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CALVIN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

REVELATION AS PRIMAL SENSING:
A THEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION INTO THE INTERACTION
BETWEEN CHRISTIAN FAITH AND AFRICAN RELIGIOUS
TRADITIONS

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF CALVIN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

BY

PHILIP M. WANDAWA

GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN

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tradition. He gave me the opportunity to explore it, grow into it, find my place in it, learn from it, and ultimately, to formulate something out of it that I can share with others.

Whatever shortcomings and mistakes there might be in this dissertation are mine.

ABSTRACT

This dissertation fills a gap in African Christian thought regarding the relationship between Christian faith and African traditions. The gap is that—withstanding the light shed on the relationship by the debate within the threefold typology (exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism)—there is ambivalence in African Christian thought regarding the value of African religious traditions for Christian faith. This ambivalence is sometimes expressed in complaints by theologians against what appears to be either “syncretism,” “divided loyalties,” “religious schizophrenia,” or “double-mindedness” in African Christian religious experience and expression.

In the view of this dissertation, the ambivalence in African Christian thought stems from the inability of the current debate to provide a broad ranging theological understanding of African traditions as a whole. Although the typology clarifies the Christian position *vis-à-vis* specific African beliefs relative to Christological and soteriological claims of Christian faith, it leaves much of the spiritual universe of African traditions unaccounted for. Consequently, a significant portion of the day to day experience of many Africans is in relative theological ambiguity.

This dissertation provides a broad ranging theological understanding of African religious traditions as a whole. It does so in three steps. First, it identifies the foundational elements of African religious traditions, namely, the African “sense of God,” *sense of reality*, and *sense of vocation*. This identification is critical because it gives one a theoretical grasp of African religious traditions as a whole. Second, it proposes a framework to achieve this, based on the theological imperatives of creation and providence, on the one hand, and the gospel, on the other. Third, based on these

theological imperatives, the dissertation offers a theological account of the foundational elements of African traditions—the “sense of God,” *sense of reality*, and *sense of vocation*. Beginning from the assumption that—in the encounter with African traditions—the onus rests squarely with Christian theology to account for African traditions, the dissertation shows that the foundational elements of African traditions are best understood through the lens of divine activity in creation and providence in relation to divine activity in the redemption revealed in Christ.

CHAPTER ONE

CHRISTIANITY AND OTHER RELIGIONS: THE WESTERN AND THE AFRICAN DEBATES REPRISED

I. Introduction

The spread of Christianity in Africa during the twentieth into the twenty-first century is truly remarkable. It is no surprise, therefore, that it has become the subject of much discussion today.¹ For some, the sheer numerical growth of Christianity in Africa represents a religious demographic shift that could have global political significance. Historian Philip Jenkins, for instance, has wondered whether the growth of Christianity in Africa does not portend a geo-political realignment that could lead to the emergence of a new “Christendom.”² The merits or demerits of this view, however, lie outside the purview of this dissertation. What is material to this inquiry is that, whatever else it might portend, the spread of Christianity in Africa has increased the breadth and intensity of the

¹ Opinions and statistics abound, both in print and electronic media, concerning the demographic shift of Christianity from the global north to the peoples of the global south. A generally respected and widely accepted comprehensive source giving statistics and comparative analyses on the spread of Christianity in Africa and other parts of the global south is the two volume study by David B. Barrett, George Kurian, and Todd M. Johnson, eds., *The World by Countries: Religionists, Churches, Ministries*, vol. 1 of *World Christian Encyclopedia: A Comparative Survey of Churches and Religions in the Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), and *The World by Segments: Religions, Peoples, Languages, Cities, Topics*, vol. 2 of *World Christian Encyclopedia*. A more recent commentary on the growing influence of Christianity in Africa is provided by Philip Jenkins, *The New Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, and *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South*, both published by Oxford University Press, 2002 and 2006 respectively. Also see his “The Next Christianity,” in *The Atlantic Monthly* 290, no. 3 (October 2002): 53-68. For helpful reflections on some of the issues raised by the demographic shift of Christianity to Africa and other parts of the global South see a collection of essays edited by Joel A. Carpenter and Lamin Sanneh, *The Changing Face of Christianity: Africa, the West, and the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) – especially the “Preface,” vii-viii; and, another by Craig Ott, Harold Netland, and Wilbert R. Shenk, *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006).

² Philip Jenkins, *The New Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*; “The Next Christianity,” 55-59.

interaction between Christian faith and indigenous religious beliefs. It is the nature of this interaction that demands an adequate theological account. An account of this nature calls for careful theological analysis and understanding of both the meaning and significance of the religious traditions of African people, especially of the intimations of divine presence and activity within it.

A. Thesis and Problem Statement

This dissertation will argue that the foundational elements of African religious traditions, which consist in three *sensibilities*, namely the *African sense of God*, the *African sense of reality*, and the *African sense of vocation*,³ derive from a primal substructure which, in this study, is referred to as *primal sensing*. *Primal sensing* is a God-given faculty of religious apprehension by means of which human beings are able to: apprehend God or that God is; apprehend reality as both natural and supernatural; construe human life as a religious transaction or vocation. ‘Primal’ denotes prior and primary, indicating that *primal sensing* is part of an original endowment which all human beings have by virtue of creation and providence. The potential value of the concept of *primal sensing* for Christian theology is threefold. First, it names or identifies a religious category that enriches our understanding of the ongoing interaction between Christian faith and African traditions. Second, it may shed light on the sources of the appeal the gospel continues to have among people in African traditions. Third, the recognition or

³ These three sensibilities will receive further clarification in the section on methodological considerations and scope of the study. Note that the key concepts in this dissertation like “*primal sensing*,” “*sense*” of “*God*,” “*reality*,” and “*vocation*” are italicized for emphasis the early part of the chapter. In the rest of the dissertation quotation marks and italics will be used only as and when necessary.

discovery that *primal sensing* is rooted in creation and providence puts us in a better position to assess the value of African religious traditions for Christian faith.

