

## **CHAPTER EIGHT**

### **CONTEXTUAL CHRISTIANITY IN THE LIGHT OF THE IMPORTANCE OF AFRICAN INDIGENOUS RELIGIONS TO BIBLICAL THEOLOGY**

Umar H. D. Danfulani  
Department of Religion and Philosophy  
University of Jos, Nigeria

This contribution, which is in honour of the excellent Christian service Rev. Prof. Danny McCain and his family have rendered to Africa in general, and Nigeria in particular, concerns an aspect of his life works and labour of love in bringing the truth of the Gospel of Christ to Africans. This chapter addresses some germane issues concerning the concept of contextualization or contextual theology in African environments that are saturated with deep spirituality and mysticism, which confronted and still confronts the genius of Western minds like that of Prof. McCain. The chapter is divided into eight sections including the introduction and conclusion. Various views and opinion addressing the definition were provided in section two. Section three examined early Christian Missionary attempts towards having an understanding of African Traditional Religions. I conclude that these amateur anthropologists (the early European Christian missionaries, explorers and traders) failed in their noble attempt to achieve their goal. While sections four describes the contributions of liberal European Christian theologians towards charting a road map for contextual theology in Africa, section five focuses on the Bible and contextual African theology. Section six describes the interplay between contextual theology and some current attempts toward reviving some African indigenous practices, while section seven critically examines the challenges usually associated with the exercise and activity of contextualization. The contribution then concludes by providing paint

strokes of the importance of African Indigenous Religions to Biblical scholarship.

**Key words:** Contextualization, Christianity, African traditional religions, biblical scholarship, missionaries

### **Introduction**

Dean Flemming had come to an international seminary in the Philippines to teach New Testament theology with his training and instructional material from a North American and European background. He delivered his message in the language and categories, which included development of biblical theology in the West, the historicity of Christ's resurrection and the assurance of personal salvation, which are familiar to him. He asserts further:

I started to listen to my Asian and Pacific friends. I soon realized that many of the "answers" I had been giving them did not fully connect with the questions they were asking when they read the scripture. Questions like, "what is the New Testament perspective on suffering and oppression? What theological resources does the Bible provide for our encounter with spiritual powers?" "What is the relationship between the Christian Scriptures and the writings of Asian religions?" "Is it wrong to honour our ancestors?" These were questions that had seldom been addressed or even considered in the contexts where I had learned to interpret scripture and do theology. For my students, however, they were burning issues that needed biblical and theological answers. As a result, I was forced to go back to the New Testament texts. I began to listen, together with my students, for theological perspectives that had previously been muted to my ears. In the process, my own understanding of the gospel and its implications was expanded and enriched.<sup>345</sup>

Every church in every epoch, place and time must learn to do theology in a way that makes sense to its audience. Thus, the patterns of doing mission among the Fulani of Northern Nigeria, Motorcycle Gangs

---

<sup>345</sup> Dean Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission* (England: Apollos, an imprint of Inter-Varsity Press, 2005), 13.

of Europe, *Dalits* or *Parsis* and *Harijans* – outcasts or the un-caste of India, or the variegated groups of North American Indians will no doubt exhibit a great deal of peculiarities.

Though the term contextualization is a recent catch-word, however, the activity expressing, presenting and embodying the Bible in context-sensitive ways has been characteristic of Christian mission from the very beginning. The Bible provides *stories of contextualization*, reflecting Ancient Near Eastern cultural milieus and practices (such as *nuzi* customary rites, *runic-stele* or long, stone writings, embalment, the importance of blood sacrifices and ablution as part of ritual purification, among many others). Thus, there are Acadian, Sumerian, Hurrian, Elamite-Arab, Egyptian, Canaanite, Babylonian -Mesopotamian, Median, Persian, Greek, Seleucid and Roman (Hellenistic) cultural and linguistic practices reflected throughout the Bible. Furthermore, Jesus, his disciples and the apostles tailor the Gospel message to address different classes, genders, religious groups and ethnic nationalities.

Though Christianity began as a Jewish sect, which was considered renegade and rebellious and it witnessed excruciating persecution, and soon became a largely Gentile organization, proclaiming a universal faith in Christ alone. Thus, mandatorily requiring the Gospel to engage new ethnicities, linguistic and cultural groups at each point of the way.<sup>346</sup>

With regards to this, two paradigms of missions are worth mentioning here. First, the assertion by Thomas Oden<sup>347</sup> that the descriptive world of the Bible, especially the Old Testament, geographically, culturally, politically, socially and economically, resonates more with the red soil [*adama*] of the African continent than any other part of the world. This reality is of importance not only for cross-cultural missions but also makes it easy for us to recognize why contextualizing the message of the Bible into African culture is not only necessary, but compelling and mandatory.

Second, is the current shifting demography and fortunes of Christendom to the Southern hemisphere or the so-called two-third

---

<sup>346</sup> Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament*, 15.

<sup>347</sup> Thomas Oden, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind: Rediscovering the African Seedbed of Western Christianity* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2007).

worlds, which benefits Africa, and which makes *reverse mission* (a term coined and first used by Afe Adogame)<sup>348</sup> to the West—the initial home of Christian missions that Christianized Africa—not only possible, but logical and obligatory. Let us examine this missiological reality for a moment.

In circa 1900, 80 percent of world Christian population was Caucasian, with over 70 percent residing in Europe.<sup>349</sup> Today, active Christian adherents have become stronger in Africa than in Europe, while church-going demography in Kenya are far more numerous than in Canada.<sup>350</sup> Jenkins writes:

Today, there are about two billion Christians, of whom 530 million live in Europe, 510 million in Latin America, 390 million in Africa, and perhaps 300 million in Asia, but those numbers will change substantially in coming decades. By 2025, Africa and Latin America will vie for the title of the most Christian continent.... The figures are startling. Between 1900 and 2000, the number of Christians in Africa grew from 10 million to over 360 million, from 10 percent of the population to 46 percent. ...Already today, Africans and Asians represent some 30 percent of all Christians, and the proportion will rise steadily.<sup>351</sup>

The *Back to Europe* or *reverse mission* initiative emerging from two-third worlds are rife, on-going and have recorded a great deal of success,

---

<sup>348</sup> Afe Adogame, *The African Christian Diaspora: New Currents and Emerging Trends in World Christianity* (London, New Delhi, New York, Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2013).

<sup>349</sup> David B. Barrett, Todd M. Johnson and Peter F. Crossing, "Status of Global Mission, Presence, and Activities, AD 1800-2015," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 32 (2008), 30.

<sup>350</sup> Mark A. Noll, *The New Shape of World Christianity: How American Experience Reflects Global Faith* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, an imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2009), 10.

<sup>351</sup> Philip Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South* (Oxford: OUP, 2006), 9. Compare, Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 88ff. David B. Barrett, George T. Kurian and Todd M. Johnson, *World Christian Encyclopaedia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 12ff.

especially among emigrant and Diaspora communities scattered all over Europe and North America. Noll succinctly captures the mood when he says:

Today, more Christian workers from Brazil are active in cross-cultural ministry outside their homelands than from Britain or from Canada. More than 10,000 foreign Christian workers are today labouring in Britain, France, Germany and Italy—more than 35,000 in the United States. Obviously, once-fixed notions of “sending country” and “receiving country” have been tossed into the air.<sup>352</sup>

According to Adogame, aspects of African culture are today being exported in Western countries with African Diaspora communities in the United Kingdom, United States, France, Germany, Canada, Norway, Sweden, Austria, The Netherlands, Belgium and Denmark, among others.<sup>353</sup>

### **Defining Contextualization**

A number of terms have been invented and used for expressing the activity of relating the Gospel of Christ to local cultures and contexts. These include among others; *accommodation*, *adaptation*, *indigenization*, *incarnation*, *translation*, *transportation* and *rereading of scripture*. Accommodation, adaptation and indigenization are older terms that have fallen out of favour, being regarded by scholars as inadequate to describe the question of contextual theology. While Lamin Sanneh<sup>354</sup> has examined the term transition, C. S. Song discusses

---

<sup>352</sup> Noll, *The New Shape of World Christianity*, 10, 20-23. Compare David B. Barrett, Todd M. Johnson and Peter F. Crossing, “Missiometrics 2007,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 31 (2007), 31.

<sup>353</sup> Afe Adogame, “Betwixt Identity and Security: African New Religious Movements and the Politics of Religious Networking,” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternate and Emergent Religions* 7:2 (2003), 24-41. Afe Adogame, “Raising Champions, Taking Territories: African Churches and the Mapping of New Religious Landscapes in Diaspora,” *The African Diaspora and the Study of Religion* (T. L. Trost ed., New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). Afe Adogame, African Christian Communities in Diaspora,” *African Christianity: An African Story* (Ogbu Kalu ed., Pretoria: Department of Church History, University of Pretoria, 2005), 495-514.

