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of God in the fact of Jesus. This principle was the centre and determining factor in Schlatter's approach to Scripture. Stuhlmacher has noted the end of the Bultmannian school's domination over contemporary New Testament scholarship as marking the end of an era. With the later Bultmannians, biblical research, which had lost its moorings in the church and its faith, tended to run aground. There are many signs today, however, of a new vitality in biblical studies. Particularly evident is the renewed concern for a theological [p. 30](#) understanding of Scripture and a return to Schlatter's view that Jesus was in fact the Christ of God and is himself the hermeneutical key to the New Testament. There are definite signs of this in other parts of the world.

In the past decade there has been a spate of writings from a variety of perspectives pointing to the current impasse in the historical-critical task. Historical criticism is supposed to give assured results, yet the results obtained are so very diverse, and there seems to be such a gap between the results of historical research and the church's faith. How can this be overcome? Stuhlmacher is representative of various scholars who seek to bridge this gap by taking cues from Schlatter. It may be that in rediscovering Adolf Schlatter, New Testament scholarship will begin to recover its true faith—faith in Jesus and faith in its true task, the service of the church through the elucidation of the text.

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Christianity as an African Religion

Byang H. Kato

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Religion is generally understood as man's effort to reach a being higher than himself. This effort is expressed through a variety of religious practices such as rituals, sacrifices and prayers. If this is our understanding of the use of the term in this context, Christianity cannot be called religion.

Christianity is a matter of personal relationship. God, a personal being on the one hand, and man, another personal being on the other, interact with each other. But the initiative starts with God. He first gives Himself to be known. Man, created by God also with the capacity to respond, does so in relation to his Maker and Sustainer. In this context, man finds answers to all that concerns him in God who has spoken.

We may, however, understand religion in the general sense of God speaking and man responding. Christianity may then be called religion. We must never forget the fact that the distinctive nature of Christianity is that it is a *revealed faith*. God has spoken decisively through His Word, the Bible, and through the person and works of His Son, Jesus Christ. "In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days He has spoken to us by a Son, whom He appointed the heir of all things, through whom also He created all things" ([Heb. 1:1, 2](#)).

The term "African" must be understood only in a loose and relative sense. It is estimated that there are nearly 1,000 ethnic groups or tribes in Africa. Then there are

other races such as Arabs, Caucasians (Europeans) and Asians who are also Africans. Differences between various people of Africa are real. But in the geographical sense, we can speak of people resident in Africa as Africans. In a more restrictive sense, we may bear in mind “black” Africans, the majority of whom have come from African Traditional Religions to Christianity. It is in this narrow sense that I want to speak. But again, not exclusively. Other Africans will be borne in mind and may be referred to if the need calls for us to do so.

The basic issue of this discussion is the relevance of Christianity to the African today. When I was in Malawi, I was told of a religious sect called Makolo (meaning ancestor worship). The preacher of Makolo lifted up the Koran and asked, “Whose book is this?” His listeners replied, “The Arab’s book.” He went on, “Whose religion is Islam?” The reply was, “It is the religion of the [p. 32](#) Arabs.” He did the same thing with Christianity. The conclusion drawn was that Christianity is the white man’s religion. The audience was invited to reject both religions as being foreign. Makolo, ancestor worship, was then declared the religion of the Africans. A similar call had been made by a Muslim head of state. He made the appeal that Africans should reject Christianity because of its Caucasian (European) connection. His call, of course, was not accepted. Is it a valid claim that Christianity is a white man’s religion in which the African should have no hand? In the following discussion, we shall seek to point out the answer to the contrary.

AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGIONS

The various ethnic African groups have their traditional religions as an answer to the reality of their existence. The primary question being raised today is that of the nature of these religions in relation to Christianity. The Apostle Paul categorically points out that the worship of pagan gods is a distortion of God’s revelation in nature ([Rom. 1:18–23](#)). Whatever rationalization we may try to make, the worship of gods in Africa is idolatry. This is not a denial of the universality of general revelation. God truly has not left Himself without a witness. His goodness to people irrespective of whether they are good or evil is the evidence of His witness to all people ([Acts 14:17](#)). His marvellous work of creation is a further pointer to His supreme power ([Psa. 19](#)). But the revelation has been distorted through the disobedience of the very first commandment. Man has not adhered to the one true God and Him alone as he has been commanded to do ([Ex. 20:3](#) [Deut. 6:4](#)); rather he has set up his own gods.

