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Universalism and New Testament Christianity

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The religious situation in Africa is as pluralistic as elsewhere in the world. Not surprisingly, the Christian claim of the uniqueness of Christ has met with a great deal of opposition and resentment. Writing from African soil, Igenoza declares, 'It is a God-given calling to proclaim the gospel to every creature. The proclamation of Christ is a great responsibility and should be done with humility, persuasion and love, and not with a "holier than-thou" attitude ... Universalism is no more than an empty and an irresponsible truce which is alien to the spirit of the New Testament. It would only further confuse an already confused situation.'

Editor

INTRODUCTION

Africa is at the cross-roads. That continent is fast becoming a breeding-ground for every form of religion and ideology, thanks to modern means of transportation and communication from any corner of the globe to another. Thus, 'light from the East' not only beams its rays as far as the West, but also wields its influence in the African heartland, 'the land of whirring wings which is beyond the rivers of Ethiopia' ([Isa. 18:1](#)). The influence of Western civilization, the Communist impact, the rising tide of Islamic Fundamentalism, the current effort to revive African religions and culture—they all have made modern Africa a religious and an ideological battle-ground, thanks to modern technological facilities. Says E. Bolaji Idowu. 'We are, in fact, being presented, without consultation, with the phenomenon of the unification of the world—unification of compulsory "nearness" if not of voluntary fellowship.'¹

An inevitable question in this kind of situation is: 'Can any group of people in Africa with a history of colonization, in an increasingly pluralistic context afford particularity in religion?' Again we could ask, 'Is such a stance not eccentric and dangerous in a more tolerant world?' Is the doctrine or belief in universal salvation, or of the ultimate salvation of all mankind, not the most sensible alternative? Is it not offensive and a show of intolerance for any Christian evangelist [p. 262](#) to proclaim that Jesus is 'the way, the truth and the life', and that no one can have access to God the Father except through him? In the same manner, should the Muslim adherent regard a person of another faith, or perhaps of no faith at all, as *Kafir*, a hopeless infidel? Why cannot all people of all faiths live together in harmony? After all, are not all peoples heading for the same eternal destination? The kind of answer we give to this series of questions is absolutely crucial, for it will unmistakably affect the way we theologize. A positive response to the above questions places us on the threshold of universalism, and its corollary of syncretism, i.e. the 'fusion or blending of religions'. The syncretist does not see why the best ideas of all the world religions cannot be brought together for the benefit of mankind. But the question is: how viable is this option, at least from the point of view of New Testament Christianity?

¹ E. Bolaji Idowu, 'Faiths in Interaction', *Orita: Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies*, Vol. IV, No. 2, Dec. 1970, p. 85.

The task of this paper is, first of all, to attempt a survey of the religious situation in Tropical Africa, and to underscore the way in which this is related to Universalism; and then, secondly, to evaluate this from a New Testament perspective. My contention is that every religion found in Africa should be given the freedom to express and propagate itself in a peaceful atmosphere, and that under no circumstance should the Christian theologian or evangelist in Africa compromise the authentic New Testament message of salvation through Christ.

In African institutions of higher learning, and in the big cities, an observer is likely to come across religious banners or posters of all sorts, erected not only by Catholics, Baptists, Anglicans or Methodists, but also by the adherents of Eckankar, Krishna Consciousness, the Grail Message, the Rosicrucian Order (AMORC), the Baha'i Faith, Christian Science, and so on. One now comes across a phenomenon which was hardly observable in the pre-independence, and in the immediate post-independence, era—Africans clad in white wrappers, with their hair scraped to the skin, leaving a tuft somewhere, aspiring to practise the Krishna faith. There are those who travel to the USA, India or elsewhere as orthodox Christians (if only nominally) but who return as Hindus or as 'Christian Scientists'.