<sup>354</sup> Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1989).

transportation,<sup>355</sup> and William A. Dyrness examines rereading of scripture.<sup>356</sup>

In recent times, three other terms have been introduced for expressing contextualization. These are; *inculturation*, *enculturation*, *restructuring* and *acculturation*. Inculturation theology is more popular within Catholic cycles.<sup>357</sup> Inculturation focuses more narrowly on the cultural dimension of human experience, even though it overlaps significantly with the notion of contextualization. With reference to contextualization, generally, Flemming asserts:

Today there is a burgeoning recognition among Christians around the globe that in order for the Christian message to be meaningful to people it must come to them in language and categories that makes sense within their particular culture and life situation. It must be *contextualized*. Contextualization has to do with how the gospel is revealed in scripture authentically comes to life in each cultural, social, religious and historical setting.<sup>358</sup>

In contrast to the other terms, *contextualization* or contextual theology, which is in current usage, better embraces the whole process of the interfacing of the Christian Gospel within all kinds of contexts. It is descriptive of a divergent contextual milieu encountered within concrete social, economic, political, mystical, spiritual, legal, and/or ecclesiastical backdrops.<sup>359</sup>

Though popular, the term contextualization has proven at times to be slippery and misty, being used by some theologically related disciplines and theorists to represent a wide range of philosophical and theological perspectives.<sup>360</sup> Some intellectuals associate it with

---

<sup>355</sup> C. S. Song, *The Compassionate God* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1982), 5ff.

<sup>356</sup> William A. Dyrness, *The Earth Is the Lord's: A Theology of American Culture* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1997), 80.

<sup>357</sup> Peter Schineller, *A Handbook on Inculturation* (New York: Paulist, 1990). Aylward Shorter, *Towards a Theology of Inculturation* (Maryknoll, Orbis: New York, 1998).

<sup>358</sup> Flemming, 13f.

<sup>359</sup> Flemming, 18.

<sup>360</sup> David J. Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods and Models* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1989), 27ff.

hermeneutical activity that is equivalent to the traditional science of the application of scripture.<sup>361</sup> Others regard it as a process of developing local theologies in the context of rapid social and cultural changes taking place in contemporary Africa.<sup>362</sup> It is a missiological activity involving cross-cultural communication of the Gospel and other faces of doing missions for others.<sup>363</sup>

Even though it is assumed that the gospel should take the pride of place in the contextualization process, others have allowed the cultural background to take the pride of place, thus birthing varied patterns of contextualization along a continuum of *sola scriptura* on the extreme left and sole culture together with the whole gamut of cultural revival interventions on the other hand.

Contextualization prescribes what should be done, has been, and is being done in cognisance of the fact that it has something to do with the deep-seated salvation provided by Christianity through the ages. In view of the above opinions, Flemming concludes by asserting:

I take contextualization, then, to refer to the dynamic and comprehensive process by which the gospel is incarnated within a concrete historical or cultural situation. This happens in such a way that gospel both comes to authentic expression in the local context and at the same time prophetically transforms the context. Contextualization seeks to enable the people of God to live out the gospel in obedience to Christ within their own cultures and circumstances.<sup>364</sup>

---

<sup>361</sup> Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral* (Downers Grove, Illinois.: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 318ff. R. C. Hundley, "Towards an Evangelical Theology of Contextualization," PhD Dissertation Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1993, 19ff.

<sup>362</sup> Shokie Coe, "Contextualizing Theology in Mission," *Mission Trends 3* (Gerald H. Anderson and Thomas F. Stransky eds., New York: Paulist, 1976), 19ff. Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1992), 21f.

<sup>363</sup> Krikor Haleblian, "The Problem of Contextualization," *Missiology* 11 (1983), 95-111. Charles Taber, "Contextualization," *Religious Studies Review* 13 (1987), 33; Hesselgrave and Rommen, *Contextualization*, 200.

<sup>364</sup> Flemming, 19.

It must be conducted for all cultures by theologians and missionaries that are courageous, brave and ready to win souls for Christ in Africa. I dare say it is such a holistic way of doing missions that it includes cultural participation in minute aspects of receiving cultures even in dietary matters, naming, dressing, family ties and community, among others.

### **Early Christian Missionary Attempts to Understand African Traditional Religions**

Before Tambaram, early European missionaries, together with their counterparts the explorers and traders, a group I elsewhere refer to as amateur anthropologists, saw nothing good in the African *kultur* and religious environment worth contextualizing. Such missionaries made some ridiculous remarks about African indigenous religious beliefs and practices. The records of European travellers, which covered from 15<sup>th</sup> centuries onwards described African religious traditions as primitive superstitions, rife with bloody animal and human sacrifices, full of evil witchcraft, black magic, voodoo and cannibalism. Their reports were riddled with moral judgements, biases and prejudices.<sup>365</sup>

The negative picture painted of African traditional religions caused some writers to pronounce its eminent death or “obituary.” Lejeune claimed that the uncompromising missionary attitude to the traditional faith had helped to quickly make and retain converts. They thus maintained a hostile stand against the traditional culture, because, “we fear the immense scandal which has been produced among Protestants: the return to Paganism of between two-thirds or one half of their converts”.<sup>366</sup> Most missionary societies were thus, fond of disseminating information that tended to misrepresent the traditional cultures. Some of the passages culled from the epistolary effusions published from time to time in the organs of the missionary societies showed evidences of calumny and hate.

---

<sup>365</sup> Umar H.D. Danfulani, “West African Religions in European Scholarship,” *European Traditions in the Study of Religion in Africa* (Frieder Ludwig and Afe Adogame eds., Wiesbaden, Germany: Otto Harrassowitz Verlag, 2004): 341-347.

<sup>366</sup> Quoted in F.K. Ekechi, *Missionary Enterprise and Rivalry in Igboland, 1851-1914* (London: Frank Cass, 1971): 148.

Most missionary publications contained materials describing the horrors of the traditional religion, condemnation and abhorrence of aspects of the traditional culture and the noble efforts of the missionaries. In some places, baptism was denied the owners of household slaves, as well as men and woman in polygamous marriages.<sup>367</sup> By the turn of the century, however, it became clear to some missionaries that their predecessors had committed some errors by not seeking to understand the traditional religions before pronouncing its obituary.

However, European missionaries that stayed longer made serious efforts to understand the traditional religions. Excellent examples are found in Abbe Pierre Bouche in Dahomey<sup>368</sup> among the Yoruba and Southern Hall among the Tangale, who stayed longer with their African hosts and started to empathetically appreciate the African religious setting. Bowen was a South American Baptist Missionary on the coast of Africa who produced the first dictionary of the Yoruba language in the mid-1850s. Through such careful study, he observed some certain “positive” and “higher” aspects of the Yoruba religion. This does not in any way suggest that Bowen saw the traditional religion as a valid faith in its entirety. His stayed longer in Yoruba land possibly added to his conclusion that *fetishes* usually depicted as the sum total of African religions were nothing more than mere symbols.<sup>369</sup> He recorded his encounter with the traditionalists stating that, “to preach against their executive gods, is more than you dare to do...the fury of the heathen

---

<sup>367</sup> P. R. McKenzie, *Inter-religious Encounter in West Africa* (Leicester: Blackfrais Press, 1976), 57.

<sup>368</sup> Edwin W. Smith, *The Golden Stool: Some Aspects of the Conflict of Cultures in Modern Africa* (London: Edinburgh House Press, 1950a, Reprinted, 1966). T. J. Bowen, “Bowen Papers,” University of Ibadan Library (July 10<sup>th</sup> 1851). T. J. Bowen, *Adventures and Missionary Labours* (London, 1857), (2<sup>nd</sup> edition, with a new Introduction by Emmanuel A. Ayandele, Frank Cass, 1968).

