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EDITOR: BRUCE J. NICHOLLS



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others (whether liberal or conservative) on this topic and will have the courage, like the church in [Acts 15](#), to make decisions which ‘seem good to us *and the Holy Spirit*’.

This experiment, then, is offered with the hope that it might be of some assistance to Pentecostals in our attempt to articulate a Pentecostal hermeneutic.

Dr. John Christopher Thomas is Professor of New Testament at the Church of God School of Theology in Cleveland, Tennessee, USA. p. 233

An African Doctrine of God and Images of Christ

M. Van der Raaij

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THE SUPREME BEING OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGIONS

Since the 1960s, African theologians have been striving to understand how God is working in their context and in their thought forms. Part of this struggle has been study on the value of the belief in a Supreme Being held by African traditional religions. As the Independent churches have grown, they have formed an ‘oral theology’ focusing on the Christological points of interest for Africans.¹

The question of whether the Supreme Being of African traditional religions (ATRs) is the same as the God of Christianity, the One True God, is an important issue in African Christianity. As part of the Independence movement and efforts to indigenize the church in African church² African Christians have been rediscovering their traditional beliefs about God.³

Almost all ATRs have a belief in a Supreme Being. Although each tribe has its own name for this god, they attribute similar characteristics to it. This god is the most powerful god in the traditional cosmology. He is Creator and the ground of all that exists but he does not control it directly. He is omniscient and lives ‘above the skies’. He is omnipresent but detached and unreachable because of some error made by humans.⁴ Thus, the lesser

¹ Black theology has also grappled with these issues, but this essay will be confined to the rest of African theology.

² S. G. Kibicho describes the context as a ‘response of resistance and struggle against the evil of colonial enslavement’, ‘The Continuity of the African conception of God into and through Christianity: a Kikuyu case-study’ *Christianity in Independent Africa* (ed. E. Fasholé, R. Gray, A. Hastings, G. Tasie: London: Rex Collings Ltd, 1978), p. 380.

³ As a result, many studies have been made on the theology of African traditional religions and these have been used to study traditional concepts of God.

⁴ I. K. Shuuya, ‘The Encounter between the New Testament and African Traditional concepts’, *Relevant theology for Africa* (Durban: Lutheran Publishing House, 1973), 48ff.

gods and p. 234 the ancestors have been given some authority by the Supreme Being to mediate between humans and himself.⁵ However, he is not often worshipped or invoked, except at important religious ceremonies, or as a last resort, in times of great disaster, misfortune or death.⁶ There p. 235 are evil attributes applied to this god.⁷



About the cover

The Cameroon artist Engelbert Mweng created this image in the apse of a chapel in Douala, Cameroon. In the original version, three colours were used that have special meaning in West Africa: black stands for suffering, white for the dead, and red for the living. 'In the semicircular apse he stretches his arms not only upward but also to the fore' (Weber). 'When the African comes into encounter with Jesus Christ, he welcomes him as the Son of God, as the Lord of the living and the dead, as the one who through life, doctrine, wonders, suffering, death, and resurrection is the greatest initiating teacher, as the one who knows the eternal truth of the doings of life and death, as the one who lives life definitively over death' (Engelbert Mweng).

From A. Wessels *Images of Jesus*

THE TENSION BETWEEN CONTINUITY AND DISCONTINUITY

There are various views on the significance of the traditional doctrine of the Supreme Being. Firstly, early western missionaries rejected any value in ATRs as *praeparatio evangelico*. At the time, all religions of 'primitive' peoples were considered animistic, that is, without any real knowledge of a Supreme Being. Also it would have been difficult for missionaries to understand the ATRs because there were no scholars and literature to

⁵ M. L. Daneel, *Christian Theology of Africa* (Pretoria: University of South Africa, 1989), p. 111.

⁶ Kibicho, 381.

⁷ C. Nyamiti, 'The Doctrine of God', *A Reader in African Christian Theology* (ed. J. Parratt, London: SPCK, 1987), p. 59.