The depravity evident in African Traditional Religions has come to all people of the earth. The Psalmist declares, “The Lord looks down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there are any that act wisely, that seek after God. They have all gone astray, they are all alike corrupt; there is none that does good, no not one” ([Psa. 14:2, 3](#)). The Apostle echoes this in the New Testament ([Rom. 3:10–18](#)). The worship of idolatry is as old as man from the fall. Adam’s effort to clothe himself instead of being clothed with God’s righteousness was the beginning of that search for answers away from God. The Philistines, the Babylonians, the Romans and the Greeks all indulged in idolatry. In modern times, no people are excluded. The Arabs were worshippers of many “Jinns” (spirits). The founder of Islam consecrated [p. 33](#) one of the rocks of pagan worship for Islamic worship. (The Muslims, however, believe that the rock, Ka’aba, descended from heaven.) Stonehenge in southern England is a living evidence of Druidism, which was the heathen worship of the early inhabitants of the United Kingdom. Human sacrifice was a part of Druid worship and was abolished in Roman days.

While pagan worship was a part of the religion of these respective peoples, they could change to other religions of their choice. Most Arabs have accepted Islam and are now

Muslims. Islam is now associated with Saudi Arabia as their religion. Thanks to the faithful witness of the Christian missionaries, the British people no longer claim Druidism as their religion. They are now Christians, and Christianity is legitimately recognized as the British religion. Why should this not be the case in Africa where at least one-third of all Africans are adherents of the Christian religion in one form or another?

In these challenging days there are many voices being heard both within and outside the church for relevancy. Some people call it the Africanization of Christianity. Despite the fact that 150 million out of the 360 million people of Africa call themselves “Christians”, there are still voices denying the fact that Christianity is an African religion. It is my conviction that Christianity is truly an African religion. What we need in today’s Africa is not a return to the old traditional religions, or even a borrowing of some of the pagan practices to add to Christianity. Our greatest need is to live up to the claims we make as Christians and promote the Christian message to all areas of life and everywhere possible as true ambassadors of Christ.

HISTORICAL RELATIONSHIP OF CHRISTIANITY AND AFRICA.

Although missionaries from Europe and North America brought the gospel to Black Africa in modern times, they are not the first messengers of the gospel to our continent. As a matter of fact, Christianity has closer ties with Africa than with European countries or North America.

God’s call to man for revealing His will to mankind first came to an Asian, Abraham. It was through his descendants, the Jews, that God gave the message of salvation. But this does not give the Jews any monopoly on the gospel. Nor does this make their culture in any way superior to other cultures. God was merely using them to fulfill His purpose for the redemption of the world. Jesus was born, brought up, died and rose again in Asia and not in [p. 34](#) any European country. I am not aware of any evidence that any of the writers of the books of the Bible was a European. Jesus Christ, the founder of Christianity, never walked in Europe. As a matter of fact, Christianity did not reach Europe until about 20 years after Christ’s death and resurrection. That was when Paul made the first convert in Europe—Lydia ([Acts 16:15](#)).

In contrast to this, the Bible presents historical facts on the relationship of Africa with Palestine, the land of the Bible. In the Old Testament, it was out of their bondage in Africa that God redeemed His people. Egypt is part of Africa. The Queen of Sheba who visited Solomon was from Ethiopia in Africa according to tradition. Moses, the head of the Israeli nation, was married to a girl who was possibly an African ([Num. 12:1](#)). It was an African who rescued Jeremiah from a pit when no one else would do it ([Jer. 38:7](#)). It was prophesied long ago of the tremendous impact of God’s work in Africa some day. Egypt and Ethiopia were spoken of representatively: “Envoys will come out of Egypt; Ethiopia will quickly stretch out her hands to God” ([Psa. 68:31](#)).

There is a geographical link between Africa and the Holy Land, a link which was separated only superficially by the Suez Canal in 1869. The New Testament too presents the direct link of Africa with the Holy Land. In fulfillment of a prophecy made seven hundred years earlier, Jesus Christ was brought to Africa as a baby for safety from wicked King Herod. God said, “I called my son out of Egypt” ([Matt. 2:15](#)). So the Saviour born in Asia, walked the soil of Africa. When Jesus was carrying His cross to the hill for crucifixion, He was so tired that He could not continue much longer. As God, He could do anything. But as man, He was limited in this instance. It was an African who carried the cross the rest of the way. Simon came from Cyrene in North Africa ([Matt. 27:32](#)). While it is true that Simon might have been a settler in the Jewish community of that North African city,

he was still from Africa. Henry Kissinger, America's former Secretary of State, is a European Jew in origin, yet no one would question the fact that he is an American.