<sup>369</sup> Udobata Rufus Onunwa, “The Study of West African Traditional Religion in Time-Perspective,” Ph.D. Thesis, Department of Religion, University of Nigeria Nsukka, 1984, 87.

soul would explode like gun powder.”<sup>370</sup> Six years later, after a glimmering understanding of the Yoruba, Bowen observed that:

Many of the notions which the people entertain of God are remarkably correct. They make him the efficient though not always the instrumental creator. They had some notion of his justice and holiness and ... they may extol the power and defend the worship of their idols that they regard as mighty beings, but they will not compare the greatest idol to God.<sup>371</sup>

Perhaps, because of the same deeper understanding of theology and professional skill in language, Abbe Pierre Bouche, a French Roman Catholic missionary in Dahomey at the same time with Sir R. F. Burton made a more careful observation of the religion than some of his contemporaries. Writing on the cultic symbols of the people, he states among other things that, it is not:

...mere material that received the respects of the black; he directs them towards a higher power, hence it cannot be said the Dahomean and Nago [Negro]...religion is really fetishism as the term is generally meant.<sup>372</sup>

While Bowen and Bouche showed some accurate understanding of African religions, P. Baudin, a French Roman Catholic Priest who sojourned in many parts of Africa between 1851 and 1890 wrote a devastating account of the religions which he saw as a “total darkness” hostile to the light of the Christian gospel.<sup>373</sup> Baudin was out to demonstrate the absurdity and folly of the religions of the Negroes of Africa.<sup>374</sup> This notwithstanding, Baudin typifies the first Roman Catholic missionary attempt at presenting the traditional religions of sub-Saharan Africa in 1885. Even though, he saw in them a vast pantheism deeply imbued with polytheism, he concluded that the idea of

---

<sup>370</sup> Bowen, “Bowen Papers.”

<sup>371</sup> Bowen, *Adventures and Missionary Labours*, 176.

<sup>372</sup> Pierre Verger, “The Yoruba High God – A Review of Source,” *Odu* 2:2 (1966), 23.

<sup>373</sup> P. Noel Baudin, ed., *The Missionary on the Slave Coast of Africa* (New York: Benzinger, 1885b). P. Noel Baudin, *Fetishism and Fetish Worshipers* (New York: Benzinger, 1885a).

<sup>374</sup> Baudin, *The Missionary on the Slave Coast of Africa*. Bowen, *Fetishism and Fetish Worshipers*.

God is fundamental in them.<sup>375</sup> Southern Hall left behind a manuscript that accurately describes Tangale indigenous religion of time, even though he exchanged sorcery with witchcraft and vice-versa. The copy of his manuscript was traced by the famous linguist and philologist of Chadic, Hermann Jungraithmyer of Frankfurt who made sure it was published by Köppe Verlag.

### **Liberal Christian Theologians: Tambaram and After – A Watershed for Officially Stamping Contextual Theology**

I present a summary of the works of liberal Christian missionaries immediately below from an earlier version.<sup>376</sup> Liberal European missionaries that came into Africa were influenced by the historical and comparative studies initiated by Max Müllerin of Oxford and C.P. Tiele in Leiden. Müller was a German philologist, polyglot and Christian missionary to India. He was made the first chair and father of Comparative Religion and Indology in Oxford, and ardent student of Sanskrit and the Vedas. Müller made the Hindu Vedic scriptures available to the Western world through his scholarly translation work. Tiele was a missionary who visited the mission fields for shorter periods.

Consequent on its realisation of the world's rich cultural diversity and "aware that it can no longer be a 'Western' Church than it could ever have been or remained a Jewish Church,"<sup>377</sup> various missionary bodies gradually changed their previous hostile attitudes and policies towards other non-Christian religions. In a number of conferences that followed, new policies were adopted and a new theology of mission came in vogue. This saw the emergence of a spate of literature with systematic descriptions of specific indigenous beliefs and practices such as the Supreme Being, ancestor-worship, sacrifice, marriage, death, and morality.

---

<sup>375</sup> Bowen, *Fetishism and Fetish Worshippers*, 9; cf. E. Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (London: SCM Press, 1973), 140.

<sup>376</sup> Danfulani, "West African Religions in European Scholarship," 352-56.

<sup>377</sup> Perry, Edmund F. "Review of Donald Senior and Carroll Stuhlieller, *The Biblical Foundations of Mission*." *Review of Books and Religion* 12:6 (1984).

The first group of liberal Christian missionary writings on African religions appeared as a means of evangelical strategy, in the late 1890s and continued into early 1900s. Farrow was a missionary to Yoruba land who began to systematically collect data on the study of Yoruba religious beliefs and practices. A few years after WWI, he used the materials he collected in Africa in the late 1890s for a doctoral thesis on religion, which later culminated in a book.<sup>378</sup> In it, Farrow tries to give a comprehensive account of Yoruba religion. Despite the bias and prejudice portrayed in the title of his work, Farrow was one of the first Europeans to consider African traditional religions as a legitimate and valid subject for a doctoral thesis. Basden who lived and worked in Awka–Onitsha as a missionary of the CMS to Igboland for over thirty-five years is another example.<sup>379</sup>

On a small scale, such studies began in the 1920's when some missionaries either on their own or under the auspices of their organisations undertook on-the-spot survey of some aspects of the traditional religions of the communities where they worked. In spite of the apparent favourable changing attitudes of the missionaries, the same notion of “superiority” of Christianity over the traditional religions, however, prevailed in the minds of the apologists.

From 1930s European Christian theologians intensified efforts in finding ways of using some elements of the traditional religions as a means of propagating the Gospel. This evangelical zeal saw the appearance of several works at the time, particularly that of Hendrick Kraemer. Kraemer for example emphasises the principle of “continuity and discontinuity” as a means of communicating the Gospel to people of non-Christian religious background. He spoke powerfully at the international conference of missionaries held in Tambaram near Madras in Southern India in 1938. The conference provided a platitude for fifteen West-African delegates to borrow political ideas from India and

---

<sup>378</sup> Stephen S. Farrow, *Faith, Fancies and Fetish or Yoruba Heathenism* (London: Frank Cass, 1924 reprinted 1958).

<sup>379</sup> G. T. Basden, *Among the Igbos of Nigeria* (London: Seeley Services, 1921, reprinted Frank Cass, London, 1966). G. T. Basden, *Niger Ibos* (London: Seeley Services, 1938, reprinted Frank Cass, London, 1968).

for other Africans to exchange views with South Africans on AICs and polygamy within an international setting.<sup>380</sup>

This suggestion initially raised a great controversy at the International Missionary Conference because of vagueness in the meanings of the two key terms *continuity* and *discontinuity*, introduced by Kraemer. Kraemer, however, explains that “continuity” meant:

The conversion of the spiritual values of non-Christian religions and the obligation to strive for the presentation of the Christian truth in terms and modes of expression that makes its challenge intelligible and related to the peculiar quality of reality in which the Churches in the mission field live.<sup>381</sup>

He opined further that there is discontinuity, because “paganism and prophetic revelation of biblical realism are not continuous with each other.”<sup>382</sup> Thus, Kraemer would not hesitate to recommend a destruction of any aspect of the traditional religion that does not yield itself to the propagation of the Gospel. In his own words:

The missionary is a revolutionary, and has to be so, for to preach and plant Christianity means to make frontal attack on beliefs and customs.... The missionary enterprise need not be ashamed of this.... Missions, however, imply a well-considered appeal to all peoples to transplant and transfer their life-foundations into a totally different spiritual soil and so must be revolutionary.<sup>383</sup>

Thus, in Tambaram, European Christian missionaries recognized and legitimized the importance of contextual theology in doing missions in Africa.<sup>384</sup>

The intellectual and pastoral concerns of the period led to a number of other conferences on the *African High God*, which became of great

---

<sup>380</sup> Frider Ludwig, “Tambaram: The West African Experience,” *Journal of Religion in Africa (JRA)* XXXI:1 (2001), 49-91.

<sup>381</sup> Hendrick Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a non-Christian World* (London: The Edinburgh House Press, 1938), 302.

<sup>382</sup> Kraemer, *The Christian Message*, 338.

<sup>383</sup> McKenzie, *Inter-religious Encounter in West Africa*, 342.

<sup>384</sup> Jan Platvoet, “From Object to Subject: A History of the Study of the Religions of Africa,” *The Study of Religions in Africa: Past, Present and Prospects* (Jan Platvoet, James Cox and Jacob Olupona eds., Cambridge: Roots and Branches; Religions of Africa 1996), 112.

interest to the Scottish missionary, Edwin Smith. Smith<sup>385</sup> states that his work is a collection of studies on various aspects of African concepts of God, which has been carefully written from missionary standpoint by those whose orientation was on Christian theology. Smith's works, though not centred on Africa, greatly changed missionary attitude. He demonstrated that the *African High God* was not a mere philosophical hypothesis—a “remote” or “withdrawn God” (*Deus remotus*), “an absconded God” (*Deus absconditus*) or “a lazy God” (*Deus ostiosus*), as initially conceived by some earlier writers—but a reality current in African thought. Another work by him published in 1926 is based on the outcome of the Conference of International Missionary Council. In it Smith convinces fellow missionaries that some aspects of African culture could enhance missionary work in Africa.<sup>386</sup> Parrinder<sup>387</sup> rightly describes Smith as “the greatest expert on African religion.” Fortes and Dieterlen state that the fact that Smith “played a significant role in altering missionary attitudes to Africa cannot be faulted”.<sup>388</sup>

The theological and philosophical training of Christian missionaries enabled them to systematically articulate and generalise African beliefs and cultural concepts. They, however, thoroughly Westernised and Christianised African thought patterns and religions based on the models of Western philosophies and theologies. They thus shaped African indigenous religions after Judaeo-Christian moulds by representing them with categories and structures derived from biblical

---

<sup>385</sup> Edwin W. Smith, ed., *African Ideas of God: A Symposium* (London: Edinburgh House Press, 1950b, Reprinted, 1961), 136.

