodation/transformation. Psalm 29 contains seven repetitions of the phrase 'the voice of Yahweh' and has been called the Psalm of the Seven Thunders. As Anderson states:

> Most modern commentators regard this Psalm as one of the oldest in the whole Psalter, and in recent years it has been customary to stress the similarities between this poem and the Ugaritic literature (as well as other Near Eastern parallels . . .). It seems quite likely that the pattern and metaphors of this hymn were provided by a Baal-Hadad song which extolled the might of the Phoenician storm god . . . The metre of the Psalm is irregular and a similar feature is not unusual also in the Ugaritic poem.[3]

The chaos monster of ancient Near Eastern mythology has various names – Tiamat, Rahab, Leviathan (the seven headed Lotan of Ras Shamra), or simply called the dragon: it is given various 'faces' in the political 'cartoons' of old and intertestamental literature – Nebuchadnezzar (Jer. 51:34), Pharaoh (Ezek. 29:3) and Pompey (Ps of Sol. 2:29).

Isaiah attacks the wisdom of relying on the 'Wise' of Egypt against the threat of Assyria, by sarcastically calling Egypt 'Rahab-who-sits-still' (Isa. 30:7). Rahab had long been associated with the oppressive Egypt (Ps. 87:4) and Deutero-Isaiah develops the theme for the new exodus from Babylon

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1 S. Bottignole, *Kikuyu Traditional Culture and Christianity,* Heinemann, Nairobi 1984, p 110.

2 G. B. Caird *The Revelation of St. John the Divine,* A & C Black, London 1966, p 279.

3 A. A. Anderson *Psalms,* vol. 1, Oliphants, London 1972, p 233. Also D. Senior and C. Stuhlmueller, *The Biblical Foundations for Mission,* SCM, London 1983, pp 111-138 provides many good insights into these psalms.

(Isa. 51:9-10) which then is carried further concerning God's final victory: 'In that day the LORD with his hand and great and strong sword will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the twisting serpent, and he will slay the dragon that is in the sea.' (Isa. 27:1)[1]

The monotheistic faith of the Priestly writer of Genesis 1 powerfully transforms the myth, Enuma Elish, into an encouraging, heartening story for the exiles in Babylon who had lost home, land, Temple and – some felt – God. He shows that God is the only God of all creation and the heavens and earth are his Temple with the sun and moon, far from being gods, being the Temple lights. Desmond Tutu has interpreted this Priestly creation story to encourage his fellow black South Africans who are exiles in their own land and surrounded by apartheid myths.

> This is a tremendous *tour de force,* to uphold the hope and faith of a people who felt quite down and out. The assertions of 'P' seemed to be complete nonsense – all this business about God's sovereignty and so on, when all the evidence pointed to the contrary. But in the end it was vindicated.[2]

The Wisdom literature of the Old Testament bears witness to the theme of accommodation. The Hebrew writer of Proverbs (22:17-24:22) has borrowed from, without slavishly copying, the Egyptian wisdom work *The Instructions of Amen-em-opet.* Eric Heaton has put the case for the existence of a School for Scribes attached to the Temple and Court of King Solomon, which provided the education for the administrative bureaucracy of the kingdom. Such schools existed at Ras Sharma and elsewhere throughout the ancient Near East and proverbs formed part of the education of young men for work in administration.

> This educated elite was the principal means by which Yahwism came into contact with the whole cultural tradition of the ancient Near East and the only means by which Israel's own tradition, enriched by its exposure to the wisdom of the nations, was preserved for posterity.[3]

In listening to students' sermons on their Sunday placements, I have noticed the regular use of traditional proverbs. These used to be part of the traditional education of young people as they sat at the feet of an elder outside his hut. When they are produced at the right time, and in the appropriate context, they are very powerful in making a point.

> *Mathiga mekiondo kimwe matigaga gukomongama*
> Axe heads in one bag cannot avoid colliding together.
> ie, When people live together you can expect clashes.

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1 G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible,* Duckworth, London 1980, p 226ff.