The problem with which this dissertation is concerned is the ambivalence within the African Christian thought regarding the status and value of African religious traditions for Christian faith. This ambivalence is caused by the inability of the debate in African theology to shed light on the ongoing interaction between Christian faith and a whole range of African religious beliefs and assumptions about life and reality as a whole. The African theological debate, which has thus far transpired within parameters of the threefold typology—inclusivism, exclusivism, and pluralism—clarifies the Christian position *vis-à-vis* specific aspects of African beliefs especially as they relate to Christological and soteriological claims of Christian faith. The typology, however, gives little guidance on the theological understanding of the wider spiritual universe of African belief and practice—which is, in fact, the world of everyday experience for many Africans. This suggests that although the typology is helpful as a conceptual framework for headlining the crucial claims of Christian faith—specifically the Christological and soteriological claims—it is not very helpful as a framework for accounting theologically for *what is already there* in African religious traditions.

There is a lot in African religious traditions that needs accounting for theologically. Within the context of this dissertation, however, what needs to be accounted for principally are the foundational elements which include the African “sense of God”, *sense of reality*, and *sense of vocation*. For without a proper account of these elements, it is hard to develop a reliable theological understanding of the wider spiritual universe of African belief and practice. And, without a reliable theological grasp of the

wider spiritual universe of African belief and practice, it is impossible to be clear about what, in African traditions, is of value to Christian faith and life.

B. Methodological Considerations and Scope of the Study

In a study of this nature, various considerations have led to decisions that have determined the shape of the project as whole. A common theme among the things considered is the degree of generalization that has been both necessary and inevitable because of the nature of the study itself. This generalization deserves comment in relation to three things that are either assumed or used in this study, namely, the cultural and religious diversity in African traditions, the diversity of Christian traditions in Africa, and the analytical categories used in the study. Although there are bound to be atypical cases that do not fit these generalizations, there is no intention or need, in this study, either to refute or defend against them. These comments are for the reader to understand the rationale behind the generalizations so as to appreciate the study as whole better.

First, given that Africa is a large continent with diverse cultures and languages, one camp of scholars, mostly anthropologists and historians of African religion—like Jan Platvoet and Henk J. van Rinsum, James L. Cox, and Rosalind Shaw—, question the generalization assumed in referring to them as if they one entity. In their view, generalizations of this kind assume or impose an artificial homogeneity on what are, in reality, discrete cultural and religious traditions in Africa.⁴ Another camp of scholars, mostly theologians, among them Mbiti, Pobee, Mugambi, recognize the cultural

⁴ Jan Platvoet and Henk J. van Rinsum, “Is Africa Incurably Religious? Confessing and Contesting an Invention,” in *Exchange* 32, no. 2 (2003): 123-153; James L Cox, “The Classification ‘Primal Religions’ as a Non-Empirical Christian Theological Construct,” in *Studies in World Christianity* 2, no. 1 (1996): 55-76; and, Rosalind Shaw, “The Invention of ‘African Traditional Religion,’” in *Religion* 20, (October, 1990) 339-353.

idiosyncrasies which anthropological and ethnographic research brings to light. In their view, however, these idiosyncrasies do not negate the common features, the “*homo Africanus*,” which underlie them and manifests itself in the “African worldview.”⁵ There is, according to Mbiti, a “unity of African religions” amid the diversity of the “individual religious...systems of different African peoples.” J. N. Kanyua Mugambi places equal emphasis on the “diversity” and “homogeneity” in African religious traditions and beliefs.⁶ To sum up on this point, three things can be noted. First, the debate between those who are for and against generalization is far from settled, and it is not possible to do so within the scope of this study. Second, the disagreement between the two camps may well stem from differences in the approach to subject dictated by the priorities of their respective disciplines. Third, this study prefers the generalization position mainly because it is consistent with the main assumptions and arguments of this dissertation.

The second kind of generalization relates to the diversity of Christian traditions in Africa. All the major Christian traditions—Eastern Orthodox, Protestant, and Roman Catholic—have a significant presence in Africa. All of them have been involved in the debate on the relationship of Christianity and African traditions. This dissertation draws mainly from the debate in the Protestant tradition. Even then, it would be impossible and even artificial to avoid drawing from the contributions of theologians from other

⁵ John Pobee, *Toward an African Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), 16-19, 42-53.

⁶ John Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy* (New York: Praeger, 1969), xii; also see his *Concepts of God in Africa* (London, S.P.C.K., 1970), xiii. J. N. Kanyua Mugambi, *African Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Nairobi, Kenya: Heinemann, 1989), 3-7; James Henry Owino Kombo argues this point and concludes that assuming the unity of African traditions is justified, *The Doctrine of God in African Christian Thought: The Holy Trinity, Theological Hermeneutics and African Intellectual Culture* (Boston: Brill, 2007), 4-7. For a more recent critique of those like Jan Platvoet and others who are against generalizing religion in Africa, see David Pym, “‘Primal religions’: Appropriate Religious Designation or Inappropriate Theological Imposition?” *Journal of African Christian Thought* 11, no. 1 (June 2008): 60-69.

traditions given especially that the debate itself cuts across traditions. The Roman Catholic contribution, for instance, has been a very important part of the African debate as a whole.⁷ For this reason it will be necessary to both note and to draw from Roman Catholic theologians as and when the occasion demands.