These new trends promote universalism and syncretism. Baha'ism, for example, has a temple of nine doors in Wilmette near Chicago. These doors, it is claimed, represent the 'nine religions of the world' which ultimately lead to God.² The great Hindu mystic, Rama-Krishna, p.263 reportedly spoke of himself as 'the same soul that had been born before as Rama, as Krishna, as Jesus, or as Buddha'. His doctrine is that 'all paths lead to the same God'. Many liberal theologians, like Schleiermacher and Hocking, hold the notion that all adherents of all faiths are climbing the same mountain and will meet at the top.³

It seems obvious that groups like Eckankar, the Grail Message, and Krishna Consciousness, whose doctrines are finding an entrance into many an African heart, are neo-gnostic and syncretistic in intention. In 1975, the late B. H. Karo raised an alarm that the stage was well set for universalism in Africa.⁴ That trend seems even more glaring now than when Karo wrote. Tokunboh Adeyemo has also had the reason to sound a note of warning about this trend.⁵ The factors believed to be responsible for this state of affairs have been identified.⁶ The first is the increasing tide of universalism in the countries where the foreign missionaries working in Africa have come from. There are perhaps fewer foreign missionaries in Africa today than heretofore; and thus the impact of their presence may be less felt; however, it remains considerable. And since many of the growing number of African theologians have been trained (and still train) in Universities and Seminaries in the West; and since they read textbooks and commentaries mostly written by Western scholars—or, at times, by African scholars greatly influenced by Western scholarship—any among such African students who has no real commitment to Christ is most likely to be swayed by the scepticisms which often characterize most of these theologies. This liberal approach results in a situation in the West where there are numerous Christians 'who have never come to an understanding of the meaning of Christian doctrine and are inclined to agree ... that most of what they hear from the pulpit

² J. N. D. Anderson, *Christianity and Comparative Religion* (London: IVP, 1970), p. 14.

³ Tokunboh Adeyemo, *Salvation in African Tradition* (Nairobi: Evangel Pub. Co., 1979), p. 11.

⁴ B. H. Karo, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa* (Kisumu, Kenya: Evangel Pub. House, 1975), Cf. p. 1.

⁵ Tokunboh Adeyemo, *op. cit.*

⁶ B. H. Karo enumerates about ten reasons in his book (*op. cit.*, pp. 11–12).

is merely [an] unnecessary mystification ... and complication of something that in itself ought to be simple'.⁷ Liberal theologies imbibed in the lecture rooms have a way of influencing people in different parts of the world.

The search for political solidarity and identity in Africa, in the context of the solidarity of the human race, contributes to the new trend of universalism in that continent. If all human beings can be p. 264 brothers, why preach a doctrine of 'division' with 'father against son, and son against father' ([Lk. 12:51-53](#))? Why should there be any thought of 'separation' as between sheep and goats in the final judgment ([Mt. 25:31-33](#))? There is also the emotional consideration which arises out of what appears to be genuine love for the ancestors who had died without any knowledge of Christ. 'What will happen to our forefathers who died before Christianity was brought to us?' is a recurring question asked by African youngsters in Christian camp meetings. Added to this there are many Africans, seemingly of good character, who continue to practise some form of indigenous religion, which in recent times is being refined and revived. Ignorance about what the Bible teaches *vis-à-vis* these emotional factors so easily combine to fan the embers of universalism. Thus, as B. H. Kato claimed, 'many pastors [in Africa] have swallowed the pill of universalism without knowing the premise nor the end result'.⁸ He was therefore of the opinion that Christianity ought to be expressed in such a way that Africans really understand and see themselves at home in it. The superficiality of the Christian religion as often practised in Africa often causes members of the Church to turn to their former ways of life at crisis moments. The cause of universalism gets a further boost in Africa through general Marxist intellectualism which abhors religion, but especially Christianity which it labels as the religion of the capitalist exploiters. The increasing secularization of society in Africa also undoubtedly promotes universalism.

Though different foreign ideologies and Eastern religions impinge on African minds, the three main religions practised in that continent are African Traditional Religion (which we will abbreviate to ATR), Christianity and Islam. Attention needs to be focussed on their bearing on universalism, or otherwise, in Africa in recent times.

AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION IN RECENT SCHOLARSHIP

Mutatis mutandis, ATR is comparable to the religions of ancient Greece and Rome. There are no known founders; there are no dogmas, or doctrines, or credal statements to be believed in. There is no question of a special revelation of faith 'once for all delivered' to its adherents. As a religious system, ATR believes in the existence of a Supreme Being, the Creator of all things. But there are also other gods thought to be his servants. Then there are the ancestors, the P. 265 innumerable spirit-forces which cannot be properly defined. There are also the widespread practices of divination, magic, mediumship, sacrifices, invocations, libations and incantations. This religious system has been a subject of intense academic study in universities and colleges both within and outside Africa for the past half century at least. Recent African writers have adopted varying attitudes towards the religion. Three of such attitudes may be identified. First there are those who romanticize and exalt the system unequivocally so as to present it as being sufficient for the salvation of the African; and who maintain that there is nothing unique or peculiarly desirable about any 'imported' religion.