2 Sermon at Hammanskraal, 7 April 1978, published in D. Tutu, *Hope and Suffering,* Collins, London 1984, p 65.

3 E. W. Heaton, *The Hebrew Kingdoms,* OUP, Oxford 1968, p 185. See also his more detailed arguments in his *Solomon's New Men,* Thames and Hudson, London 1974.

Mwene thi agire gwaguthikwo akithikwo muti-iguru
When the Owner came to the earth he found no place to be buried, so he was buried up a tree.
ie, A leader is often not respected in his own area. (This is one of several interpretations).

The second proverb has fascinating parallels with both Luke 9:58 and Luke 4:24; its christological hints are sometimes developed in the way Proverbs 8:22f, was in the early church.

As well as hymns, myths and proverbs, many other ideas and concepts which we find in the Old and New Testaments were also accommodated from outside God's covenant people and transformed. The Feast of Weeks, at the wheat harvest, (Exod. 23:16) was one of the special occasions in the agricultural calendar of Palestine (Gen. 30:14, Judg. 15:1), and the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Exod. 23:15) was not observed till the Israelites had settled in Canaan (Lev. 23:10 states this explicitly when referring to the first sheaf).

Solomon's Temple was designed on a Canaanite model and built by Phoenicians (1 Kgs. 5:1-12)[1] and its amazingly advanced metal work was carried out by Phoenician technicians (1 Kgs. 7:13-47). In 1957 the excavations at Hazor discovered a Canaanite temple built on the same plans as Solomon's.

The concept of Kingship was borrowed from the Canaanites when the Philistine threat proved too powerful for the divided and jealous tribes of Israel. The elders of Israel came to Samuel at Ramah and demanded 'Now appoint for us a king to govern us like all the nations' (1 Sam. 8:5).

The personification of wisdom in Proverbs 8:22f may also have been borrowed: for a new comparable myth see Job 15:7-8. This is transformed by New Testament writers to describe the primacy of Christ (Col. 1:15-17, 2:3, 1 Cor. 1:24, 30, also Heb. 1:3, John 1:1-4, Rev. 4:11, 22:13).

In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31), Jesus takes a familiar folk tale and adapts it to a new purpose by adding an unfamiliar twist to the end of it. The story of a wicked rich man and a pious poor man whose fortunes are reversed in the afterlife seems to have come originally from Egypt and was popular among Jewish teachers.

As well as Paul's famous quoting of Greek poets at Athens (Acts 17:28), he also borrows from Stoic ethics (Phil. 4:8f.) and uses the general language of hellenistic philosophy in expressing his belief in the creator 'For from him and through him and to him are all things' (Rom. 11:36 – cp the language of modern eucharistic liturgies – see also 1 Cor. 8:6, Eph. 4:6 and the writer to the Hebrews use at Heb. 2:10). John's radical development of

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1 Moslems are in the majority on the Kenyan coast and the dome of Mombasa Cathedral was deliberately designed on the model of a mosque's dome, but with a cross on the top. The chief builder of the new Embu Cathedral, in the Diocese of Mount Kenya East, was a Sikh.

personified wisdom in Proverbs, and in intertestamental writings, and of the logos doctrine in Stoic philosophy and Philo, will be discussed below.

So, we have seen hymns, myths, proverbs, festivals, architecture, styles of government, folk tales and philosophical idioms being accepted, from gentile sources and transformed under God's Spirit for the education of his people. But where is the line between accommodation and syncretism? What of the confrontation themes in the scriptures?

Theological Fornication

Lesslie Newbigin, in his autobiography, describes a meeting in Birmingham soon after his return from India organized by a body called 'All Faiths for One Race'.

> It was typical that all those present were Christians and that a clergyman among them described missions as 'theological racism'. I was provoked into advising him to beware of theological fornication![1]

Unfaithfulness to Yahweh is often portrayed in the Old Testament in terms of fornication and adultery, particularly because worship of the Baals often involved sacred prostitutes (Exod. 34:13-16). Sometimes the language is very earthy (eg, Jer. 2:23-24)! What happened at Shittim when Israel 'yoked himself to Baal-Peor' (Num. 25:1-5) sent reverberations throughout biblical literature (Ps. 106:28, Hos. 9:10, 1 Cor. 10:8).