The third kind of generalization concerns the analytical categories to be used in this study. Three broad categories that will be used in this study—and which have already been used in the thesis statement—are those used to identify the foundational elements of African religious traditions, namely, the African “sense of God”, the African *sense of reality*, and the African *sense of vocation*. This dissertation will not engage in describing or discussing the religious traditions of particular African peoples—this area is well covered in much of the primary and secondary literature.⁸ These categories, however, are

⁷ Major documents relating to Vatican II are conveniently published in one volume by Walter M. Abbott, *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1966). The specific documents that have played a major role on the question regarding the relationship of Christian to non-Christian religious traditions include: “The Dogmatic Constitution of the Church,” *Lumen Gentium*; the “Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions,” *Nostra Aetate*; the “Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation,” *Dei Verbum*; the “Declaration on Religious Liberty,” *Dignitatis Humanae*; “Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity,” *Ad Gentes Divinitus*; and “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World,” *Gaudium et Spes*. Other papal proclamations and documents that relate to Africa directly are compiled in *Evaluative Articles: Inculturation of Christianity in Africa*, Spearhead Numbers 112-114, ed. Teresa Okure and Paul van Thiel, 32-36 (Eldoret, Kenya: AMECEA Gaba Publications, 1990). For a helpful overview of the Roman Catholic contribution to African debate see John Parratt, *Reinventing Christianity: African Theology Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 28-40.

⁸ There are an ever growing number of monographs presenting the religious beliefs of individual people groups in Africa. This dissertation has drawn from the more established and well known studies a representative sample of which includes Bolaji Idowu, *Olódùmare: God in Yoruba Belief* (London: Longmans, 1962); *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1973); John S. Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy* (New York: Praeger 1969); *Concepts of God in Africa* (London, S.P.C.K., 1970); *New Testament Eschatology in an African Background: A Study of the Encounter Between New Testament Theology and African Traditional Concepts* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971); *The Prayers of African Religion* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1976); *Introduction to African Religion* (Oxford: Heinemann Educational Books, 1991); Gabriel M. Setiloane, *The Image of God among the Sotho-Tswana* (Rotterdam: A. A. Balkema, 1976); Samuel Kibicho, “The Continuity of the African Conception of God into and through Christianity: A Kikuyu Study,” in *Christianity in Independent Africa*, ed. Edward W. Fasholé-Luke, Richard Gray, Adrian Hastings and Godwin Tasié (Bloomington & London: Indiana University Press, 1978), 370-388; Samuel Kibicho “The Kikuyu Conception of God, Its Continuity into the Christian Era and the Question It Raises for the Christian Idea of Revelation” (Ph.D. thesis, Vanderbilt

strategic tools to group and analyze, theologically, widely held beliefs on the same phenomenon. The African “sense of God”, for instance, brings together all the data regarding the beliefs, names, and concepts of God in African traditions. The African “sense of reality” covers those beliefs concerning the nature of reality, sometimes referred to as the African ontology. The African “sense of vocation” brings together all those beliefs regarding the construal of human life as a fundamentally religious vocation. Given their analytical function, these categories will play a constructive role in organizing chapters. There will be a chapter on the African “sense of God”, and another on the African ““sense of reality”” and *sense vocation*. The African “sense of reality” and “sense of vocation” will be treated together because they are inextricably linked. Moreover, both are simultaneously expressed in the African religious ontology and way of life.

The chapter as whole has four sections. Following this first section, the second section will present the debate on the relationship of Christianity and other religions as it has been discussed in the modern Western Christian tradition. This discussion, which also sets the general background to the dissertation, will be referred to as the general or Western debate. The third section will present the debate concerning the relationship between Christianity and African religious traditions. This will be referred to as the specific or African debate. Presenting these two debates one after the other should make the connections between them obvious. The specific, African, debate has evolved along

University, 1972); Ikenga Emefie Metuh, *Comparative Studies of African Traditional Religions* (Onitsha, Nigeria: IMICO Publishers, 1987); *God and Man in African Religion: A Case Study of the Igbo of Nigeria* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1981); Cosmas Okechukwu Obiego, *African Image of the Ultimate Reality: An Analysis of Igbo Ideas of Life and Death in Relation to Chukwu-God* (Frankfurt am Main: P. Lang, 1984); Ikenga Emefie Metuh, *God and Man in African Religion: A Case Study of the Igbo of Nigeria* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1981); *Comparative Studies of African Traditional Religions* (Onitsha, Nigeria: IMICO Publishers, 1987).

lines established by the general, Western, debate. For this reason treatment of the African debate will be comparatively shorter because much of the theological background will have been covered in the Western debate. The fourth and final section will briefly evaluate the threefold typology as tool for engaging non-Christian religions in general, and African traditions in particular. The goal will be to set the stage for the approach this dissertation is going to use to engage African religious traditions theologically. This final section will conclude with a brief synopsis of the remaining chapters, focusing especially on how each chapter advances the main argument of the dissertation as a whole.

II. The Debate in the Western Christian Tradition

There is no doubt that religious diversity, and especially the relationship of Christianity to non-Christian religious traditions, has been perceived as a major theological problem in the Western Christian tradition. There have been various attempts to address it. Friedrich Schleiermacher's answer to this problem became the template on which many of the modern responses to the same problem are, in one form or other, based. Schleiermacher saw the different religions as manifestations of what he called the "self-identical essence of piety" or feeling (*gefühl*) of absolute dependence,⁹ but which are at "different stages of development" along an evolutionary trajectory from idol worship, polytheism, to monotheism.¹⁰ Since then, there has been no shortage of answers

⁹ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, the English translation of the second German edition, ed. by H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1928), §4. The piety which Schleiermacher has in mind is "the immediate consciousness of the universal existence of all finite things in and through the Infinite, and of all temporal things in and through the Eternal," the Second Speech in *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, translated from the third German edition by John Oman, with a foreword by Jack Forstman (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), 33.