On the day of Pentecost, Africa was represented. Settlers of Cyrene in North Africa went there when the Holy Spirit inaugurated the Christian Church ([Acts 2:10](#)). An African from Ethiopia was one of the first converts outside the Jewish circle ([Acts 8](#)). When the first missionary conference was held, an African was there. Mentioned among the faithful disciples in Antioch was Simeon, nicknamed the Niger ([Acts 13:1](#)). Niger, from [p. 35](#) which the river Niger and the countries of Niger and Nigeria are named, means black. It is obvious therefore that Simeon was a "black man" ([Acts 13:1](#)—Living Bible). Either he was a black man from Africa who had assumed a Jewish name, or he was a Jew in origin but had lived in Africa. There has also been a suggestion that he was from Southern Arabia.

During the first two hundred years of the existence of Christianity, North Africa and modern Turkey had the strongest churches. Admittedly, many of the Christians in North Africa were settlers from other parts of the Roman Empire. But they were still inhabitants of Africa. Africa in the first four centuries of our era produced outstanding theologians. St. Augustine of Hippo, born of a Tuareg mother, Monica, has more lasting influence on Christian theology than any other person since the Apostle Paul. His African practical mind can still be noted in both Roman Catholic and Protestant theologies. Cyprian, Athanasius, Arius and Origen were all outstanding African theologians. It was due to internal squabbles and lack of vision that Christianity was to spread out towards Western Europe including the British Isles. Converted Europe then later brought Christianity to black Africa. One may see the cycle of the spread of Christianity to Asia, Africa, Europe (America), Africa and the rest of the world. Perhaps the cycle will repeat itself before long when Africans and Asians will once again take the gospel back to Europe. Church attendance in Germany today is 2%, England 4% and Kenya 40%. To claim that Christianity is a white man's religion only because white missionaries brought the gospel two hundred years ago is not historically accurate. But this does not give an Asian or an African any monopoly on Christianity. God gave His revelation to the whole world. The invitation comes to all people of all cultures: "Turn to me, and be saved, all the ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other" ([Isa. 45:22](#)). "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" ([Matt. 11:28](#)).

If anyone wants to reject Christianity, he must do so on other grounds and not on the excuse that it is a white man's religion. We are indebted to modern missionaries for bringing the gospel to Africa. But they are only messengers and they would fully identify themselves with the declarations of John the Baptist and of Paul: "He must increase but I must decrease" ([John 3:30](#)); "Let God be true, and every man a liar" ([Rom. 3:4](#)).

Africans have a right to change their religion from heathen worship to Christianity. Having done so, Christianity can become an [p. 36](#) African religion. This is what has happened.

Historically Christianity was thriving in Africa long before it reached North America and the British Isles where most of the Protestant missionaries come from. We can therefore rightly call Christianity an African religion.

THE NATURE OF CHRISTIANITY

Particularism and universalism are paradoxically both creatures of Christianity. Christianity is both exclusive and inclusive. It is particularistic right from its inception. When mankind lapsed into idolatry and all forms of godlessness, it pleased God to call a particular man, named Abraham, to reveal His will for mankind through him ([Gen. 12:1-3](#)). Through a particular line, Abraham—Jacob (Israel), His message of redemption would

reach all mankind. Through Abraham all mankind would be blessed. It is not bigotry nor is it nationalism or racism to speak of the God of Israel. Israel, from time to time, has become introspective and arrogant, thus failing in its mission to the world. Nevertheless, it was chosen by God to convey the message of salvation to the whole world.

Universalism in the sense of God's revelation for the redemption of all mankind, is just as much part of God's revelation as particularism in God's choice of Israel as a nation. Israel was to be a light to the Gentiles. The God of Israel extends His invitation to all people ([Isa. 45:22, 23](#)), "Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other. By myself I have sworn, from my mouth has gone forth in righteousness a word that shall not return to me. Every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear." Not only woman and children are subjects of interest in Luke, but Gentiles also. John the theologian interprets the life of Christ and His message in terms of His benefits to the world. He is the bread and water of life for whoever would come. God's love and provision is for the whole world ([John 3:16](#)), and this includes the African. Jesus Christ, the centre of Christianity is for the Africans.