In the second half of the second millenium BC Baal, a new upstart god, took over from his rival El as the leading god in the west Semitic pantheon. Unlike El(ohim) who was seen as continuous with Yahweh – and it is interesting to note the absence of anachronistic references to Baal in the patriarchal narratives – Baal was not. He was seen as the enemy and confronted.[2]

Worshipping Yahweh plus others was not worshipping Yahweh at all; it was a vote of no confidence in him (faithlessness), as well as the intimate joining together with a foreign body (unfaithfulness). Worshipping Yahweh alone, but in the ways of Baal was not really worshipping Yahweh (Deut. 12:29-31). Child sacrifice still persisted into the days of the kings, eg, Ahaz (2 Kgs. 16:3) and Manasseh (2 Kgs. 21:6). Priests (Lev. 18.21) and prophets (Jer. 7:31) forbade it but were unable to stamp it out completely. Two particular stories are interesting on this theme of worship: the witch of Endor conjouring up Samuel was narrated to forbid contact with ancestors and the story of the King of Moab sacrificing his son on the city wall, with such amazing results against the army of Israel, is remembered to show the horror of Chemosh worship. Although both rituals were strangely effective ('. . . and Saul knew it was Samuel' (1 Sam. 28:14) '. . . and great

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1 L. Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda*, SPCK, London 1985, p 244.

2 Though cp Judg. 8:33 and 9:4 (Baal-berith) with 9:46 (El-Berith) Also 1 Chr. 8:33 (Esh-baal) with 1 Sam. 4:1 (Ishbosheth); the word *bosheth* means 'shame'.

wrath came upon Israel' (2 Kgs. 3:27), they were still utterly forbidden.

In Kenya during the Mau Mau revolt (1952-7) many 'Revival Brethren' were killed, including people here at Kabare, because they refused to take the Mau Mau oath which involved goats' blood or the blood of the oathtaker. The spirituality of the East African Revival stresses the blood of Christ and the frequent reply of the Brethren who were willing to face martyrdom was 'I have been saved by the blood of the Lamb, so how can I take the blood of goats?'[17]

Mau Mau was a Kikuyu revolutionary movement which erupted in the early fifties, though the roots of opposition lay much further back. The British theft of their ancestral land was at the heart of the revolt. It is difficult for Europeans to grasp the importance of ancestral land: when I mentioned to a friend of mine that I owned no land in England his immediate, astonished response was 'Then where will you bury your father?' Ancestors in Africa are buried in the family land and removal from the land is not just a case of economic loss, but a religious and family bereavement too. The forced removals in South Africa are equally horrific. Desmond Tutu has powerfully applied the story of Naboth's vineyard which was stolen by King Ahab to his context there.[2]

Some Kikuyu loyalists backed the colonial administration and the tension for Christians was enormous: they were strung in the middle, and pulled both ways. Obediah Kariuki, a member of the Revival movement who visited his brother-in-law, Kenyatta, in prison and was later to be the first Bishop of Mount Kenya, writes in his memoirs:

> I did not see anything wrong with fighting for one's own freedom in one's own country. What most of us in the church at that time objected to was the violence, coercion and finally forced oathing to make people join the Mau Mau movement . . . But such opposition did not blind us to the fact that we had all been subjected to a reign of terror during colonial times and we had all suffered together, Christian and non-Christian. We became a single body being wounded in the struggle, not only physically but spiritually in our dilemma as we tried to decide which way to go.[3]

So the colonial revolt became a civil war and a religious conflict. The revolt was eventually defeated but its long term results led to Indepen-

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1 See A. Hastings, *A History of African Christianity 1950-1975,* CUP, Cambridge 1979, pp 87-8 and 100-3, for a fine short summary of the political and religious tensions involved in Mau Mau, and for a detailed bibliography.