⁷ See Stephen Neill, *Christian Faith and Other Faiths* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 64-65.

⁸ B. H. Kato, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

Okot p'Bitek has pointed out that many modern African scholars now claim that African deities are eternal, omnipresent, omniscient and omnipotent; in other words, African deities have all the attributes of the Christian God.⁹ If this is granted, there is no reason why the deities of ATR cannot save. It is not too surprising therefore, for Ngindu Mushete to believe that 'there exists a universal revelation above and beyond the bounds of any "special" revelation [such as the Judeo-Christian one], and that salvation can be obtained through nonecclesiastical channels as diverse as the various ideals and humanisms nurtured by human beings'.¹⁰ At the popular level it is not uncommon to hear practitioners of ATR claiming that 'we are all serving the same God, only that our approaches are different'.

The intellectual repudiation or denigration of orthodox Christianity is, at times, backed up practically by the establishment of a 'church' with the place of Jesus taken over by an African deity. Among the Bini of Nigeria an *Oba* (paramount traditional ruler) some time ago established the syncretistic '*Aruosa Church*' where *Osanobua*, the Supreme God, is worshipped through his son, *Olokun*, the deity of healing and fecundity. Among the Yoruba, also of Nigeria, there is the 'Church of Orunmila', the oracle divinity, through whom *Oladumare* is worshipped. Even though these people have deliberately repudiated Christianity, they use the scaffolding of the Christian Church to erect a belief in an African divinity as the messenger of God to the black race.¹¹ p. 266

A new dimension in these attempts to modernize ATR and make it more acceptable is that these new protagonists and exponents of the system strive to win converts through preaching. There is an air of sophistication and intellectualism about it. They separate the shrines where sacrifices are offered from the 'Church building' where they regularly congregate for 'worship'. They compose and sing hymns to reflect their beliefs. For example, the 'Orunmila Church' has the following:

1. Jesus belongs to the white man [Europeans]
 Muhammad belongs to the people of the East [the Arabs]
 Orunmila belongs to us,
 From here till Ife-Ile [i.e. our eternal home].
2. Let us all believe in him [Orunmila]
 His holy light of Ifa [method of divination]
 Shines through out the whole world;
 Orunmila is worthy of our worship;
 Let us believe in him.

The above appears to be an unambiguous expression of universalism.

Secondly, there are those African writers who, though are willing to accept the uniqueness of Jesus, are still able to exalt and glorify ATR beyond all reasonable proportions, so much so that the impression created in the minds of their readers is that the various autochthonous systems of worship suffice for the salvation of their devotees. By their very nature the pronouncements of this group of scholars are very evasive and

⁹ Okot P'Bitek, *African Religions in Western Scholarship* (Kampala, Nairobi, Dar es Salaam: East African Literature Bureau, 1970), pp. 7, 28.

¹⁰ Ngindu Mushere, 'The History of Theology in Africa: From Polemics to Critical Irenics' in K. Appiah-Kubi and S. Torres (eds.), *African Theology en Route* (New York: Orbis Books, 1979), p. 24.

¹¹ See E. Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (New York: Orbis Books, 1973), pp. 206–207.

ambiguous, to the extent that the average reader is left in doubt about their precise intent. Some of these 'nationalist' thinkers are clergymen, and therefore owe some form of loyalty to the Church; but at the same time, in their struggle to preserve the dignity of the traditional African, they give undue respect to ATR. Bolaji Idowu, for example, bases his thesis about the sufficiency of ATR for salvation on [Acts 14:17](#) which states (in part) that God has not left himself without any witness. He writes: 'If we are true to the spirit of the Bible and of our faith, we must admit God's self disclosure is, in the first instance, to the whole world and that each race has grasped something of this primary revelation according to its native capability'.¹² Pursuing the argument further, Idowu says:

All religions in which God is not a mere abstraction but a personal, present, living, active and acting, succouring Reality, are each in its own way a p. 267 consequence of the divine activity of the loving God who is seeking man, and of man's responsive soul reaching out (however feebly and uncertainly) for Him, each according to its native capability.¹³