In the rest of the New Testament, the universal nature of Christianity becomes evident both in doctrine and practice. When the Holy Spirit inaugurated the Church, Asians, Africans and Europeans were all there ([Acts 2:9-11](#)). They can all claim Christianity as their religion. In describing the composition of the Church as the body of Christ, Paul sees all men as members of that one body p. 37 ([1 Cor. 12:13](#)). In that body "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" ([Gal. 3:28](#)). No one racial class or sex group has a monopoly on the claims of Christ's Church. Christianity is an African religion to its African adherents, just as it is European to the European, American to the American or Asian to the Asian followers of Christ.

THE PRACTICE OF CHRISTIANITY

Christianity is truly an African religion and Africans should be made to feel so. Christian doctrine should be expressed in terms that Africans can understand, where such has not been the case. Practices that enhance the growth of the Church, the maturity and enjoyment of the African believer, should be promoted. Take for instance the formal prayers written in the 18th century. Both the language and concepts are not easy for today's English youth to understand, let alone African youth. Should not African clergymen revise this and recast it in language and concepts easily understood by the African youths? Perhaps greater involvement by the congregation in a church service would appeal more to Africans. This should be explored. Clothing and musical instruments are also to be considered. Whatever would reflect the glory of Christ in His Church in Africa and make the African feel that "this is my faith", should be promoted. If there are any alien beliefs and/or practices mingled with Christianity, the answer is not to throw away the baby with the bath water. It is not to erroneously call Christianity a white man's religion. Rather, we should purge biblical faith of those alien features and express the unchanging biblical faith in Africa for the Africans, since it is as much an African religion as it is a European religion.

MY RECOMMENDATIONS

(a) *Know the truth and defend it* with all at your disposal including your life's blood. The way ahead may not be easy, and Jesus Christ never promised us an easy road. Jesus says, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow

me” ([Mark 8:34](#)). The Word of God further says, “For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in Him but also suffer for His sake” ([Phil. 1:29](#)). Our Lord appeals to us “to contend for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” ([Jude 3](#)). **p. 38**

(b) *Discern the voices.* Get your marching orders from the Word of God and not from men’s voices, be they from within or without the camp. “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are for God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world” ([I John 4:1](#)).

(c) *Reject moratorium but promote self-reliance.* Some advocates of moratorium today see the work of missionaries as a part of the system of colonial servitude. While we do agree that there have been some failures on the part of some missionaries to live up to the gospel of Christ, yet we cannot deny the fact that they came as truly the messengers of good tidings. The One who sent them said. “If the Son shall make you free, you will be free indeed” ([John 8:36](#)). We should therefore be thankful to God and His messengers.

The rejection of moratorium, however, should not mean that your church should now maintain a servile, begging attitude. Your priority should be to promote the training of nationals with missionaries helping as necessary, so that both black and white will move together as workers with Christ ([II Cor. 6:1](#)).

(d) *Evangelize or perish.* It would take your church only two or three generations to go out of existence if you do not evangelize. The youngest Christian in your church today is not likely to be around in another hundred years. The thing to bear in mind is that if Jesus Christ should come today, millions of people would go to a Christless eternity. This should motivate every Christian in Africa to say, “Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel” ([I Cor. 9:16](#)).

(e) *Contextualize without compromise.* Let Christianity truly find its home in Africa by adopting local hymnology, using native language, idiom and concepts to express the unchanging faith. But always let your primary goal be that Jesus Christ might have the foremost place. “So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” ([I Cor. 10:31](#)).

(f) *Pray for and be prepared for revival.* While we should all be thankful for the revivals of the past (as in East Africa for instance), dare we dwell on the blessings of the past? While we should rejoice over the victory of the gospel through the missionaries of the past and the earlier generation of African Christians, should we not plead with the Lord to provide us with more Joshuas and Timothys for today and tomorrow? God has promised, “Behold I will do a new thing” ([Isa. 43:19](#)). May it happen in our day even if it means some changes in our image and value structures. **p. 39**

(g) *Become more missionary minded.* Look beyond the borders of your country and further afield to the pagan strongholds on our continent, to the western world and its materialistic attractions. The world is the field. The church in Africa and elsewhere is the only agent for sowing the seed ([Matt. 13:38](#) [Acts 1:8](#)). May the Lord help the members of His body, the church, as we lift up His banner of victory in Africa in particular and the world in general.

Dr. Byang H. Kato was General Secretary of the Association of Evangelicals of Africa and Madagascar (AEAM) until his untimely death in 1975. **p. 40**