2 Tutu, op. cit., pp 39-42.

3 O. Kariuki, *A Bishop Facing Mount Kenya,* Uzima, Nairobi 1985, p 78. Oathing and intimidation broke out again in 1969 when there was a political crisis of unity, which had culminated in the assassination of Tom Mboya. After the churches protested, it stopped as abruptly as it started. See Fashole-Luke, op. cit., pp 267-284.

dence in 1963. Obediah Kariuki continues: 'For myself I am deeply convinced that Christians, especially those who faced death rather than take the oath, contributed to the return of peace to this country: their blood nourished the tree of freedom as much as any other.'

The Mau Mau themselves were deeply religious and worshipped Ngai with moving hymns: they rejected the 'colonial Christ', as they perceived him, but prayed facing Mount Kenya for Ngai's help in their liberation struggle. So here we find a tension with our continuity theme outlined above. We argued that Ngai should have a captial N, but in the time of Mau Mau, worship of Ngai and of God as revealed in Jesus were in conflict. The traditional ways of worship were no longer right for Christians. Perhaps this sheds some light on Joshua's words in Joshua 24:2 and 15. In the renewal of the covenant he challenges the people to be rid of all other gods including even 'the gods your forefathers worshipped beyond the River.' Chris Wright comments on this:

> The inference here is that however God may have initially accommodated his relationship with the patriarchs to their previous worship and concept of deity, as was necessary in the period historically prior to the exodus, now that their descendants have an unambiguous knowledge of Yahweh in the light of the exodus, Sinai and the conquest, such concepts are inadequate and indeed incompatible with covenant loyalty.[1]

A similar, though not strictly parallel, theme is present in the letter to the Hebrews, where the writer encourages the Christians under pressure not to return to the sacrifices of Judaism.

This theme of confrontation and antagonism is rarely given prominence in current 'theologies of other faiths'. Both the General Synod's Board of Mission and Unity Report and Wesley Ariarajah's recent booklet (WCC) have little to say about the polemic against idols: Ken Cracknell's new book (BCC), which is a gold mine of fascinating information, has only a short and rather inadequate note on the subject.[2]

Max Warren has perceptively stressed that the prophetic attack against idolatry was directed not so much against people outside the covenant as against God's own people inside the covenant.[3] This is well said, though the thesis does not fit all the references, and is similar to Jesus' warnings about *Gehenna*, and other attacks against idols in the New Testament

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1 C. Wright, 'The Christian and Other Religions: The Biblical Evidence', in *Themelios* 9, 1984, p 7.

2 Church of England, General Synod, Board for Mission and Unity, *Towards a Theology For Inter-Faith Dialogue*, CIO, London 1984. S. W. Ariarajah, *The Bible and Other Faiths*, WCC, Geneva 1985. K. Cracknell, *Towards a New Relationship: Christians and People of Other Faith*, Epworth, London 1986, pp 39-40.

3 M. Warren, *A Theology of Attention*, Christian Literature Society, Madras 1971, p 31.

(sometimes demythologized – Matt. 6:24, Eph. 5:5, Phil. 3:19, Col. 3:5). This does not, however, imply that God is not concerned about idolatry in the world, he clearly is and wishes all those who worship idols to come to the Living God, for idolatry dehumanizes people and they become like their idols (Ps. 115:8, Jer. 2:5).

The Shema of Deuteronomy 6:4, however it is translated, is a powerful confession of mono-Yahwism which eventually forced the biblical writers to deal theologically with pagan gods. It seems to me that there have been four approaches to this problem. Firstly *continuity:* this has been described above. Secondly *the denial of their existence:* Elijah began this with his mocking of Baal and Deutero-Isaiah takes it up against Bel and Nebo and other 'non-entities'. Barnabas and Paul at Lystra (Acts 14:15) call idols empty foolish things, *mataioi,* compared to the Living God.

Thirdly, *demotion:* they were dedeified and became part of Yahweh's council, sons of God/angels, part of his administration, his governors, covering his worldwide empire (Deut. 32:8). They have been delegated authority over the nations but are confronted and called to account for their unjust action (Ps. 82:1-2, 6-7). The nations mistakenly worship them as gods (though cp Deut. 4:19). Israel, however, is governed by Yahweh's own direct rule (Deut. 32:9). Paul's concept of principalities and powers seems to have been a development of this.[1]

Fourthly, and less commonly, *demonization:* the Hebrew *sedim* of Deuteronomy 32:17 and Psalm 106:37 (occuring only here in the Old Testament) is translated in the Septuagint by *daimonioi,* a disparaging term for other peoples' gods. Paul quotes this in 1 Corinthians 10:19-20. 'What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God.'