¹⁰ For Schleiermacher, idol worship is "a confused state of self-consciousness" in which the feeling of absolute dependence is "reflected as arising" from a sensible object. Polytheism is a form of

to this problem in history of the church. E. C. Dewick distinguishes four “replies” or responses which the Church has had to non-Christian religious traditions: “Conflict,” “Fulfillment,” “Co-operation,” and “Discontinuity”; Tillich identified three positions: negation, tolerance, and dialectical union of acceptance and rejection; and, Lesslie Newbigin on his part, lists six views held by Christians concerning other faiths.¹¹ Even H. Richard Niebuhr’s classic five-fold typology, which focuses primarily on Christian attitudes towards society and culture, has undertones of some of the same themes found in the debate on Christianity and other religions.¹²

The passage of time does not seem to have yielded a final or definitive answer to the theological problem of religious diversity. In many ways modern developments, especially the communication technologies that have drawn people of different cultures and religions into ever closer proximity, have intensified and diffused the debate into areas of experience beyond the confines of religion and theology. In this regard Tillich’s comment on this issue, namely that “it is almost impossible to discover a consistent line of thought about this problem,”¹³ may be as true of the contemporary situation as it was

piety whose consciousness of being absolutely dependent fails to achieve unity because it is hindered by “diverse affections of sensible self-consciousness.” Monotheism is a form of higher self-consciousness in which, by allowing the world to act upon us, we become conscious of ourselves as absolutely dependent, *The Christian Faith*, §4, §7 and §8.

¹¹ E. C. Dewick, *The Gospel and Other Faiths* (London: Canterbury Press, 1948), 92-102. Tillich, *Christianity and the Encounter of the World Religions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963); Lesslie Newbigin, “The Gospel Among Other Religions,” in *Faith Meets Faith*, Missions Trends 5, ed. Gerald H. Anderson and Thomas F. Stransky (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), 5-8; also *The Gospel in A Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), especially chapters 2, 13, and 14.

¹² Niebuhr’s fivefold typology includes Christ against culture, Christ of culture, Christ above culture, Christ and culture in paradox, and Christ the transformer of culture, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper, 1951).

¹³ Paul Tillich, *Christianity and the Encounter of the World Religions*, 30. As George A. Lindbeck remarks ten years later, not even the weight of time honored “tradition,” and commitment to the “exegesis [of Scripture] in the strict sense,” have been sufficient to “settle” or guarantee consensus on this question,

almost fifty years ago when he made it. Although an answer that satisfies everyone is still a faraway cry, a generally accepted way of thinking about the relationship of Christianity to other religions is the threefold typology—exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism—popularized by Alan Race in his influential book *Christians and Religious Pluralism*.¹⁴ Most of the contemporary statements on this issue either assume the threefold typology, or are based on it, or are otherwise a variation on it.¹⁵ John Sanders’ “restrictivism” (exclusivism), “wider hope” (inclusivism), and “universalism” (a cousin of pluralism) clearly mirror Race.¹⁶ Ronald Nash adopts Race’s typology wholesale.¹⁷ A volume edited by Timothy Phillips and Dennis Okholm adds a variation on it, identifying not three but four types.¹⁸ Gabriel Fackre’s typology—inclusivism, divine perseverance, and restrictivism also parallels Race’s.¹⁹ Millard J. Erickson’s treatment is another variation

“*Fides ex auditu* and the Salvation of Non-Christians: Contemporary Catholic Positions,” in *The Gospel and the Ambiguity of the Church*, The Gospel Encounters History Series, ed. Vilmos Vajta (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), 110, 111.

¹⁴ Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983).

¹⁵ One notable exception is Gabriel Fackre’s seven-fold typology – “parallel pluralism,” “synthetic pluralism,” “degree pluralism,” “centripetal singularity,” “centrifugal singularity,” “imperial singularity,” and “universal particularity.” Although the article in which Fackre proposed his typology came out in the same year as Race’s book, it shows no evidence that he was aware of or influenced by Race’s typology. Clearly, his categories are more descriptive, less synthetic, and do not have the conciseness that makes Race’s typology so appealing. See his “The Scandals of Particularity and Universality,” in *Mid-Stream* 22, 1 (January 1983): 32-52.

¹⁶ John Sanders, *No Other Name: An Investigation into the Destiny of the Unevangelized* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992).

¹⁷ Ronald H. Nash, *Is Jesus the Only Savior* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994).

¹⁸ The pluralism of John Hick, the inclusivism of Clark Pinnock, the ‘post-enlightenment particularism’ of Alister McGrath, and the ‘evidentialist particularism’ of Douglas Geivett and W. G. Phillips. See Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm ed., *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).