Thus, in Idowu's understanding, Islam, African Traditional Religion, Christianity and indeed all religions, have a meeting point somewhere. As Adeyemo rightly interprets Idowu: 'The fact that God has not left Himself without a witness is understood to mean that God has ordained the worship of African Traditional Religion. In the final end, it seems to imply that Christianity cannot claim the monopoly of salvation. Thus, universalism is evident'.¹⁴

To say the least, Idowu's understanding and application of the first part of [Acts 14:17](#) is faulty. He has used that text out of context. The witness intended is clearly stated in the latter part of that verse. It is that of divine providence for all living things in creation: 'he [God] did good and gave you from heaven rains and fruitful seasons' ([Acts 14:17b](#); cf. also [Mt. 5:45](#); [Ps. 145:16](#); [Ps. 147:8-9](#)). This revelation in creation and provision does not amount to salvation but a kind of *praeparatio evangelica*. As St. Paul has argued, natural revelation through creation and providence does not suffice for salvation. Rather, human beings because of their perverted nature exchange the glory of the immortal God seen in creation 'for images', worshipping and serving the created order rather than the Creator (cf. [Ro. 1:19-25](#)). This does not in any way contradict the theology of St. Luke as represented in the context of [Acts 14:17](#). The men of Lystra who were going to sacrifice at the temple of Zeus were restrained by Paul and Barnabas with the words: 'Why are you doing this? We ... bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to serve a living God' ([Acts 14](#): see vv. [13-15](#)).

Perhaps because of his ecclesiastical background, Idowu was able to express the view that of all the religions and ideological forces contending for the African soul, Christianity by its very nature stands the best chance of meeting the deep spiritual needs of the African. But later on, elsewhere, he gleefully contrasted the efficacy and triumphs of African Traditional Religion with the seeming impotence of Christianity and of those who preach it. He said: 'In matters concerning providence, healing and general well-being ... most Africans still look at their religion as "the way"'.¹⁵ He was more p. 268 forthright still elsewhere, in support of universalism but under the guise of citing another writer: a certain Seyyed Hossein Nasr: 'The essential problem that the study of religion poses is

¹² *Sunday Sketch*, a Nigerian newspaper printed in Ibadan, Oyo State, March 9 1986, pp. 8-9.

¹³ K. Dickson and P. Ellingworth (eds.) *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs* (N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1969), p. 1.

¹⁴ E. Bolaji Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* (London: Longmans, 1962), p. 32.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

how to preserve religious truth, traditional orthodoxy, the dogmatic theological structures of one's own religion, and yet gain knowledge of other traditions and accept them as spiritual valid ways [sic] and roads to God.'¹⁶ Idowu therefore expects the Christian, for example, to 'preserve' the theological structures of his own religion while at the same time 'accepting' other religions 'as spiritual valid ways and roads to God'. Idowu's theological position is therefore full of ambiguities, but its universalistic tendency is not in doubt.

The third category of scholars of ATR comprises the few who study it with caution, detached objectivity and some discernment. This crop of African scholars accept the uniqueness of Jesus as the only Saviour. While they are willing to recognize whatever good qualities there might be in ATR—as there is no people on earth totally devoid of goodness—they accept at the same time its limitations, especially as regards ultimate salvation. It is true that God has revealed himself to all peoples through creation, providence, and the conscience—'the moral law within'. But this kind of revelation cannot result in spiritual salvation. To hold otherwise is to ignore totally God's soteriological action in Christ. Adeyemo and Kato belong to this third group of scholars. For example, Adeyemo writes with reference to ATR:

Salvation in the thought of traditional African peoples ... implies acceptance in the community of the living and the living-dead; deliverance from the power of evil spirits, and a possession of life force. Only in limited cases are the people really searching and seeking after God, or to fill a perceived gap.¹⁷

These scholars declare that through the study of ATR the genuine religious aspirations of Africans may be correctly identified. This can help the Christian minister in his attempt to address these aspirations. The failure to recognize and meet legitimate spiritual needs can result only in despair, rejection of Christianity, and an inclination towards universalism. But the Christian scholar is also called upon to recognize the limitations of ATR.

ISLAMIC AMBITIONS IN MODERN AFRICA

From about 1050, Islam began effectively penetrating the West African P. 269 sub-region. Today, it is one of the dominant religions of the area. Islam in Northern Nigeria received a great boost through the *Jihad* of Usman dan Fodio (1804–1810). The Muslim faith also spread through peaceful means such as commerce, Quranic teaching and preaching, the practice of medicine and fortune-telling by peripatetic *malams*. The spread of Islam into the forest zones of Nigeria and other parts of Africa was held in check by natural forces, and by the strategies of missionary societies like the Sudan Interior Mission and the Sudan United Mission, which began to operate in the Middle Belt and in the northern parts of Nigeria. However, Islam has become popular among the Yoruba of the South-western part of Nigeria, but not generally in the South-eastern part where Christianity pre-dominates.