How do these approaches relate to the Christian encounter with African Traditional Religion? The first we have already seen concerning the continuity of Ngai. The second has been applied, in traditional missionary teaching to lesser spirits and divinities, denying their existence, but with little profound success at the level of deep feelings. The third approach has been more fruitful and finds a fascinating parallel in ATR itself: Kwame Bediako, in his paper quoted earlier, describes how sometimes these diverse divinities are seen as ministers of the Ultimate God, charged with responsibilities in various departments of his universe; since they have ability to act independently, and sometimes capriciously, they are worshipped and revered.[2] After the encounter with the Christian gospel, it seems to me that these spirits/lesser divinities are often demoted to angels and not worshipped (though there is still a powerful pull on Christians to do so, especially in time of trouble).

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1 For a fuller exposition of this response see Caird, *Language,* pp 179 and 236-7.

2 Bediako, op. cit., p 85.

Kwame Bediako goes on to suggest how the doctrine of the Trinity resolves the profound tension and dilemma in African Traditional Religion of the One and the Many (One Supreme God but many lesser divinities):

> It firmly roots the divine plurality in an identity of nature and will, which is far ahead of what the theology of African Traditional Religion can set forth. Thus the risk of divinities, ancestral spirits and other impersonal spirits acting independently and capriciously is decidedly excluded. The ubiquity of spiritual forces becomes the ubiqity of the Holy Spirit who relates the activity of the divine from the one source to the multiplicity and plurality in the world and in human experience. Also the African sense that the essential character of deity is uniqueness – a uniqueness not of remoteness or of an otiose nature, but rather a uniqueness of transcendence – is taken care of, while the intuition that God is involved in human affairs is more than adequately answered by the incarnation which is the high point in the manifestation of the divine immanence.[1]

Before coming to the fourth approach in Africa, what of it in Europe? The demonization approach is less prominent than the others in the scriptures but it is there. What do people make of Jesus' and Paul's confrontation with evil spirits, or of Revelation's warning against bestial Emperor worship? I remember a sketch satirizing the total relativist approach to inter-faith dialogue on the programme 'Not the Nine O'clock News'. Mel Smith was playing a trendy Anglican vicar talking about the Church of England's new acceptance of Satanism within its comprehensiveness! 'It's not so much "Get thee behind me Satan" as "Come in and have a cuppa tea old mate".'[2]

While I certainly do *not* hold that all other faiths are satanic, I believe the demonic can become present in all faiths – even in Christianity (the Crusades, the Inquisition, Apartheid etc) – and that we shoud not sweep the existence of Nazism and witchcraft, for example, under the theological carpet.[3]

In the African context of profound spiritual awareness, *Shaitani* is often mentioned in sermons. In ATR there is an important distinction between medicine men and witchdoctors: the former are part of the community and of healthy worship, while the latter are hated and condemned. Samuel Munene, one of the ordinands here, last year on his month long pastoral

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1 Ibid., p 91.

2 Oral tradition!

3 Gavin D'Costa writes that while John Hick eschews total relativization of religious truth some 'Pluralists', such as W. Cantwell Smith, A. Race and E. Troeltsch, do not. 'It is difficult to see how such relativists would combat claims that Nazism or witchcraft represent true responses to the divine reality.' (G. D'Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism*, Blackwell, Oxford 1986, p 41).

placement met an old man called Muthakie. After various greetings the conversation went as follows:

Munene: I have come to bring the good news of Jesus Christ to you.

Muthakie: Please, no, I am a witchdoctor.

Munene: Praise the Lord! Many witchdoctors got saved in Acts chapter 19. They burnt books worth 50,000 shillings. Another, called Elymas, abused Paul while he was preaching to a Governor in Acts chapter 13 and he became blind.