¹⁹ Gabriel Fackre, Ronald H. Nash and John Sanders, *What about Those Who Have Never Heard: Three Views on The Destiny of the Unevangelized* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1995).

that adds (to Race's threefold typology) "universalism" as a distinct type.²⁰ Paul Knitter, on the other hand, is worth noting because although he is obviously conversant with Race's typology, his own version is not dependent on it. Rather than adopt a synthetic framework like Race, Knitter uses ecclesiastical traditions as the frameworks for identifying what he calls "models" of Christian approaches to other religions. The models he identifies include: the conservative evangelical model, the mainline Protestant model, the Catholic model, and the theocentric model.²¹

The widespread use of the threefold typology makes it an apt foil for unpacking the state of the question on this matter. In general, there are two fundamental motifs around which the debate on the relationship of Christianity to other religions has been carried out—the *universality motif*, commonly referred to as general revelation, and the *particularity motif*, otherwise referred to as special revelation. The *universality motif* concerns the reality of divine revelation or activity in creation and in human experience. The *particularity motif* concerns the gospel of Jesus Christ in whom God's means of salvation have been revealed. Accounts of the relationship between Christianity and non-Christian religious traditions are either, exclusivist, inclusivist, or pluralist depending on the interpretation or understanding of the significance and relationship between these two motifs. As will soon be clear, there are various factors which affect or determine the way theologians interpret these motifs, among them, scripture, the tradition of the church, the quest for ecumenism, questions deriving from the wider cultural context, and the relative

²⁰ Millard J. Erickson, *How Shall They Be Saved: The Destiny of Those Who Do Not Hear of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House), 1996.

²¹ Paul Knitter, *No Other Name: A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes toward the World Religions* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1985). Knitter's approach also helps one to see that tendencies towards the different types—exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism—may be found in all ecclesiastical traditions.

weight placed on specific doctrinal considerations like, for instance, the uniqueness and finality of Christ.

A. Exclusivism

The standard exclusivist position is that only those who come to knowledge of God through Christ (the *particularity motif*) receive salvation. On this view, receiving or participating in salvation, which “comes only through faith engendered by the hearing of the gospel,”²² is the ultimate proof of true knowledge of God. Conversely, those who have not heard of Christ do not have the opportunity to receive the true knowledge of God that leads to salvation. On this view, then, non-Christian religions are of little or no value at all since they do not have the crucial element—salvation—which the gospel of Christ alone provides. Generally speaking, exclusivism has scriptural support both in Old and New Testaments. The exclusivity of Yahweh, the God of Israel, as both Lord and God beside whom there is no other is a basic theme of the Old Testament (Deut. 6:4; 9:3; 20:4; 1King 8:60; Isa. 45:5, 14, 18, 22; 46:9; Dan. 3:29; Joel 2:27). The New Testament also makes exclusivist claims regarding salvation and knowledge of God (Mat. 11:27; Luke 10:22; John 1:18; John 6: 44, 65; 14:6; Acts 4:12; 1Cor. 8:4-6). The church has on occasion, both in its distant and more recent history, articulated dogmatically exclusivist positions. According to the Council of Florence (ca. 1438-45) all those who are not members of the Catholic Church, including “Jews and heretics and schismatics,” have the

²² Amos Yong, *Beyond the Impasse: Toward a Pneumatological Theology of Religions* (Grand Rapids; Carlisle, U.K: Baker; Paternoster, 2003), 25.

same fate as the “devil and his angels.”²³ The Congress on World Mission held in Chicago in 1960 expressed the view that all those who had not had the opportunity to hear and respond to the gospel had “passed into [an] eternity...of hell fire.”²⁴

In looking at the modern debate it is ironic that although Karl Barth himself lived and wrote before this typology came into vogue, his views on other religions have come to be regarded as the paradigmatic expression of the exclusivist position.²⁵ In truth, it is not entirely clear that Barth’s views fit well at all in the categories used in this debate. For one thing Barth did not think of Christianity as just one *religion* among others. He drew a sharp dichotomy between *religion* and *faith* or revelation. According to Barth, true faith is one based on God’s self-revelation. Since God is truly revealed only in Christ, Christianity is the only true *faith*—what he calls the “the religion of revelation.” All other religions are, *ipso facto*, counterfeit human attempts to lay claim on what only God can do—justification and reconciliation.²⁶ Hendrik Kraemer and G. C. Berkouwer are other

²³ See *Council of Florence* in Heinrich Denzinger, *The Sources of Catholic Dogma*, trans. Roy J. Deferrari from the thirtieth edition of Henry Denzinger’s *Enchiridion Symbolorum* (St. Louis: Herder, 1957), 230 [# 714].

²⁴ Congress on World Missions, *Facing the Unfinished Task: Messages Delivered at the Congress on World Missions*, Sponsored by Interdenominational Foreign Missions Association of North America, Compiled by J. O. Percy, ed. Mary Bennett (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1961), 9.

²⁵ According to Alan Race, “the most extreme form of the exclusivist theory has been stated by Karl Barth in his *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. 1/2,” *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions*, 11.

²⁶ The use to which Barth’s views are put in the threefold typology debate make an extended comment on his thought necessary. The parts of Barth’s considerable corpus which relate to revelation and religion can be found in *Church Dogmatics*, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956-75), I/1, 295-333; I/2, 280-325; II/1, 63-254. The salient aspects of Barth’s thought are contained in his views on revelation and religion which can be summarized in two broad statements:

First, for Barth both the *means* and the *purpose* of revelation are designed or meant to address the human condition which is marked by two impossible predicaments. On the one hand, there is an insurmountable ontological chasm between God and creation since there is no analogy of being between God and humanity. On the other, due to sin human beings have no capacity to know God or to fathom their own condition. Only God himself can surmount the ontological gap and overcome human incapacity to

theologians whose views on other religions are seen as following closely in the path marked by Barth. For Kraemer, it is “not feasible” to aver that God has revealed Himself in non-Christian religions, which he regarded as mere “human achievements” rather than as the product of a human encounter with divine presence.²⁷ G. C. Berkouwer, on his part, saw “no common ground” but rather an “antithesis” between what he called “heathen religiousness and the Gospel.”²⁸ Beyond these, allegedly paradigmatic, exponents of the exclusivist position, exclusivism has different nuances depending on the church, theological, and even cultural tradition in which it is expressed.