B. H. Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa* (Kisumu: Evangel, 1975), p. 71. One of Kato's criticisms of J. S. Mbiti's *Concepts of God in Africa* is that out of any of the 270 tribes that he studied, he included hardly any reference to evil characteristics attributed to the Supreme Being. Kato does not give any example of these evil attributes.

study from.⁸ In the case of the Kikuyu tribe, the missionaries concluded that the people were ignorant of the One True God because of the vagueness of the concept of Ngai (the Supreme Being), the confusion between Ngai and the spirits and the remoteness of Ngai from daily living.⁹

The second view emphasizes a continuity between the ATRs and Christianity, which is the general trend among African theologians. Many of them insist that the god that their fathers worshipped is the same God that they worship as Christians. Mbiti rejects the distinction between 'general' and 'special' revelation made by western theologians. He thinks that God's revelation is not limited to the biblical account and that salvation history includes other nations besides Israel. Just as the Old Testament is considered as preparation for the gospel, Mbiti places the ATRs in the same category.¹⁰ Kibicho suggests a radical continuity between ATRs and Christianity. The Kikuyu were not attracted to the 'new religion' because of a new god. There were new elements in this 'new religion' but the concept of God was similar. They believed that when they became Christians, they continued to worship Ngai.¹¹ They believed that since the other peoples around them (Maasai, Kamba, Dorobo) worshipped the same god, then he must be the God of the missionaries as well.¹²

This view recognizes the spirituality of Africans but it leads to problems. It waters down the uniqueness of the gospel by denying that a new faith is being brought to Africa.¹³ It affects the interpretation of Scripture and the canonical value of the Old Testament.¹⁴ Without the Old Testament, the New Testament p. 236 would be incomplete and incomprehensible. The early church (including Gentile Christians) recognized the Old Testament as the revelation of God in its purest form.¹⁵ The Supreme Being in ATRs is evidence of *imago Dei* by which people are still aware of the existence of God¹⁶ but what they know of him is not accurate, distorted by sin and deception. This has led many theologians to propose a third view which affirms the continuity but also perceives a discontinuity between ATRs and Christianity. They cite the situation in the Old Testament where Yahweh accepted the name of El, the highest god in the Semitic pantheon, as a paradigm.

In the Bible there is continuity and discontinuity between Yahweh and El.¹⁷ Bosch says that the name Elohim emphasizes the 'comparableness' of God, making him relevant and understandable to Israel and the surrounding nations, but the name Yahweh emphasizes

⁸ K. Bediako, 'Biblical Christologies in the Context of African Traditional Religions', *Sharing Jesus in the Two-Thirds World* (ed. V. G. Samuel & C. Sugden: Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), p. 85.

⁹ Kibicho, pp. 377–378.

¹⁰ J. S. Mbiti, 'The Encounter of Christian faith and African religion', *The Christian Encounter* (August 1980), pp. 817–818 cited in Daneel, 113–114.

¹¹ Kibicho, p. 384.

¹² Kibicho, p. 386.

¹³ Daneel, p. 116.

¹⁴ Daneel, p. 114.

¹⁵ J. A. van Rooy, 'Christ and the religions: the issues at stake', *Missionalia* 13:1 (1985), p. 9.

¹⁶ Kato, p. 75.

¹⁷ Daneel, p. 116.

the distinctness of God over against all other gods.¹⁸ El was a generic term and a personal name and so could be used for Baal. But Yahweh took the concept of El with its good characteristics and transformed them to indicate his own character. And so God has used the concept of the Supreme Being in ATRs but has transformed them. It is a common point of reference from which to launch believers on a new understanding of God.¹⁹ Christianity is the fulfilment of all the desires and needs of Africans and Christ is the fullness of revelation.