<sup>386</sup> Edwin Smith, *African Ideas of God* (London: Edinberg House Press, 1961), 2.

<sup>387</sup> Geoffrey Parrinder, *African Traditional Religion* (London: Sheldon Press, 1954, reprinted, London: Hutchinson, 1968, 1974). Geoffrey Parrinder, *West African Psychology: A Comparative Study of Psychological and Religious Thought* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1951). Geoffrey Parrinder, *West African Religion* (London: Epworth Press, 1949; Reissued 1969).

<sup>388</sup> Meyer Fortes and G. Dieterlen, “Christianity in Africa,” *African Systems of Thought* (Meyer Fortes and Dieterlen eds., London: Oxford University Press, 1965), 31.

religions.<sup>389</sup> P'Bitek was, therefore, right when he asserted that Christian missionaries dressed up African gods in Hellenistic robes and garb and then paraded them before the world, while African theologians forced African gods to fight as mercenaries in foreign battles.<sup>390</sup>

Missionaries also constructed a *historic* view of African traditional religions, as part and parcel of past, static, stable, well-integrated societies. This unifying and ameliorative mode of perception became the accepted paradigm of academic research in African indigenous religions by academic theologians when the earliest university colleges were founded from 1948 onwards. It henceforth shaped and informed the direction of research in African traditional religions in the respective departments that catered for the study of religions.<sup>391</sup>

The missionary writings appeared more frequently in journals, correspondences, magazines, newsletters, annual reports and reviews. In them, the various missionary bodies were able to communicate their views, impressions and strategies to other members of the group. Such periodicals were intended to interest the supporters of the missionary-societies as well as the churches in the mission fields. They contained articles on geography, religions of the various mission fields, important missionary letters, and ethnology/anthropology, among others. These and other similar publications came out more regularly than books and were extensively used in the dissemination of information about the missionary labours in Africa, changing in content as the policies changed in the field. Such views had gained ground in some centres of academic Christian theology in some European and North American universities in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The historical-critical approach to the

---

<sup>389</sup> See the criticisms of Platvoet, "From Object to Subject," 113, cf. Rosalind Shaw, "'Traditional' African Religions," *Turning Points in Religious Studies: Essays in Honour of Geoffrey Parrinder* (Urshila King ed., Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1990b), 182ff. Rosalind Shaw, "The Invention of 'African Traditional Religion,'" *Religion* 20:3 (1990), 343. Okot P'Bitek, *African Religions in Western Scholarship* (Nairobi: East African Publishing Bureau, 1971). Robin Horton, "Judaico-Christian Spectacles: Boon or bane to the study of African Religions," *Chaiers d'Études Africaines* 96:24/4 (1984), 391-436.

<sup>390</sup> P'Bitek, *African Religions in Western Scholarship*.

<sup>391</sup> Platvoet, "From Object to Subject," 113, 1989: 109f.

study of the Bible as a literary document, rather than just merely regarded as the pure and unalloyed “Word of God” had started to gain impetus.

In summary, therefore, Christian missionary writings on African indigenous religious traditions could be categorised into three: The first approach was to fight and destroy African traditional religions. This was perpetrated by amateur anthropologists. When this approach failed, however, the salient features of African traditional religions were ‘baptised’ as a form of evangelical strategy. At this level, African traditional religions were accepted as:

...proper religions, permitted, or even ordained by God, and with at least some function in the divine economy and some salvific efficacy. Therefore, they may, or must, be respected, studied and encountered as communities of co-believers of a different religiosity.<sup>392</sup>

African religions were thus regarded as the *logoi spermtikoi*, or the ‘seed words’ from which Christianity might spring, that is, as *praeparatio evangelica*, good soil for the ‘preparation of the gospel’. This presupposes a continuity between African religious traditions and the true religion—Christianity. African indigenous religions and culture become foundational, especially because of the key role played by language in translating the message of Christianity.<sup>393</sup>

The next one consists of scholars who assumed that all religions proceeded from a faculty common to all humanity—a *sensus divinatatis in ipsis medullis et visceribus infixus*—a sense of divinity fixed into the very bowels and innards of human by God at creation. This is similar to what Schleiermacher describes as *Sinn und Geschmack für das Unendliche*, meaning a sense and taste for the infinite or Max Müller’s perception of the infinite in the finite.<sup>394</sup> Missionaries under the influence of this new approach produced descriptions of specific traditional religions of African people. They were missionaries with liberal views who had lived amongst the ethnic groups they described, having learned their language, possessing a passion for ethnography, a

---

<sup>392</sup> Platvoet, “From Object to Subject,” 112.

<sup>393</sup> Danfulani, “West African Religions in European Scholarship,” 352.

<sup>394</sup> Platvoet, “From Object to Subject,” 112.

deep respect for African cultures and religions, and a genuine concern for their adaptation to and integration in the new contexts.<sup>395</sup>

### **The Bible and Contextual African Theology**

The first issue of importance concerning the Bible and contextual African theology is the germane issues of translation. The Bible possesses an unimaginable great contextual meaning and value for the African Christian. Concerning this, Mbiti asserts:

On African soil, the Bible – far more so than individual foreign missionaries or indigenous pastors – is firmly shaping the church and the nature of Christianity. “Foreign” mission societies and local churches may well switch their focus and concept of mission from individuals to Bibles. The Bible carries more missiological weight and authority than individuals to execute mission, build the church, and undergird its spirituality.<sup>396</sup>

Africa possesses some 2,100 languages and circa 5,000 dialects. Colonial rulers planted their languages in the colonies such that today Africans have reacted to such language invasion. Ngugi wa Thion’go writes the following:

Thus [English] language and literature were taking us further and further from ourselves to other selves, from our world to other worlds...The language of an African child’s formal education was foreign. The language of the books he read was foreign...This dissociation, divorce, or alienation from the immediate environment becomes clearer when you look at colonial language as a carrier of culture.<sup>397</sup>

---

<sup>395</sup> Platvoet, “From Object to Subject,” 112; David Westerlund, *African Religion in African Scholarship: A Preliminary Study of the Religious and Political Background* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1985), 50 ff; cf. Danfulani, “West African Religions in European Scholarship,” 352.

<sup>396</sup> John S. Mbiti, “Translating the Word, Equipping the Disciples: Toward De-Westernizing Bible Translation into African Languages,” *From Achimota to Arusha: An ecumenical Journey of Mission in Africa 18-25* (Conference on World Mission and Evangelism), (Lesmore Gibson Ezekiel and Joseph Keum eds., Geneva: Acton and WCC Publications, 2018), 24.

<sup>397</sup> Ngugi wa Thion’go, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in Africa Literature* (London: Heinemann, 1986), cited in Mbiti, “Translating the Word, Equipping the Disciples,” 18.

One of the early European missionaries who realised the power of translation in achieving the goal of leading Africans to Christ was Bowen. He developed the first Yoruba dictionary and also started translation work on the Yoruba Bible.

Today, all Christian ethnic groups, orthodox groups, evangelicals, the African Initiated Churches (the AICs), together with the *Pentecostalism* (under the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria) are involved in translation work. To this end, the Bible, the Jesus film, a great deal of Christian literature, films, documentaries and other Christian materials have been translated into hundreds of thousands of languages around the world, including some African languages.

Second is the power of both the spoken and written word as the Bible became enshrouded in a belief that it carried immense benevolent power. Though a written scripture is foreign to African people since it was virtually absent in their culture, the Bible was considered a potently powerful tool in its physical form and its written words. Before the embedment of Christianity, Africans considered the words of their gods, ancestors, priests/priestesses, sacred kings/queens, diviners, medicine-men, rain-makers, and other religious functionaries as powerful. They believe that, songs, poems, ritual processes, incantations, chants, and myths carry both divine benevolent powers [to bless] and malevolent or malignant powers [to curse]. Mbiti underscores the importance of words in indigenous African context when he writes:

There is a mystical power in words, especially those of a senior person to a junior one, in terms of age, social status or office. The words of parents, for example, carry 'power' when spoken to children: They cause good fortune, curse, success, peace, sorrow or blessings, especially when spoken in moments of crisis. The words of medicine-man work through the medicine he gives, and it is this, perhaps more than the actual herb, which is thought to cause the cure or prevent misfortunes.<sup>398</sup>

---

<sup>398</sup> John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969) 197.