enable fellowship between God and humanity. In other words God has to be, both the ontological source and the epistemological means of the revelation of God, hence Barth’s insistence that “God reveals Himself... *through Himself*” (*Dogmatics*, I/1, 295-6, 235). Since in Barth’s view the *means* of revelation, God, entail the *purpose* of revelation, reconciliation and salvation of humanity, it follows from this that nowhere else, but in Christ, is God truly or fully revealed. What other media – creation as a whole, the *imago Dei*, nature, providence, and natural law – offer are merely “tokens” of revelation not the real thing. Only in Christ are the *means* and *purpose* of revelation perfectly coincident, hence Barth’s claim that “revelation is what took place and still takes place in Jesus Christ.” See “Revelation,” in *Revelation*, ed. John Baillie and Hugh Martin (New York: Macmillan, 1937), 41-81, 44; *Natural Theology*, translated by Peter Fraenkel with an introduction by John Baillie (London: The Centenary Press, 1946).

Second, revelation (which Barth understood to mean revelation in Christ) and religion bear no relationship to each other either “materially or formally.” For him, revelation is rooted in divine initiative, while religion is rooted in human understanding or natural theology. Their utter difference is also illustrated or demonstrated by the fruit they bear. The former, revelation in Christ, produces “the religion of revelation,” that is Christianity, which is the product of faith in God’s gracious action. The latter, the “revelation of religion,” produces a human counterfeit, a “false and hypocritical religion and irreligiosity,” which is the fruit of unbelief and human predilection to justify themselves before God on their own merit (*Dogmatics* I/2, 284-285, 297-325).

²⁷ Hendrik Kraemer, *Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, with a foreword by the late Archbishop of Canterbury (London: Edinburgh House Press, 1938; reprint, 1947), *passim*, 110-113, 122-126, and 131-141. Although Kraemer attempts to nuance his position in his later writings—see his “Continuity or Discontinuity,” in *The Authority of the Faith*, Published for the International Missionary Council, ed. William Paton (London: Oxford University Press, 1939), 1-23; *Religion and the Christian Faith* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1957); *Why Christianity of All Religions*, trans. Hubert Hoskins (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962)—some argue that his position remains fundamentally the same. For earlier critiques of Kraemer’s position see Marshall Horton, “Between Hocking and Kraemer,” in *The Authority of The Faith*, 144-145. For a more recent critique which includes an assessment of previous critiques see Richard J. Plantinga, “Missionary Thinking about Religious Plurality at Tambaram 1938: Hendrik Kraemer and his Critics,” in *The Changing Face of Christianity: Africa, the West and the World*, ed. Lamin Sanneh and Joel A. Carpenter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 159-190, 176.

²⁸ G. C. Berkouwer, *General Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 144-147.

The exclusivism of some mainline Protestant theologians is nuanced by missiological and ecumenical concerns relative to other religions and cultures. Willem Adolf Visser 't Hooft presents an ecumenically accented exclusivism based on what he calls a “Christocentric universalism,” namely, the idea that the “One [Christ died] for all Once for all.”²⁹ J. N. D. Anderson’s earlier views reveal an uneasy relation between exclusivism and a genuine appreciation of non-Christian religious traditions.³⁰ According to him, although virtuous practices in non-Christian religions can “rebuke, instruct and inspire the Christian,” those practices cannot, in themselves, be considered “forerunners or harbingers of the full revelation in Christ.” For, although the virtue they display “has its origin in God,” yet for him, non-Christian religions are “inherently hostile” to Christian faith.³¹ For him the difference between Christianity and non-Christian religions is categorical—for while Christianity is “not man-made but God-revealed and therefore universally valid,” non-Christian religions are “Satanic substitutes.”³²

J. H. Bavinck has a slightly different take on other religions. For him non-Christian religions or—pace the expression—“heathenism” and “paganism,” as he repeatedly calls them, show no signs of a “thirst” or a genuine “longing for Christ” which

²⁹ Willem Adolf Visser 't Hooft, *No Other Name: The Choice Between Syncretism and Christian Universalism* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963), 83-125, especially 95ff. Also see his “Pluralism - Temptation or Opportunity,” in *Ecumenical Review* 18, 2 (April 1966): 129-149.

³⁰ The earlier Anderson is reflected in the “Epilogue” he wrote to a collection of essays he edited published in *The World's Religions* (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1950), 190-96. Anderson’s views moderate significantly overtime as seen through his *Christianity and Comparative Religion* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press 1970), and the reprint of it *Christianity and World Religions: The Challenge of Pluralism* (Leicester England, Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1984). The change is such that he is now classified mostly as an inclusivist. See, Millard J. Erickson, *How Shall They Be Saved: The Destiny of Those Who do Not Hear of Jesus*, 123-127.

³¹ Anderson, “Epilogue,” *The World's Religions*, 190-191.

³² Anderson, “Epilogue,” *The World's Religions*, 192.

would have been evidence of a *praeparatio evangelica*.³³ The Christian approach to other religions should therefore be an elenctical one aimed at “unmasking” the sinful roots of “heathendom” in order to show that, general revelation and common grace notwithstanding, humanity in non-Christian religions is “always secretly busy escaping from God.”³⁴ For Johannes Verkuyl, the reference point for a theological approach to non-Christian religions is God’s revelation in Christ which, according to him, is “unique, incomparable, irreplaceable, and decisive for all ages and peoples.”³⁵ This reference point, however, is within the Trinitarian understanding of the Redeemer as the Son of the “Father,” and of the Holy Spirit as the “Spirit of the Father and Son” who is also at work in the whole of creation and in history of religions as well.³⁶

Arguably the most outspoken contemporary exponents of exclusivism in the Western Christian tradition—especially North America—are to be found in that coalition of broadly evangelical cum fundamentalist and conservative Protestant traditions³⁷ associated with the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) which emerged in 1940s

³³ Johan H. Bavinck, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions*, trans. Hugh Freeman (Grand Rapids: Baker 1960), 63-65.