IMAGES OF JESUS IN THE AFRICAN CONTEXT

As the focus of Christianity, what is the portrait of Jesus in African conceptualization?²⁰ What are the images of Jesus that are most important or poignant to Africans? The Independent churches are the most fruitful ground for contextual theology.²¹ For these churches the birth, baptism and death of Jesus are important because they highlight the humanity of Jesus. For Africans, these stages of life are important as 'rites of passage' through which a person becomes fully human and is accepted into the community.²² Thus Jesus has gone through the necessary rites of passage and is portrayed as the perfect man, fully human yet without sin. Therefore, experience of the cross has more significance as an indication of the confirmation of Jesus' full humanity. Death is normal and the cross is **P. 237** merely a means of death. The people believe in the atoning work of Jesus' death but this aspect has less significance. The resurrection is what differentiates the work of Christ from normal humanity. The soteriological consequences are derived from the cross rather than caused by the cross.²³

The idea of a *Saviour* has no parallels in ATRs. Their mythologies concentrate on the past and the present. There is nothing to look forward to but the constant cycle of day and night, birth, death and entry into the realm of the ancestors. There is no promise or hopes of reconciliation with the Supreme Being. But Jesus comes as the Saviour who brings hope, reconciliation and fulfilment of their desires where there was no other known means of fulfilment.²⁴

Jesus, as Saviour, is able to release one from any bondage, spiritual or physical. This is important to Africans who are very aware of the influence of evil powers, curses and spirits which cause sickness, misfortune and death.²⁵ Protecting oneself from evil and

¹⁸ D. J. Bosch, 'God through African Eyes', *Relevant Theology for Africa* (Durban: Lutheran Publishing House, 1973), p. 69.

¹⁹ Bosch, p. 73. See [Acts 17](#) for Paul's treatment of continuity and discontinuity between Zeus, the unknown God and Yahweh.

²⁰ Bediako, p. 97.

²¹ J. S. Mbiti, 'Some African Concepts of Christology', *Christ and the younger churches* (ed. G. F. Vicedom: London: SPCK, 1972), pp. 52–53. Therefore, H. W. Turner's study of common themes in sermon texts in the Aladura church (Church of the Lord) is an important source of African theology (*Profile through Preaching* (London: 1965)).

²² K. Appiah-Kubi, 'Christology', *A Reader in African Christian Theology* (ed. J. Parratt: London: SPCK, 1987), p. 70.

²³ Mbiti, pp. 56–57.

²⁴ Mbiti, p. 60.

²⁵ Appiah-Kubi, p. 72.

remedying evil actions are a major preoccupation of daily life. Religion is a means of protecting life against destructive forces. Health is evidence of a harmonious relationship between people and their environment. Jesus as the Lord of the spirit-realm, has the power to overcome evil.²⁶ Thus *Christus Victor* is a dominant theme in Independent churches. But there is a risk of emphasizing a *theologia gloriae* at the expense of a *theologia crucis*.²⁷

Jesus as *Healer* is also an important theme. He offers total healing of the spiritual, psychological and physical states. Jesus is the power by which the people overcome their daily worries and fears, the source of entire life ([Mt. 10:8](#)).²⁸ Many Christians initially went to African Indigenous churches to be healed. If this *Wunderlust* is the only basis of their faith then it is weak and unbalanced because it will be shaken when God chooses not to do a miracle.

This image of Jesus as Healer has a parallel in the traditional healers (bongaka) among the Akan who relied on the Supreme Being for their power. At the moment of healing, the bongaka is merely an instrument of God. The difference with Jesus is that he is God himself.²⁹ Missionaries used the Congolese position of nganga (traditional healer) as a point of contact. The nganga is a mediator between people and the spirits not with God. But the office provides concepts of liberation and redemption. The ngangas willed to save people but failed, but Christ has succeeded.³⁰

Christ as the *Ancestor* who mediates for the people is a powerful image for Africans. Those who have died naturally after a good and fruitful life live on as ancestors in the spirit realm. They mediate between God and the people and ensure peace and harmonious relationships. They are the source of life and [p. 238](#) the only route to the Supreme Being.³¹ They can also bring misfortune if they are angered. They are the Elder siblings who receive deference, respect and offerings. Through his resurrection and ascension, Jesus is now present in the spirit-realm.³² He is now the ultimate Ancestor, the Lord of all and the mediator between God and man ([In. 14:6](#); [1 Tim. 2:5](#)), giving abundant life ([In. 10:10f](#); [In. 6:51](#)). He is the Eldest Brother who has made the offering since he is responsible for the acts of his younger siblings ([Isa. 53:4-5](#); [Heb. 8-10](#)).³³ He is the closest to God and therefore he is the best mediator.³⁴ To Africans, sin is actions which damage the interests of another or the collective life of the community rather than moral error. So for Africans, Jesus' mediatory function is primarily to guarantee a harmonious life in community rather than pleading for forgiveness of sin.³⁵

²⁶ Bediako, p. 97.