Michael<sup>399</sup> states that it is not surprising for Africans coming from a background where words are conceived to be so portent, that they are marshalled to magical effects to also regard the divine words in the Bible within the same parameters. Little wonder, the magical treatment of the Bible is rampant in many parts of Africa. The Bible is often used in a form of divination (known as Bible turning) to find a thief when money or some valuable items are missing. Adamo asserts that the Bible, especially the Psalms is used among the Yoruba as a means of incantations and healing.<sup>400</sup>

When Africans encountered the Bible, some quote it from memory as a spiritual defence against opposing metaphysical ‘forces of darkness’ or some unpleasant circumstances in the belief that biblical words possess the power to ward off or check the intrusion of evil forces. Many use ‘the name of Jesus’, call on the Holy Spirit and/or plead ‘the blood of Jesus’. AICs develop the knack for employing biblical verses to address all human problems including ‘matter of the dry tree’ or barrenness, impotency and sterility, ill-health, exorcising *obanje/abiku*, *mammy water* and other demonic spirits, witchcraft, sorcery and every kind of evil.

Third is the fact that the origin of contextualization is found exemplified in the incarnation of Jesus Christ from his perfect heavenly based into an imperfect sinful human earth for the sole purpose of providing once-for-all universal redemption for the whole of fallen humanity. This singular action caused the Word (Logos), who resided originally in heaven, who created heaven and earth for his own glory to shift to shift his base temporarily to earth by taking on human form (John 1: 1-3, 14).

Jesus came to earth at the nick of time, the ripe period and at zero-hour BCE/CE as declared by Paul in Galatians 4:4-5.

God has been active in Africa since time immemorial. These are the words paraphrased words of Africans who affirm that humanity in

---

<sup>399</sup> Matthew Michael, *Christian Theology and African Traditions* (Kaduna: Yuty Graphics, 2011), 89ff.

<sup>400</sup> David Tuesday Adamo, “The Use of Psalms in African Indigenous Churches in Nigeria,” *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories and Trends* (Gerald O. West and Musa Dube eds., Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 2000), 336ff.

Africa is historical and theological (not pagan) and is part and parcel of God's redemptive and saving act revealed in and through humanity. This makes it easier to interpret God's incarnational purpose in the historical and resurrected Jesus Christ. God who is revealed in a particular (Palestinian-Jewish) cultural context through Jesus Christ is equally revealed in the African context.<sup>401</sup>

Contextualization and contextual theology are therefore ordained by God through the singular act of the incarnation of the Triune Godhead who declared in Genesis 1:26: Let Us make man *Imago-Dei*—in Our Own Image. Incarnation is the first heavenly culture and language that God used to reconcile or bring back fallen humanity to Himself.

Fourth is the reality that the revelation of God is universal and therefore not limited to a specific culture, religion or racial group. In the revelation of God's contextual design and calculation, the Triune God does not privilege or lift up one *kultur* or ethnic nationality over another. Rather, Jesus has been incarnated to serve the purpose of the continuing outpouring of the blessings of His sovereign holiness over the whole of creation as manifested in biblical traditions. Africans therefore do not need to be apologetic or polemical concerning their discipleship of Christ because Christianity is a universal deluge or avalanche of God's unlimited holistic love for the human race, which encapsulates, inundates and accommodates all humanity and their variegated cultural milieu. It is in line with this fact that the powerful Christian message resonates with much of Africa's needs of redemption and salvation that Christianity has grown from strength to strength in Africa.<sup>402</sup>

The fifth relates to holistic redemption and freedom that is usually brought by Christianity, also referred to as liberation theology. The sensitivity of Christ towards both physical and spiritual redemption of humanity is glimpsed and fully appreciated in the Christ's redefinition of

---

<sup>401</sup> Faustin Leonard Mihali, "Arusha: A Confluence for Transformational Agenda and Discipleship in Africa", in: Lesmore Gibson Ezekiel and Joseph Keum eds., *From Achimota to Arusha: An ecumenical Journey of Mission in Africa* (Conference on World Mission and Evangelism) (Geneva: Acton and WCC Publications, 2018), 13; cf. John Parratt, *Reinventing Christianity: African Theology Today* (Grand Rapids, Michigan; Eerdmans Pub., 1995), 105ff.

<sup>402</sup> Mihali, 13f.

His Great Commission in Mathew 28: 18-20 and his socio-political mandate in Mathew 11: 2-6 (cf. Luke 4: 18-19, &: 22) cited from Isaiah 61, as His grand command and manifesto in engaging Christians to bring liberation and succour to the physically and spiritually oppressed (imprisoned, blind, crippled and poor) and to imbibe living in solidarity with the poor.<sup>403</sup>

In order for Christianity to become relevant in Africa, it should appeal to its real needs of liberation.<sup>404</sup> Boulaga states further:

The human being retains the ultimate, redemptive capacity to suffer and die in the refusal to accept this shipwreck of meaning by hoping against all hope that life will be the stronger, that life will bestow what it promises, and that God will ratify his truth by restoring life to the dead, in [a] manner unimaginable.<sup>405</sup>

Thus, African liberation theology brings to the table tangible African problems of various types of freedoms: equality and justice, human rights, rule of law, religious freedom, and civil rights, among others. Antonio Gramsci, an Italian Marxist scholar, in his *Selections from the Prison Notes* was greatly inspired by the works of Old Testament prophets towards mobilizing the Italian rural populace to start a revolution whose aim was to fight against all forms of injustice. Max Horkheimer of the Frankfurt School likewise believes that Psalms 91:2 should be utilized as a source of critique and inspiration to cope with and transform injustice and oppression, insisting that this verse be inscribed on his tomb stone in Bern, Switzerland because to him, God is the imageless and nameless totally other. Similarly, religion can paradoxically be used to fight against injustice and also to perpetuate injustice depending on specific context and situation. Moreover, the utilization of religion as driving force for all kinds of freedoms,

---

<sup>403</sup> David J. Bosch, *Transforming Missions: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1991), 81.

<sup>404</sup> Parratt, *Reinventing Christianity*, 105ff; Peter Kanyandogo ed., *Inculcating the Church in Africa: Theological and Practical Perspectives* (Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, 2001); Boulaga, 2001: 104f and Bujo, 1992: 122ff.

<sup>405</sup> F. Eboussi Boulaga, *Christianity without Fetishes: An African Critique and Recapture of Christianity* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1984), 105f.

including social, political, and economic liberation has been popular in human history. This ranges from the liberation theology of Latin America that fought for the elimination of social injustice and poverty, to the Black Theology of South Africa that fought against apartheid as epitomised in the life of Nelson Mandela. The ideologies of *Satyagraha* and *Ubuntu*, of Mohandas Mahatma Gandhi and Arch-Bishop Desmond Tutu, respectively, speak to the use of religion to attain communal social harmony, political, economic and religious freedom in an active non-violent manner. The ideologies of these two resonate with the black movement of Martin Luther King Jr, which fought against racial segregation of the black race in the US and perhaps drew impetus from the life of Marcus Garvey.

Liberation theology is generally the endeavour to provide a synthesis of the biblical understanding of social justice together with some insights from Marxist social analysis of the role of religion in entrenching inequality, injustice and poverty in society.<sup>406</sup> This approach has also been employed in the study of not only the competition of religions and their denominations, sects, cults and Church structures, in the production of religious goods for their religious markets, but *mutatis-muntadis*, also in the study of militant movements and the whole gamut of religious fundamentalism, including self-determination and anti-establishment movements that have arisen and have taken up arms in the name of God. Thus, Christian liberation theology, though borrowed from Marxist ideology, has brought succour to many people across the globe. In fact, one does not really need to totally embrace Marxism, together with its (atheistic and agnostic) nihilist ideology for one to find some analytical tools for treating religion as an empirical 'object' open to study and criticism. Moreover, it (religion) is very often implicated in social injustice, such as search for justice, identity, self-determination, equality and peace. Within the broader spectrum of the discourse on liberation theology in Africa, it has so far been restricted to the Southern

---

<sup>406</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1988), and Leonardo Boff, Cladovis Boff and Paul Burns, *Introducing Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1987).