Muthakie: I fear God's people and I don't joke with them. I cannot react like that witchdoctor, Elymas.

Munene: If you fear God, go and get all your charms and burn them so that you may be saved.

Muthakie: If anyone burns my charms I'll take him to court. Please leave me alone and I will think about it. Perhaps I will be saved after a while.[1]

Extra Regnum Nulla Salus

At the full meeting of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism in Mexico 1963, the first such conference in which the Orthodox took a full part, the Bishop of Cathage was heard to remark: 'One of my predecessors, Cyprian, used to say, *"Extra ecclesiam nulla salus"*. I don't agree, but he had a point.'[2]

Indeed he did, but perhaps a more biblical phrase may be 'Outside the *Kingdom* there is no salvation'. Jesus' proclamation of dynamic Kingdom salvation summed up the Hebrew concept of *shalom*. Writing carefully on this word, Michael Sadgrove and Tom Wright comment:

> Broadly speaking, salvation has a more specifically earthy character in the early faith of the Jews: it is very much linked to health, happiness, good weather, successful harvests and victory in battle. These ideas begin to be expanded (though not superseded) to include all that is implied by a healthy relationship with God. We should be careful, however, not to infer that 'spiritual' ideas of salvation are *only* late appendices, or that 'material' blessings are always regarded as a true index of a man's relationship with God. The whole of the Old Testament faith is in a God who saves his people in history. It is a real material salvation that he brings, yet more than that. It is wholeness of life for man individually and in community which contains a spiritual dimension as well.[3]

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1 Samuel Munene, in an essay on evangelism, 1986.

2 Newbigin, op. cit., p 207.

3 M. Sadgrove and T. Wright, 'Jesus Christ the Only Saviour' in J. Stott ed, *Obeying Christ in a Changing World*, Collins, London 1977, pp 65-6.

This all became real in history for me during the confirmation service of Turkana and Samburu Christians that was referred to above. Diocesan missionary work was started in this semi-arid area at Isiolo in 1980, with a congregation of eight people: the parish now has eighteen different congregations. From the beginning evangelism and development went hand in hand.[1] In February 1985 Bishop David Gitari baptized 180 people and the week prior to the confirmation service, in December, a further 257.

After the service the communion table became a development desk. The Bishop and Diocesan Director of Development took notes as the elders explained their further needs, which included clean water, eye treatment, cattle dips, and help with preventing elephants from ruining their crops! While this was happening, the local community health workers (who had been trained here at the institute) were dispensing medicine.

As I reflected on this exciting expeience of *Shalom* and of the growth of the Kingdom, the question came up in my mind of their status before God, before they had heard, seen and welcomed the good news of Christ. Perhaps I should have put it out of my mind and just rejoiced in their new wholeness: I did rejoice, but I also did some thinking about this strange question. I am still pondering it and only offer the following as negative and positive reflections 'en route'.

There seem to me to be at least five biblically inadequate responses. Firstly, *the denial of God's judgment.* Jim Wallis has told the story of a zealous friend of his who once marked all the references to the poor in an old Bible, and then cut them out with scissors. When he was finished the Bible literally fell apart! It was a Bible full of holes.[2] I believe the same would happen if the references to present and future judgment were removed. The doctrine of God's justice and judgment is in fact good news as well as bad news in Africa, and the world, where evil, injustice and oppression are rampant. When God's justice is done it calls for cheers (Rev. 19) as well as tears (Luke 19:41).

Secondly, *the denial that God's judgment is just.* This seems to me to be the implication if we insist that every individual who is 'unreached', both in the world today and in past centuries, is therefore inevitably eternally lost. If so, then their judgment would be radically affected by their particular location in space and time. God does judge for eternity, and the doctrine of 'universalism' is not, I believe, a biblical option, but nor is a doctrine of 'condemnation by geography or chronology', for God is just in all his judgments, even on human terms of justice as Paul consistently argues in Romans (eg, Rom. 3:26).

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1 For a theological reflection on the growth of the church in this area of Isiolo see D. M. Gitari, 'The Tribal Background of Pluralism' in P. Sookhdeo, ed, *New Frontiers in Mission*, Paternoster, Exeter 1986.