²⁷ Daneel, p. 119.

²⁸ Appiah-Kubi, pp. 74-78.

²⁹ Daneel, pp. 127-128.

³⁰ Daneel, pp. 128-129.

³¹ F. Kabasélé, 'Christ as Ancestor and Elder Brother', *Faces of Jesus in Africa* (ed. R.J. Schreiter: London: SCM, 1992), p. 116.

³² Bediako, p. 104.

³³ Bediako, p. 103. Kabasélé, 'Christ as Ancestor', pp. 121-122.

³⁴ Kabasélé, 'Christ as Ancestor', p. 123.

³⁵ Appiah-Kubi, p. 71. Bediako, p. 103.

The Chief or King of a tribe has functions also as a mediator between the people and the spiritrealm. Among the Bantu Christians Jesus is called Mukalenge, the chief who holds authority as leader of the people and Ntita, a chief who is authorized to enthrone other chiefs and Luaba, one who is destined for power. He is the Chief because like an African chief, he is a defender and protector, he is strong (meaning he can perceive spiritual forces and can bring life; [Jn. 8:42](#); [Lk. 24:32-34](#)). He makes life pleasant and prosperous for his subjects and he brings reconciliation; he is called cinkunku.³⁶ Some object to the use of this title because the chief's authority is not absolute since he is dependent on his elders. The chief lives in walled settlements and is accessible only through intermediaries. This represents *theologia gloriae* at the expense of *theologia crucis* since the authority of a chief is not gained by suffering and humility.³⁷ Although it has potential, the image of Jesus as Chief needs to be transformed.

TESTING AFRICAN ORTHODOXY

It is easy to see that Africans have made considerable progress in forming theology about God and Christ as seen in their context. They are using cultural concepts that are relevant and recognizable to describe their understanding of God. But I cannot evaluate them properly because of the distance that separates me from their concerns, their worship and their traditions. I rely on what some scholars have recorded but this can be an optimistic or pessimistic report of what African Christians are doing and thinking. **P. 239** Also, I do not see the whole picture because I don't know how these beliefs work in practice. However, it is the responsibility of those who know the context and concepts thoroughly to test the orthodoxy of African theology.

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³⁶ F. Kabasélé, 'Christ as Chief', *Faces of Jesus in Africa* (ed. R. J. Schreiter: London: SCM, 1992), p. 104ff. Cinkunku means 'who gathers the hunters', like a tree under which the hunters gather to swap stories and share the soils.

³⁷ Daneel, pp. 126-127.

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M. Van der Raaij, a student at the Bible College of New Zealand, Auckland, wrote this article as a class assignment for Dr. John Roxborough, Professor of Missions at BCNZ. p. 240

Indigenization as Incarnation: The Concept of a Melanesian Christ

Joe Gaqurae

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All Melanesians experience colonialism politically and religiously. The present political and religious stage in every country is the product of efforts made by the colonizers. Foreign countries have put into these countries much money and manpower for the sake of development. For this, Melanesians are thankful.

Melanesians were and are a religious people. Traditional religions play an important role in the people's spiritual affairs and the total life of the community. Ancient Melanesians were not stupid people as we often think. They were a religious, clever and capable people. They knew what was right and what was wrong according to their particular society's recognized standard.

Western missionaries had experienced a new kind of religion, namely Christianity. They felt that they had to share this religion with others. Therefore they came to the Melanesian countries with an urgent gospel. Christianity came with western civilization. Political colonizers and missionaries arrived at about the same time. Thus Christianity was seen as the colonizing race's religion. At times, local people saw Christianity as identical with western imperialism. Although Christianity has done a lot to reform