Africa. There is the need for its spread to the entire African continent because it will address countless other issues.<sup>407</sup>

### **Contextual Theology and the Revival of African Indigenous Religions**

The enthusiasm of many Africans over the fear of completely losing their local cultural praxis and values has led to a conflict between indigenous religious traditions, rituals and beliefs with Christian praxis. In a number of glaring examples, two paradoxical patterns are obtainable: the first refers to resistance and the second tends towards a clear exhibition of the dwindling fortunes of indigenous religious tradition in the face of confrontational structures of globalization and direct impact of Christianity. We can definitely point to areas that missionary Christianity has influenced in Africa, giving birth to a vibrant and dynamic culture and in the process birthing African Christianity. In this interplay between Christianity in Africa and African Christianity, there exists conquered areas and areas of stiff resistance.

It is not a truism that with the appearance of Christianity, African indigenous religions collapsed *Jericho wise*. However, in most Christian communities, the indigenous gods, divinities and deities have suffered death blows, together with their shrines, worship and the whole gamut of beliefs and ritual sacrifices associated with them. This does not mean that African Christians no longer possess deities. Some of them have of course embraced new or modern gods imported from outside. Monogamy is popular and church wedding has replaced wife kidnapping, widow inheritance, levirate marriage and many secondary forms of marriage have disappeared as a direct impact from the presence of Christianity.

But the high cost of title taking, bride-wealth, and burial rites have persisted. The patronage of local booze (such as the three-day beer—*adanze*, *burukutu* or *mwes*) and bottled beer, local and bottle gin and various other brews (such as *goskolo*) is still a huge problem for the church in many places in Africa. This is aside from attempts across the continent at reviving the surviving aspects of ancestor worship and the art of masquerading. However, the attempt at revival is producing neo-

---

<sup>407</sup> Emmanuel Katongole, *The Sacrifice of Africa: A Political Theology for Africa* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub Co, 2011).

traditional religions patterns in Africa. For instance, there are recent reports of some elite on the Jos Plateau sewing uniform for masquerades (in Langtang), transporting them in vehicles, macho-masquerades being crushed by vehicles, and misbehaving masquerades being defiled or charged to the police station (in Pankshin). There is the strange spectacle of the praying masquerades of Badni in Kadung District. They promptly stopped their performance while a rather longish Christian prayer was being given by a local pastor who suspected that most of the persons behind the masks were members of his Church hence their eager willingness to stop their masquerading activities while he prayed.

In Mupun land, a case of the defilement of a masquerade went to the magistrate court some years ago. Even though it was the *nyem kum-mo*, adherents of Mupun indigenous religion that took the case to court, they lost because a Mupun priest, named Da Rev Joel Luutchi Gukas went to court and defended Christianity arguing from within the ethics of *nanyim*, the *female leafy one*, who was supposedly defiled. Joel Gukas took off his cassock and wore the traditional Mupun *zaal* male clothing covering parts of the chest, over the *fwat* and *naar*, to look like the *nyem kum-mo* in garb and appearance. He then argued as an expert witness that the leafy one normally plays with women and children carrying two whips in her hands. He wondered what made her to carry stones on that fateful day. He also argued that from history, the pastor's house was taboo to her, since there was a mutual agreement to that effect. What then made *nanyim* to wander away from her usual road from the River Ambring up to the threshing floor on top of the mountain away from the pastor's house? He argued further that as spirits, ancestors never die. So, the claim by the adherents of *kum* that one of their members did not return to the ancestral land after a clash with the pastor's son was false. He concluded that the Mupun do not usually disclose to any that Mupun land was facing some kind of trouble. By turning jettisoning the plea of the Mupun Royal Fathers to settle the matter quietly and rather publicising the matter in court to the whole world meant that Mupun land was exposed to attacks by their enemies. He warned revivers of *kum*, Mupun religion to desist from adding false innovations to the religion, adding that if some Mupun ancestors were to return to the land of the living, they would not recognize the religion they left behind. The

case was struck out based on the knowledge of *kum*, Mupun indigenous religion by Joel Gukas.

However, many areas remain problematic, uncharted, and unexplored waters for Orthodox and Evangelical Christian leaders in Africa. These include the problem of witchcraft (*sot*), sorcery (*lom*), voodoo (*dajol*), magic (*bak-kaa*, *jen-ndaat*), possessors of secret mystical powers (*nyem-jyom-mo*, *zari* or *jep-rit*, the good children), and those-who-die-to-return (*mba-ndaas*). Others include *juju*, secret societies, ritual murders and trafficking in human parts. There is also an urgent need to reconcile Christian baptism with African male/female puberty rites, while indigenous marriage rituals such as *put tol* (motherhood, child rearing and sex education for girls) could be merged with marriage counselling.

### **Challenges of Contextualization**

What is the term contextualization meant to convey in empirical terms? In other words, how does a Christian practise contextualization? Are there principles and practice of contextualization? What are its dos and don'ts, or rather, does contextual theology possess border lines? Many Christians are confused as to what to contextualize and what not to contextualize. Many people are suspicious of the term in the belief that it will lead to a watered-down Christianity. They wonder whether it will not lead Christians to un-biblical living, compromised values, and life bereaved of expected moral behaviour.

Also owing to the hostile posture of amateur anthropologists (early Christian missionaries, European traders and explorers already examined above) against African culture, which they considered as totally unchristian, Appiah-Kubi asserts:

But it is not an exaggeration to say that, hitherto, the church's attitude towards African beliefs and heritages has been generally one of negation, a denial of those beliefs and the social structure as a whole. Most Euro-Americans including the missionaries tended to look down on African religious perspectives, customs and cultures, and at worst, some felt that Africa has no education, culture, history or religion and therefore the idea of God.<sup>408</sup>

---

<sup>408</sup> Kofi Appiah-Kubi, "Jesus Christ—Some Christological Aspects from African Perspectives," *African Dilemma: A Cry for Life* (Kofi Appiah-Kubi

A number of Eurocentric thinkers among missionaries rejected African drums, cymbals, dancing styles, songs, poems, and percussion instruments, as part of church service or liturgy because they have been used in the worship of the African deities and ancestors. Appiah-Kubi continues:

They found Africa a blank slate on which anything could be written. It was therefore the avowed duty of the missionary to “civilize” the African and drum the idea of God into him. Thus Emile Ludwig, by no means a missionary, when told by Edwinn Smith [a Scottish missionary], about what the missionaries were doing – teaching the Africans about God – retorted in great perplexity: “How can the untutored African conceive God? How can this be? How can this be? Deity is a philosophical concept which savages are incapable of framing. In fact, Emil Ludwig is not without disciples or followers even in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Yet the common phrase often on the lips of those outsiders who have come in contact with Africans has been and still is: “This incurable religious people.”<sup>409</sup>

The concerns today are different from those of yesterday. Today, Christianity is taken by the present generation as a given, without questioning, because the receivers are second, third or even fourth generation Christians. It was not so with some first-generation Christians who nursed the fear that perhaps their African culture and identity was being eroded. This is how Laroche captures the situation in his days:

If the Church has always respected the personality and culture of different peoples, it must be admitted that missionaries have not always been faithful to this golden rule. On the one hand, it is difficult for them to bring in an abstract Christianity, wholly disengaged from Western culture, because the Christian religion has always been incarnated with a culture, first Hebrew, the Greek, the Roman and finally Western. One must not be astonished by the number of Africans who have come to identify the Christian religion with Western civilization, and who have hesitated to show themselves in favour of the ‘white man’s religion’ because they

---

Chief ed., *Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians—EATWOT*, 1992), 59.

<sup>409</sup> Appiah-Kubi, “Jesus Christ—Some Christological Aspects from African Perspectives,” 59 and Smith, *African Ideas of God*, 1.

feared that in becoming Christians they must at the same time accept a foreign culture wholly incompatible with their own traditions.<sup>410</sup>

Concerning the notion of contextual theology, Christian throughout the world cultures are caught in a web of a huge confusing paradox: The burning desire to communicate the truth of God's Word in culturally relevant ways on the one hand and the fear of giving away too much of the Gospel on the other.

There is also the challenge of dynamism of culture in terms of translation of the Bible—the Word of God. For instance, certain cultural concepts and notions that were relevant and meaningful to earlier receiving generations are currently fast disappearing from the cultural radar and environment of current younger generations. This poses the challenge of finding new words, phrases, notions and conceptual frames suitable, relevant and meaningful to current receiving audiences of the Bible. This young, Western educated generation has been profoundly influenced by forces of the process of globalization. They find it difficult to read older versions of Bible translations and would need newer versions, which will drop words and phrases they no longer understand and replace them with newer ones.

The process of globalization and emerging global realities are posing new challenges to the task of doing contextual theology. There are rapid changes, increased economic and cultural globalization, reactionary nationalism and ethnicity, religious intolerance, extremism and fundamentalism, which very often implies narrower and more literal interpretation of the Word of God leaving no room for cultural hermeneutics, which when carried out are referred to as creativity and innovation, akin to Islamic *shirk*, which amounts to heresy.