The propagation and growth of Christianity in tropical Africa in recent times, which in many cases has led to the conversion of the offspring of some staunch Muslims, has been a matter of great concern to the Muslims themselves. The number of Christians with Muslim parental background seems to be growing. Tokunboh Adeyemo, now a Christian,

¹⁶ Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition*, pp. 205–206.

¹⁷ See Adeyemo, *op. cit.*, pp. 80–86, for his assessment of Mbiti.

claims to have been born 'to a wealthy Muslim family'.¹⁸ Before colonization and political independence, it was easier for Islam to spread in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa through the *Jihad* of the sword. But circumstances are such now that it is becoming increasingly difficult for Muslims to successfully launch such holy wars. The Maitatsine Islamic riots which took place in some northern Nigerian towns in the recent past (mostly in the 1980s) in all probability were designed as *jihads* to purify and spread Islam by force. In most cases anti-riot policemen and soldiers with modern weapons had to be used to quell these Islamic riots.

The peculiar claim by Christians that Jesus is the only valid way to God had always been offensive to Muslims right from the time of Muhammad. According to the Qu'ran: 'They say "no one shall enter paradise except those who are Jews or Christians"—these are their wishful thoughts'. Not only are many Muslims willing to regard their faith as another valid way to God, they also see it as the only means of salvation now available for mankind, in view of their belief that the prophethood of Muhammad supersedes all others, including that of Jesus.

Even though *jihads* in the literal sense are not easily fought these days, there have been sporadic incidents in which Muslims have [p.270](#) attacked Christians and burned churches. During a Palm Sunday procession in Ilorin, Nigeria, in 1986, Christians were attacked.

In Islam, state and religion are inseparable, and the ultimate aim of the religion is the political domination of the country where it is present, and ultimately of the whole world. The belief of the Muslim is that 'God through Muhammad revealed a total pattern for the life of man in which politics, ethics, economics, social order are bound together in an indissoluble totality by the will of God'.²¹ This explains why the *Sharia* system of law is practised side by side with whatever legal system has been inherited from the colonial masters in those areas of Africa with strong Islamic presence. The influential Muslim elements of the Yoruba area of Nigeria, where Christianity also has a strong representation, have been clamouring that they should as of right be allowed to practise the *Sharia* form of law; without which, they believe, there can be no real justice for them. The Christians and some other enlightened elements among them have so far successfully resisted this move. But Islamic ambitions will not be deterred. With large sums of money from the Islamic countries of the Middle East and beyond, Islamic institutions such as mosques and schools are being built in different locations. The civil war in Sudan today is not unconnected with the imposition of the *Sharia* law by the ruling Muslim class (from the northern part of the country) on the South, which is mainly made up of Christians and the adherents of ATR.

Islamic political ambitions also, perhaps, explains the recent surreptitious manner in which Nigeria was 'smuggled' into the organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) as a full member, because of the so-called economic benefits; but the move was made ultimately for political reasons. In Nigeria, the Christians under the umbrella of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) are not allowing these sensitive [p.271](#) religious issues to lie low. Through communiques and press releases, they vigorously protest against any measures which they discern to be potentially dangerous to their faith.

The point is that Christians who are willing to embrace Universalism could easily be overrun in such circumstances. If we shall all get to heaven after all, what difference does it make whether we follow Muhammad, Orunmila, Buddha or Jesus? Why suffer

¹⁸ Cf. Harry Boer, *A Brief History of Islam* (Ibadan: Daystar Press, 1969), pp. 49, 107.