³⁴ Johan H. Bavinck, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions*, 222-229.

³⁵ Johannes Verkuyl, *Contemporary Missiology: An Introduction*, trans. and ed. Dale Cooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 358.

³⁶ Thus Verkuyl asks: “Should not one be open to the God’s creational revelation in the history of religions?” Pointing to bible characters like Melchizedek, Jethro, and Abimelech; and also to non-Christian religious phenomena like the Vedas, and persons like Buddha receiving the Bodhi, and Mohammed meditating in the grotto, Verkuyl concludes that “I believe that the bible compels us to admit that God is involved and puts himself in touch with human beings,” *Contemporary Missiology: An Introduction*, 356, 354-361.

³⁷ Hence Veli-Matti Kätkäinen’s comment to effect that that for many “evangelicalism is probably synonymous with particularism [exclusivism],” in his “Evangelical Theology and the Religions,” in *Cambridge Companion to Evangelical Theology*, ed. Timothy Larsen and Daniel J. Treier (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 201-202.

under the leadership of well known leaders like Harold Ockenga, Carl F. H. Henry, and Billy Graham. For ease, this group will be referred to either as evangelicals or conservative evangelical Protestants. This coalition, which has genetic and historical relations to similar movements in the UK and Europe,³⁸ espouses a theology of religions based on three criteria: the authority of scripture as the source of true knowledge of God; the uniqueness of Christ as God's final and decisive self-revelation, and the necessity of conversion as the means by which salvation and true knowledge of God are appropriated.³⁹ There is little doubt that on these criteria, the prospects of non-Christian religions appear to be dismal indeed. Thus for a classic protagonist of the conservative evangelicalism like Harold Lindsell, there are "no real values" in non-Christian religions

³⁸ George Marsden's *Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) is an apt introduction to the historical evolution and theological trends leading up to the emergence of conservative evangelical Protestantism in North America. Although conservative evangelical Protestantism in North America is distinct from its counterpart in the United Kingdom (UK) and the rest of Europe, there are, nevertheless, family resemblances between them due to organic and historical connections. David W. Bebbington's influential study of evangelicals in UK identified four marks—conversionism, activism, Biblicism, and crucicentrism—which could just as well have been used to describe evangelicals in the North America. It is interesting to note, as Bebbington points out, that at least three of these marks—conversionism, Biblicism, and crucicentrism—have been present or at least adumbrated in other Protestant traditions, specifically in Puritanism and Methodism, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 1-17, 35. Also see his "Revival and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century England," in *Modern Christian Revivals*, ed. Edith L Blumhofer and Randall Herbert Balmer (Urbana, Ill: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 17-41. Bebbington's more recent *The Dominance of Evangelicalism: The Age of Spurgeon and Moody, A History of Evangelicalism* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2005) confirms the organic and historical links between evangelical Protestantism in North America and the UK. Timothy Larsen's recent five-fold classification of Evangelicals, dubbed "the Larsen Pentagon," presupposes and, in some ways, expands upon "the Bebbington Quadrilateral." See his "Defining and Locating Evangelicalism," in *Cambridge Companion to Evangelical Theology*, ed. Timothy Larsen and Daniel J. Treier (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1-14.

³⁹ These criteria are spelled out rather succinctly by Ronald Nash at the beginning of his book, *Is Jesus the Only Savior* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 11, 11-25. Although Nash lists only the second and third explicitly—"Jesus Christ is the *only* Saviour" and "explicit faith in Jesus Christ is necessary for salvation—it is clear from his discussion on the page following that that these two presuppose and are anchored in scripture.

because they are not based on a “sufficient revelation of God.”⁴⁰ For Bruce Demarest, there might be “glimpses of truth” in non-Christian religions but they are “essentially false.”⁴¹ For Mark Heim, since the claims of the gospel are “objectively true” the Christian has no choice but to affirm and draw conclusions from those truths. One such conclusion is that “there is not one identical building block ‘God’” beneath the Christianity and other religions. The God in whom Christians believe “is not quite the same as that of the Jew or Muslim.”⁴² According to David Wells, whatever good there is in non-Christian or “pagan” religions is “an affront to God” because it brings people “not in touch with the triune God....revealed in nature....but with demons.”⁴³ For Ronald Nash, since the New Testament position concerning other religions is clearly exclusivist, any view to the contrary is false.⁴⁴ All this goes to show that although conservative evangelicalism is *formally* polite and respectful of non-Christian religions, some of the declarations made either in official fora and by some of its leading exponents are unambiguously negative regarding value and significance of non-Christian religions.

⁴⁰ As far as Lindsell is concerned any person who “is not in Christ” cannot claim to “be in God either,” *An Evangelical Theology of Missions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970), 112-113.

⁴¹ Bruce A. Demarest, *General Revelation: Historical Views and Contemporary Issues* (Zondervan, 1982), 259.

⁴² Mark S. Heim, *Is Christ the Only Way: Christian Faith in a Pluralistic World* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1985). Also see his “Interfaith Relations and the Dialogue of Human Need,” in *Public Theology for a Global Society* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2010), 139-157; *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995; “Salvation: A More Pluralistic Hypothesis,” in *Modern Theology* 10, no. 4 (October 1, 1994): 341-360.

⁴³ David F. Wells, *God the Evangelist: How the Holy Spirit Works to Bring Men and Women to Faith* (Grand Rapids; Exeter, England: Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1987), 22, 16-27.