2 J. Wallis, *The Rise of Christian Conscience*, (1986 CMS Annual Sermon), CMS, London 1986, p 3.

Thirdly, the denial of the distinction between the people of God and of the world. Such phrases as 'all humanity is the people of God'[1] are misleading for the phrase 'people of God' is the language of God's covenants with Abraham, Moses David and Jesus rather than with Noah. It refers to Israel and the reconstituted Israel – the Church. God does choose a special people for himself but only for the sake of all the peoples. In an article on the New Testament doctrine of God and in the context of the covenant and incarnation, C. F. D. Moule writes: 'The New Testament, in other words, constantly represents God as content to achieve his purposes by self-limitation, by specialization, by selection, by contraction in order to expand'.[2]

The eschatological gathering of the nations shown in the Kingship Psalms and visions of the prophets will be a glorious fulfilment of that 'expansion'.

Fourthly, *the development of the Logos/Cosmic Christ doctrine.* Sometimes I think that the beloved disciple would be amazed at Justin Martyr's development of his verses on the *Logos* and Justin himself would be astounded at many recent developments.[3] The Saviour in John's Gospel is clearly the incarnate not the non-incarnate *Logos:* otherwise, where is the need for enfleshment and death? C. K. Barrett has shown that the verb *photizei* in John 1:9, on which hangs most of this doctrine, means not 'inward illumination' but 'exposure to the light of judgment' (cp 1 Cor. 4:5). Verse 10 'and the world knew him not', and the fact that in the rest of the gospel the function of light is judgment, gives backing to this translation.[4]

In the context of his Apology (1:5-6) Justin refers to the *Logos* in pagan philosophy as an argument against pagan religion, which he saw as the work of demons![5] Paul would probably likewise be surprised at the modern development of his Cosmic Christ passages in terms of universalism, especially considering Ephesians 2:1-3 and 12.

Fifthly, *justification by works.* The claim that the people who have not heard of Christ can be saved by their piety and righteous behaviour runs right up against Jesus calling sinners and not the pious, Paul's doctrine of justification and his comments about Israel. Paul argues in Romans 3:29f. that there is only one way of justification because there is only one God. Since Gentiles are included in God's family then justification must be by faith (in Christ), there being no *Torah* way for them, and therefore Jews also are only justified by faith in him. These verses, which are rooted in the *Shema,* seem to me to point to the uniqueness of Christ even more than the well known ones of John 14:6 and Acts 4:12.

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1 BMU, op. cit., p 15.
2 C. F. D. Moule, 'God – NT' in G. Buttrick et al, eds, *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible,* Abingdon, Nashville, 1962, vol. 2, p 435.
3 Cracknell, op. cit., pp 98-107.
4 C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According To St. John,* SPCK, London 1955, p 134.
5 See L. Newbigin, *The Open Secret,* Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1978, p 192.

So, if these five responses are inadequate because of their flight from God's judgment, his justice, his covenant, his historic Christ, and his only way of justification, what positive responses are possible?

Firstly, *the numerous individuals in the Bible, outside the covenant, who know God.* Melchizedek, Abimelech, Jethro, Baalam, Rahab, Job, Naaman, the Magi et. al., are important pointers to God's grace. In Acts 10 Cornelius is described as a devout man who feared God (v 2), and was upright (v 22): Peter implies that he is acceptable to God (v 35). God's Spirit interrupts Peter's sermon and fills the people: a second Pentecost has happened and Cornelius and his household are baptized and become members of the people of God. But what of Cornelius's status before hearing the good news? I believe the story implies that he was not part of the people of God, nor had he the Holy Spirit, but that if he had died he would have been accepted and welcomed into God's Kingdom. The other uses of the word 'acceptable' *(dektos)* in Luke 4:19, Luke 4:24, 2 Corinthians 6:2 and Philippians 4:18 bear witness to this conclusion.