²¹ Qu'ran 2: Verse 11.

persecution or martyrdom for the sake of Jesus? But most Nigerian Christians have vowed not to compromise their faith.²³

UNIVERSALISM: CHRISTIAN APPROACHES

Gerald H. Anderson points out that there are two distinct approaches in the history of Christian thought to the problem of Universalism. He claims that these two different traditions have the support of the New Testament. In the first approach, the non-Christian religions are viewed as the various efforts of human beings to apprehend their existence, whereas Christianity is the result of the self-disclosure of God in Jesus Christ, God has spoken to humanity only in the person of Jesus Christ and 'there is salvation in no one else' ([Acts 4:12](#)). The second tradition, according to him, while recognizing the uniqueness and universality of Christ, emphasizes the continuity of God's revealing and redeeming activity in Christ with his activity among persons elsewhere. It views the Christian faith as the climax of a divine revelation that began long before human history and has been available to everyone. In this view, Christ is crucial, normative and definitive but not exclusive. What is true of Jesus Christ in a focal way is pervasively true of the whole cosmos. The word of God is not limited to the revelation in the historic person of Jesus. John's Gospel affirms that the same light which was in Jesus enlightened everyone. [Acts 14:17](#) assures us that God did not leave himself without witness even among those who knew nothing of biblical revelation. Thus, it is claimed, the *logos spermatikos* is active everywhere sowing seeds of truth and preparing the way for the gospel. However, we have already in this essay tried to show the type of witness intended in [Acts 14:17](#); and if [John 1:9](#) is placed in the context of in. [1:12](#); [3:14-20](#); and [14:6](#), the light which 'enlightens every man' does not automatically mean *saving* light, but rather *rationality*, the idea of moral goodness, and so on, which all human beings possess. P. 272

In Protestant circles, Paul Tillich has propounded the concept of 'the latent Church'. From Roman Catholic ranks, Karl Rahner talked about 'the anonymous presence of God in the non-Christian world'.²⁴ We also have Hans Küng who explicitly stated: 'Every human being is under God's grace and can be saved; and we may hope that everyone is. Every world religion is under God's grace and can be a way of salvation'.²⁵ In our view, it is unsafe and perhaps exegetically unsound to conclude from the New Testament passages often cited in support of universalism that everybody will be saved. To do so is to contradict the whole New Testament evidence. If the light which everyone already had before the incarnation was enough for salvation why then the incarnation and the suffering of Christ? St. Paul makes it plain that all men stand condemned before God ([Rom. 3:9-23](#)). The reality of the separation of the saved from the damned, and the reality of heaven and hell is painted for us in the New Testament, no matter how unpalatable, cannot be taken too lightly because of human emotion. Though God makes 'acquittal and life' available to all ([Ro. 5:18](#)); though Jesus is the Saviour of all men ([1 Tim. 4:10](#)), and has given himself a ransom for all ([1 Tim. 2:6](#)); and though he does not wish that any should perish ([2 Pet. 3:9](#)) but desires that all should be saved ([1 Tim. 2:4](#)), and so on; it is however doubtful if all men will eventually be saved. To think so is to forget the important element

²³ As contained in a two-page document entitled 'Some Suggestions for Consideration At The Heads of Churches Meeting' in Kaduna Northern Nigeria, July 15 1986, p. 1.

²⁴ See Gerald Bray, 'Origen' in *The Lion Handbook of Christian Belief* (Tring, Herts: Lion Publishing Co. 1982), p. 431.

²⁵ Gerald H. Anderson, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

of freedom and choice in human life. What may be safely inferred from the New Testament is that some people who were no 'Christians' in their lifetime may be saved. After some critical analysis, Professor J. N. D. Anderson (in *Christianity and Comparative Religion*) comes to the conclusion that in the apostolic *kerygma* we have a unique salvation, and that through the Incarnation and in the doctrine of the Trinity we have a unique disclosure of God. He concedes that God has, in part, revealed himself in many different ways, and in almost all world religions. So the term 'unique' as he uses it 'is intended to signify that the historical event on which Christianity is founded is itself without parallel, and is also in its fullness and essential nature—the salvation which it offers and the self-disclosure of God which it enshrines'.²⁶ After considering a number of New Testament passages p. 273 including [In. 10:8](#), [In. 14:6](#) and [Acts 4:12](#), Anderson submits: 'It seems to me that the consistent teaching of these verses as a whole—indeed their necessary and inescapable import—is that it is only through Christ that any man can come to a personal knowledge and fellowship with God, and only through his life, death and resurrection that any man can come to an experience of salvation.'²⁷