Flemming asks a challenging question: In the midst of an increasingly multi-faceted cultural mosaic and the cultural diversity that is witnessed in the mission field, where a single target cultural approach will prove very inadequate, how does one accurately inculturate faith? In a transnational world where African ways of communication have given way to faster modes of communication via satellite compliant gadgets

---

<sup>410</sup> R. Laroche ed., *Christianity in Tropical Africa* (London: Oxford U. Press, 1968), 300.

such as computers, cell phones, fax, the inter-net, DSTV, CNN, M-net and MTV, what strategies does one employ for doing contextual theology?<sup>411</sup> These forces have turned globalization into an inevitable ideology as observed by Cox when he asserts:

As globalisation is becoming an ideology in other parts of the world, where globalisation came to be presented as finality, as the logical and inevitable culmination of the powerful tendencies of the market at work, the dominance of economic forces was regarded as both necessary and beneficial... thus, in a second meaning, globalization became an ideology. The forces and policies that sustained the complex of tendencies just mentioned came to be regarded as inevitable (“there is no alternative”) and in the long run beneficent, at least for some people.<sup>412</sup>

The relevance of trans-historical relations, transnationalism and cross-cultural potential of global humanity is significant as the new-age, decolonized postmodern age tries to make sense of new experiences and link individual fate with historical experience.<sup>413</sup> Albrow declares clearly:

The term globalisation binds the syntax of the global and its derivations into a ramifying set of meanings...it conveys a widespread sense of transformation of the world. Globalisation is the making or process of being made global; in individual instances—by the active dissemination of practices, values, technology and other human products throughout the globe; when global practices and so on exercise an increasing influence over people’s lives; when the globe serves as a focus, or a premise in shaping human activities.<sup>414</sup>

There is thus the challenge of creating, pursuing and implementing contextualization models that will work in contemporary, globalized and post-modern Africa.

A much bigger and more dangerous challenge to contextual theology is language death, which has consumed many languages and is threatening to swallow more. Translation work is an intellectually,

---

<sup>411</sup> Flemming, 14.

<sup>412</sup> Cox, “A Perspective on Globalisation,” 23.

<sup>413</sup> Martin Albrow, *The Global Age: State and Society beyond Modernity* (Cambridge and Oxford, UK: Polity Press, 1996), 73ff.

<sup>414</sup> Albrow, *The Global Age*, 86ff.

financially, and psychologically expensive activity. This also permeates into human-hours spent, since it is monstrously time consuming, thus making the whole business difficult and costly. All these investments will be in vain where a language is either dead or dying, which equally implies language death. We may compare the issue of language/culture death with the problem of climate change in the global environment.

Other challenges come from the perspective of the influence of economic or market theories of religion on Christianity in Nigeria, especially in the attitude of strategies of Pentecostals towards competition. Furthermore, the role of local African missionary agents suffers great neglect in terms of academic studies.

### **Conclusion: Importance of ATR to Biblical scholarship**

Africans are deeply religious. They are notoriously and incurable religious and go everywhere with their religion that have been written on their hearts. Ikenga-Metuh states that Leonard cited Mendelson, all that was sustaining or weakening in African life has become anchored in religion. This includes the individual's relationship to his/her family, clan or ethnic morality, law, worship, politics, economics, social life, war and peace.<sup>415</sup> John Samuel Mbiti puts it this way:

Africans are not only highly religious but notoriously religious too. As such wherever the African is there is his religion. He carries it to the field where he sows his seeds or harvesting a new crop, he takes it with him to the beer party, or to attend a funeral rite, and if he is educated, he takes religion with him to the university, if he is a politician, he takes it to the house of parliament.<sup>416</sup>

Every verse in the whole of the Judaeo-Christian Bible was written and actually reflects a particular cultural matrix, cosmology, *erlebnis* and/or *sitz-im-leben*, that is, life situation, socially, politically, economically, geographically, and/or spiritually. I knew this much at least after attending the very popular and life changing lectures of the American Biblical scholar Craig Keener.

---

<sup>415</sup> Emefie Ikenga-Metuh, *Comparative Studies of African Traditional Religion* (Jos, Nigeria: Imico, 1987).

<sup>416</sup> John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969), 92.

Even though African culture in this context is the receiving culture of the Gospel of Christ, it has a great deal to learn from and offer to Western Christendom from where it was converted. The still has a great deal to learn from the warmth and hospitable welcome disposition of the African culture to the Christian message. Today, Arab, Asian and Western cultures are not as open to Christianity. The creativity, initiative, spontaneity and emotional responses of African culture to the expression of Christianity exemplified in dances, festival, song, poems and drumming have made Christianity genuinely African.

African Christianity exhibits great spiritual vigour, vibrancy and aggression that resonates with the rhythm and nearness and anointing of the Holy Spirit, especially when all other possession and non-possession spirits have been exorcised and cast out. Most Africans have a quickness for grasping things of the spirit with full understanding, back with an innocence and unquestioning acceptance of the gospel truth.

For Christianity to be meaningful and acceptable to Africans, it must be incarnated through African culture, into all its variegated modern dynamic patterns and structures. Contextual theology also pertains to the translation of divine revelation into every language to bring it within the range of all cultures so that every disciple of Christ can gain contact with the Saviour and Redeemer in a manner suitable to his/her mentality and feeling. Mbuy-Beya states that contextual theology ought to embrace the spirit of deep African spirituality, feeling of integration communal identity and general communalism, love for ritual festivals and religiosity, which is the singular bedrock and rallying point of African culture.<sup>417</sup> The very deep, explicit and vibrant nature of African spirituality is a medium that permits and gives Africans the ability to make sense of life. African spirituality is rooted in the socio-cultural universe of the person. Spirituality is a reality rich in implications and it is at the centre of the life and *kultur* of the individual and the community.

---

<sup>417</sup> Bernadette U.J Mbuy-Beya, Sr.. "African Christian Spirituality: Charismatic and Feminine Trends in Zaire," *African Dilenmma: A Cry for Life* (Kofi Appiah-Kubi chief ed., Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians—EATWOT, 1992), 108.

## **Bibliography**

- Adamo, David Tuesday. "The Use of Psalms in African Indigenous Churches in Nigeria." *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories and Trends*. Gerald O. West and Musa Dube eds., Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 2000.
- Adogame, Afe. "Betwixt Identity and Security: African New Religious Movements and the Politics of Religious Networking." *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternate and Emergent Religions* 7:2 (2003), 24-41.
- Adogame, Afe. "Raising Champions, Taking Territories: African Churches and the Mapping of New Religious Landscapes in Diaspora." *The African Diaspora and the Study of Religion*. T. L. Trost ed., New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
- Adogame, Afe. "African Christian Communities in Diaspora." *African Christianity: An African Story*. Ogbu Kalu ed., Pretoria: Department of Church History, University of Pretoria, 2005, pp. 495-514.
- Adogame, Afe. *The African Christian Diaspora: New Currents and Emerging Trends in World Christianity*. London, New Delhi, New York, Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2013.
- Albrow, Martin. *The Global Age: State and Society beyond Modernity*. Cambridge and Oxford, UK: Polity Press, 1996.
- Appiah-Kubi, Kofi. "Jesus Christ—Some Christological Aspects from African Perspectives." *African Dilemma: A Cry for Life*. Kofi Appiah-Kubi Chief ed., Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians—EATWOT, 1992.
- Barrett, David B., George T. Kurian and Todd M. Johnson. *World Christian Encyclopedia*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Barrett, David B., Todd M. Johnson and Peter F. Crossing. "Missiometrics 2007." *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 31 (2007).
- Barrett, David B., Todd M. Johnson and Peter F. Crossing. "Status of Global Mission, Presence, and Activities, AD 1800-2015", *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 32 (2008).
- Basden, G. T. *Among the Igbos of Nigeria*. London: Seeley Services, 1921, reprinted Frank Cass, London, 1966.