Secondly, *the position of the patriarchs.* Abraham died before Christ, but his Old Testament faith in *Kurios* illustrates and is equated with our New Testament faith in *Kurios Iesous* (Rom. 4). Abraham 'comes to the Father' through Christ (there is no other way) and comes by faith (there really is no other way), for his faith in God is counted as faith in God and in his Messiah. I believe the saving effect of the Messiah's death and resurrection are not bound by time, and work backwards to Abraham as well as forwards to us and forwards to those who are still in the position of the patriarchs.

Thirdly, *the surprises of the Kingdom.* The Old Testament concept of God's Kingship was of his general sovereignty over all the nations of the world, direct rule over Israel (Deut. 32:8-9) and an eschatological hope of a world wide reign involving judgment or salvation for the nations (Isa. 42:1-12 and 49:22-26). John Goldingay comments on Psalm 47:8-9:

> In so far as the nations are seen as in wilful rebellion against God, they are to be put down; but in so far as they are seen as in regretful ignorance of Israel's God, they are to be invited to join in his worship. One way or another they will bow: of their own free will or under compulsion, in sullen submission or in humble worship.[1]

Jesus modifies the Jewish concept of God's Reign by underlining its universality (Gentiles are included), by redefining it as a gift (not a reward) and by announcing its transcendental irruption – or immanent eruption? – *now* (as well as its consummation in the future).[2] God is actively establishing his liberating rule among men and women now: he is creating a new

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1 J. Goldingay, *Songs From A Strange Land,* IVP, Leicester 1978, p 80.

2 Concerning Mk. 1:15 *engiken* being properly translated as 'has arrived' George Caird notes that in the vocabulary of the temple, a priest was said to bring an offering near: 'This meant he presented it at the altar, not left it a mile outside the city!' (Caird, *Language,* op. cit., p 260 note 22.)

realm of blessing into which surprising people enter and where the values of this world are amazingly turned the right way up again.

There are surprises in history and at the last day. In the Old Testament we read the exciting descriptions of Psalm 87:1-6, Isaiah 19:19-25, Amos 9:7, and the whole book of Jonah; in the New Testament we encounter the semi-pagan 'Good Samaritan' (in Jesus' context a contradiction in terms!), the Roman Centurion, those present at the messianic feast from East and West, and those who inherit the Kingdom prepared for them before the foundation of the world. The form of this last parable (Matt. 25:31-46) resembles the Old Testament vision of the gathering of the nations and similarly has a double edge to it. The central point is of ignorance and surprise: ignorance of the King in their earthly life and surprise at being saved or lost.

Finally, *the crisis of the Kingdom.* Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom, particularly in his parables, precipitates a crisis amongst his hearers: they are divided in their response to him. In the various traditions of the New Testament this eschatological crisis is focused in the words 'but now'. In the context of the farewell discourses in John, and concerning his persecutors, Jesus says: 'If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have sin: but now they have no excuse for their sin.' (John 15:23). In Athens Paul declares 'the times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all men everywhere to repent.' (Acts 17:30). To the Roman Christians, at the very nadir of the bad news of sin, Paul triumphantly writes, 'But now the righteousness of God has been manifested' and 'in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.' (Rom. 3:21 and 25).

These 'but now's, coupled with the implications of divine overlooking/passing over of previous sins, find parallels in the evangelistic preaching in areas of this Diocese where the gospel is still new news. When this gospel is first proclaimed and shown in action the people experience their own eschatological crisis. This does not mean that all are automatically saved before the evangelist arrives, for the gospel of the Kingdom brings out people's real response to God, which is already hidden deep in their hearts (Mark 4:10-12, John 3:16-21, 9:39-41) – and which God alone knows.

Conclusion

So, these are some preliminary reflections on the four themes of continuity, accommodation, confrontation, and salvation as seen both in the encounter between ATR and Christianity, and in the Bible.

The Priestly writer, Solomon the King, Elijah the Prophet and Jesus the Messiah seem to me to represent these themes in the Bible. Here, in the mighty presence of Mount Kenya, Ngai is the word used for God in the Kikuyu Bible and liturgies, drumming and dancing are welcomed in worship, traditional oathing is heartily rejected and the holistic salvation of God's Kingdom, centred on Christ, is celebrated.

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