What then will happen to the countless millions of people, including Africans, who have died without hearing about Christ through no fault of theirs? What about the many Muslims, the votaries of ATR, the Buddhists and the many of today who have no specific religion, who though they know of Christ have not, for one reason or another, considered or accepted him as their Saviour? At the time of Jesus, there were many leading Jews who believed in him, but 'for fear of the Pharisees they did not openly confess their faith lest they should be put out of the synagogue' ([In. 12:42–43](#)). J. N. D. Anderson holds that God is capable of speaking directly to the human heart, bringing before it its sinfulness and the need for forgiveness through Jesus. That may be true but there is no concrete evidence in support. Even the classical case of Malam Ibrahim and his followers, who more than thirty years before missionaries got to Kano were convinced about the mediatorial role of Jesus through the study of the Qu'ran,²⁸ is not sound enough. That conviction did not come *ex nihilo* but, at least, with the study of the Qu'ran. We must think about stark illiterates who can neither read the Qu'ran or the Bible, or anything else for that matter, and who are not in any way in touch with the outside world or with missionary activity. We may still believe that the omnipotent and omniscient God, by his Spirit, can speak directly with no form of mediation whatsoever to the hearts of people, making them realise their need to cast themselves on the mercy of God. But then, what becomes of missionary activity?

It is at this point that I beg to differ slightly from J. N. D. Anderson. I do not agree with him that the motive for missionary activity lies only in obeying the dominical injunction to preach, or in the need to teach the convert who would have been saved in any case, or in the need to give assurance, joy, peace and power through faith in Christ to such a convert.²⁹ There are many people who may never feel the need for forgiveness, and therefore might be lost eternally. But through God-sent preachers, this need could be positively aroused in them. p. 274 Preachers are therefore partners with God, and the Holy Spirit uses them to bring the need for God's mercy to as many as possible. The revelation to Ezekiel more than two thousand five hundred years ago still holds good: 'If I say to the wicked ... you shall surely die, and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn away from

²⁶ As cited in Adeyemo, *Salvation in African Tradition*, *op. cit.*, pp. 12–13. He was citing Owen C. Thomas (ed.) 'The Freedom of Religions' in *Attitudes Toward Other Religions*, p. 216.

²⁷ J. N. D. Anderson, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

²⁹ J. N. D. Anderson, *op. cit.*, pp. 106f.

his way, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity but his blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the wicked to turn from his way and he does not turn ... he shall die in his iniquity, but you will have saved your life ... yet, if he turns from his sin and does what is lawful and right ... he shall surely live' ([Ezek. 33:8-9, 14-15](#)). Unless God's spokesman warns the wicked, he may never turn, and thus risks the possibility of dying everlastingly. In Pauline thought, everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved. But Paul asked: 'How are men to call upon him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher?' ([Rom. 10:13-14](#)). We may conclude therefore that the role of preachers is vital for the salvation of people, and goes beyond the mere conferring of assurance, joy, peace, power or right spiritual knowledge on believers here on earth. Even the preacher who does not exercise self-control, or does not continue to walk the path of submission and obedience to God, could be disqualified in the end ([1 Cor. 9:27](#)).

Concerning the millions who died and still die without any knowledge of Christ, St. Peter's statement that the crucified Christ 'went and preached to the spirits in prison, who formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah' perhaps applies (See [1 Pet. 3:19-20](#)). God gives everyone a chance for salvation only through Christ. It is Adeyemo's submission that those who have never heard the gospel will be judged according to the measure of light they have received, and that for those who die in childhood, 'God's love in Christ is completely effective'.

CONCLUSION

The hope of the African, and of all peoples, for salvation cannot be realized through any scheme of Universalism. Jesus, as the New Testament boldly claims, is the way to God and all men are admonished to consider him. The religious situation in Africa is as pluralistic as elsewhere in the world. The preaching of the unique Christ may naturally arouse resentment and opposition from different quarters. In the words of J. N. D. Anderson: 'The Church does not—and must not—apologise for the fact that it regards Christ as wholly **P. 275** unique; and that it wants all men to know him and to follow him. It is a God-given calling to proclaim the gospel to "every creature".'³⁰ The proclamation of Christ is a great responsibility and it should be done with humility, persuasion and love, and not with a 'holier-than-thou' attitude or antagonism. As much as is possible, dialogue with other faiths and mutual understanding should be encouraged. But to promote Universalism, either in theological scholarship or by some other means, is no more than an empty and irresponsible truce which is alien to the spirit of the New Testament. It would only further confuse an already confused situation.

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³⁰ Tokunboh Adeyemo, 'Is Everyone Saved?' in *The Lion Handbook of Christian Belief*, op. cit., p. 419.