- Basden, G. T. *Niger Ibos*. London: Seeley Services, 1938, reprinted Frank Cass, London, 1968.
- Baudin, P. Noel ed. *The Missionary on the Slave Coast of Africa*. New York: Benzinger, 1885.
- Baudin, P. Noel. *Fetishism and Fetish Worshippers*. New York: Benzinger, 1885.
- Bevans, Stephen B. *Models of Contextual Theology*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1992.
- Boff, Leonardo, Cladovis Boff and Paul Burns. *Introducing Liberation Theology*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1987.
- Bosch, David J. *Transforming Missions: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1991.
- Boulaga, F. Eboussi. *Christianity without Fetishes: An African Critique and Recapture of Christianity*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1984.
- Bowen, T. J. "Bowen Papers." University of Ibadan Library. July 10<sup>th</sup> 1851.
- Bowen, T. J. *Adventures and Missionary Labours*. London, 1857; 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, with a new Introduction by Emmanuel A. Ayandele, Frank Cass, 1968.
- Bujo, Benézét. *African Theology in its Social Context*. Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publications, 1992.
- Coe, Shokie. "Contextualizing Theology in Mission," *Mission Trends 3*. Gerald H. Anderson and Thomas F. Stransky eds., New York: Paulist, 1976.
- Danfulani, Umar H. D. "African Traditions in the Study of Religion in Africa." *African Traditions of the Study of Religion in Africa*. Afe Adogame, Ezra Chitando and Bolaji Bateye eds., Surry, England and Burlington, USA: Ashgate, 2012.
- Danfulani, Umar H. D. "West African Religions in European Scholarship." *European Traditions in the Study of Religion in Africa*. Frieder Ludwig and Afe Adogame eds., Wiesbaden, Germany: Otto Harrassowitz Verlag, 2004, pp. 341-347.

- Dyrness, William A. *The Earth Is the Lord's: A Theology of American Culture*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1997.
- Ekechi, F. K. *Missionary Enterprise and Rivalry in Igboland, 1851-1914*. London: Frank Cass, 1971.
- Farrow, Stephen S. *Faith, Fancies and Fetish or Yoruba Heathenism*. London: Frank Cass, 1924 reprinted 1958.
- Flemming, Dean. *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission*. England: Apollos, an imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2005.
- Fortes, Meyer and G. Dieterlen. "Christianity in Africa." *African Systems of Thought*. Meyer Fortes and Dieterlen eds., London: Oxford University Press, 1965.
- Gutierrez, Gustavo. *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1988.
- Haleblian, Krikor. "The Problem of Contextualization." *Missiology* 11 (1983): 95-111.
- Hesselgrave, David J. and Edward Rommen. *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods and Models*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1989.
- Horton, Robin. "Judaean-Christian Spectacles: Boon or bane to the study of African Religions." *Chaiers d'Études Africaines* 96:24/4 (1984): 391-436.
- Hundley, R. C. "Towards an Evangelical Theology of Contextualization." PhD Dissertation Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1993.
- Idowu, E. Bolaji. *African Traditional Religion: A Definition*. London: SCM Press, 1973.
- Ikenga-Metuh, Emefie. *Comparative Studies of African Traditional Religion*. Jos, Nigeria: Imico, 1987.
- Jenkins, Philip. *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South*. Oxford: OUP, 2006.
- Jenkins, Philip. *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*. Oxford: OUP, 2002.

- Kanyandogo, Peter ed. *Inculturating the Church in Africa: Theological and Practical Perspectives*. Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, 2001.
- Katongole, Emmanuel. *The Sacrifice of Africa: A Political Theology for Africa*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub Co, 2011.
- Kraemer, Hendrick. *The Christian Message in a non-Christian World*. London: The Edinburgh House Press, 1938.
- Laroche, R. ed. *Christianity in Tropical Africa*. London: Oxford U. Press, 1968.
- Ludwig, Frider. "Tambaram: The West African Experience" *Journal of Religion in Africa (JRA)* XXXI:1 (2001), 49-91.
- Mbiti, John S. "Translating the Word, Equipping the Disciples: Toward De-Westernizing Bible Translation into African Languages." *From Achimota to Arusha: An ecumenical Journey of Mission in Africa*. Conference on World Mission and Evangelism. Lesmore Gibson Ezekiel and Joseph Keum eds., Geneva: Acton and WCC Publications, 2018, pp. 18-25.
- Mbiti, John S. *African Religions and Philosophy*. London: Heinemann, 1969.
- McKenzie, P. R. *Inter-religious Encounter in West Africa*. Leicester: Blackfrairs Press, 1976.
- Michael, Matthew. *Christian Theology and African Traditions*. Kaduna: Yuty Graphics, 2011.
- Mihali, Faustin Leonard. "Arusha: A Confluence for Transformational Agenda and Discipleship in Africa." *From Achimota to Arusha: An ecumenical Journey of Mission in Africa*. Conference on World Mission and Evangelism. Lesmore Gibson Ezekiel and Joseph Keum eds., Geneva: Acton and WCC Publications, 2018.
- Noll, Mark A. *The New Shape of World Christianity: How American Experience Reflects Global Faith*. Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, an imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2009.
- Oden, Thomas. *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind: Rediscovering the African Seedbed of Western Christianity*. Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2007.

- Oduyoye, Mercy Amba. "We are Women, Africans, and Faithful Christians: Women's Contribution in Ongoing Christian Witness in Africa." *From Achimota to Arusha: An ecumenical Journey of Mission in Africa*. Conference on World Mission and Evangelism. Lesmore Gibson Ezekiel and Joseph Keum eds., Geneva: Acton and WCC Publications, 2018.
- Onunwa, Udobata Rufus. "The Study of West African Traditional Religion in Time-Perspective." Ph.D. Thesis, Department of Religion, University of Nigeria Nsukka, 1984.
- Osborne, Grant R. *The Hermeneutical Spiral*. Downers Grove, Illinois.: InterVarsity Press, 1991.
- P'Bitek, Okot. *African Religions in Western Scholarship*. Nairobi: East African Publishing Bureau, 1971.
- Parratt, John. *Reinventing Christianity: African Theology Today*. Grand Rapids, Michigan; Eerdmans Pub., 1995.
- Parrinder, Geoffrey. *African Traditional Religion*. London: Sheldon Press, 1954, reprinted, London: Hutchinson, 1968, 1974, 1961.
- Parrinder, Geoffrey. *West African Psychology: A Comparative Study of Psychological and Religious Thought*. London: Lutterworth Press, 1951.
- Parrinder, Geoffrey. *West African Religion*. London: Epworth Press, 1949; Reissued 1969.
- Perry, Edmund F. "Review of Donald Senior and Carroll Stuhlieller, *The Biblical Foundations of Mission*." *Review of Books and Religion* 12:6 (1984).
- Platvoet, Jan G. "The Institutional Context of the Study of Religion in Africa South of the Sahara." *Marburg Revisited: Institutions and Strategies in the Study of Religion*. Michael Pye ed., Marburg: Diagonal-Verlag, 1989, pp. 107-126.
- Platvoet, Jan. "From Object to Subject: A History of the Study of the Religions of Africa." *The Study of Religions in Africa: Past, Present and Prospects*. Jan Platvoet, James Cox and Jacob Olupona eds., Cambridge: Roots and Branches; Religions of Africa 1996.
- Sanneh, Lamin. *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1989.

- Schineller, Peter. *A Handbook on Inculturation*. New York: Paulist, 1990.
- Shaw, Rosalind. "'Traditional' African Religions." *Turning Points in Religious Studies: Essays in Honour of Geoffrey Parrinder*. Urshila King ed., Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1990.
- Shaw, Rosalind. "The Invention of 'African Traditional Religion.'" *Religion* 20:3 (1990).
- Shorter, Aylward. *Towards a Theology of Inculturation*. Maryknoll, Orbis: New York, 1998.
- Smith, Edwin W. *African Beliefs and Christian Faith*. London: Lutterworth Press, 1936.
- Smith, Edwin W. ed. *African Ideas of God: A Symposium*. London: Edinburgh House Press, 1950, Reprinted, 1961.
- Smith, Edwin W. *The Christian Mission in Africa*. London: International Missionary Council, 1926.
- Smith, Edwin W. *The Golden Stool: Some Aspects of the Conflict of Cultures in Modern Africa*. London: Edinburgh House Press, 1950, Reprinted, 1966.
- Song, C. S. *The Compassionate God*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1982.
- Taber, Charles. "Contextualization." *Religious Studies Review* 13 (1987).
- Thion'go, Ngugi wa. *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in Africa Literature*. London: Heinemann, 1986.
- Turaki, Yusuf. "The Christianization of African Traditional Religion." *From Achimota to Arusha: An ecumenical Journey of Mission in Africa*. Conference on World Mission and Evangelism. Lesmore Gibson Ezekiel and Joseph Keum eds., Geneva: Acton and WCC Publications, 2018, pp. 47-54
- U. J Mbuy-Beya, Sr., Bernadette. "African Christian Spirituality: Charismatic and Feminine Trends in Zaire." *African Dilenmma: A Cry for Life*. Kofi Appiah-Kubi chief ed., Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians—EATWOT, 1992.

Verger, Pierre. "The Yoruba High God – A Review of Source." *Odu* 2:2 (1966).

Westerlund, David. *African Religion in African Scholarship: A Preliminary Study of the Religious and Political Background*. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1985.