⁴⁴ According to Nash, given that the “tenets” of Christian are true, it follows that “any religious beliefs that are logically incompatible with those tenets are false.” Not unpredictably he is in basic agreement with Demarest that non-Christian religions are “essentially false,” *Is Jesus the Only Savior*, 11, 159; *The Gospel and the Greeks: Did the New Testament Borrow from Pagan Thought?* (Richardson, Texas: Probe Books, 1992); *The Word of God and the Mind of Man* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1992).

Exclusivism, however, is far from a monolithic or static position. There are signs of movement, development, and even change from within. As a group, one discerns a shift that is based on a reassessment of the threat non-Christian religions pose for Christianity. Attitudes towards non-Christian traditions have gradually changed from the kind fear—of syncretism, and of liberal ecumenism—that led conservative evangelicals to shun dialogue, to a more positive appreciation of the necessity of dialogue and engagement.⁴⁵ At the individual level, some theologians have undergone a dramatic change of heart and position. Hick went from being a conservative evangelical proponent of exclusivism to the leading exponent of pluralism.⁴⁶ Clark Pinnock and John Sanders, as will be evident in due course, are two prominent conservative evangelicals who have gradually shifted from an exclusivist to an inclusivist position.

An equally dramatic and interesting trend of change is observable within the Pentecostal and Charismatic strands of conservative evangelical Protestantism. Although Pentecostals and Charismatics have traditionally been on the conservative end of the

⁴⁵ There has been a gradual easing of attitudes towards non-Christian religions among evangelicals. The 1966 “Wheaton Declaration” sought to sound an alarm and to define boundaries against perceived syncretistic and universalistic assumptions and practices in mission, *The Church’s Worldwide Mission: An Analysis of the Current State of Evangelical Missions and a Strategy for Future Action*, ed. Harold Lindsell (Waco: Word Books, 1966), 215 -237. The 1970 “Frankfurt declaration” was a terse statement reaffirming the Bible as the criterion for Christian engagement of other religions directed against perceived liberal ecumenism, *Christianity Today* 14, 19 (June 19 1970): 3-6. The “Lausanne Covenant” 1974, agreed upon at the International Congress on World Evangelization held July 16-25 at Lausanne, Switzerland, reaffirmed the uniqueness and finality of Christ but also recognized the importance of dialogue and cultural engagement, in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice: International Congress on World Evangelization, Lausanne, Switzerland: Official Reference Volume*, ed. J. D. Douglas (Minneapolis: World Wide Publishers, 1975), 3-9. Also, in *Evangelization, Mission Trends*, no. 2, ed. Gerald H. Anderson and Thomas F. Stransky (New York: Paulist Press, 1975), 239-248. The 1992 “WEF Manila Declaration” affirmed that “salvation stems solely from...Jesus Christ” but also recognized that “the true aspects of the world’s religions stem from God’s creative power or from the work of the Holy Spirit,” in *The Unique Christ in Our Pluralistic World*, ed. Bruce J. Nicholls (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 14-27, especially 15 and 16.

⁴⁶ An examination and critique of Hick’s radical shift takes up the first part of Nash’s book, *Is Jesus the Only Savior*, 29-100.

spectrum of the evangelical response to non-Christian religions, their theologies are characterized by a strong pneumatological emphasis. Perhaps it was to be expected, as Pinnock suggested, that because of their openness to religious experience” Pentecostals and Charismatics would in time “develop a Spirit-oriented theology of mission and world religions.”⁴⁷ It would appear that the successful worldwide expansion which has brought Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity into closer interaction with different cultures and religions has both hastened and provided the perfect occasion to develop a Pentecostal theology of religions. Although their approach retains the usual evangelical emphases on scripture, Christ, and conversion, there is a much more pronounced pneumatological understanding of divine activity in the gospel, in the world, and in other religions. Ironically it is precisely this pneumatological focus which tends to push the Pentecostal-Charismatic contribution to this debate beyond the domain of exclusivism and into the domain of inclusivism. The two leading flag bearers of a pneumatologically oriented evangelical theology of religions are Amos Yong and Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen.⁴⁸

B. Inclusivism

The traditional inclusivist position holds to two affirmations. On the one hand, in line with the *universality motif*, that there is genuine encounter with and knowledge of

⁴⁷ Pinnock himself proposes a pneumatologically oriented theology of religions that highlights not only the Father and Son, but the work and role of the Spirit in salvation, especially the “cosmic range” of Spirit by which he is able to “foster transforming friendship with God anywhere and everywhere,” *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 274, 49, 186-187.

⁴⁸ Amos Yong, *Beyond the Impasse: Toward a Pneumatological Theology of Religions; Discerning the Spirit(s): A Pentecostal-Charismatic Contribution to Christian Theology of Religions* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000); and, Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Introduction to the Theology of Religions: Biblical, Historical, and Contemporary Perspectives* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003); “Toward a Pneumatological Theology of Religions: A Pentecostal-Charismatic Inquiry.” *International Review of Mission* 91, no. 361 (April 1, 2002): 187-198.

God in and through his activity and presence in creation. On the other, in line with the *particularity motif*, that redemption is through Christ alone. This understanding gives the initial impression that proponents of exclusivism and inclusivism might be in *full* agreement on the *universality motif*. It also seems to suggest that they might be in *general* agreement on the *particularity motif*. On a closer look, however, there are some differences between them on the meaning or construal of the *universality motif* especially at it relates to the *particularity motif*. There are two distinct ways in which this motif is construed. One construal, favored by some Roman Catholic theologians, holds that although Christ is the only savior, the efficacy of his saving work is available and accessible beyond the boundaries of the church and of explicit Christian faith. This construal essentially suggests that the benefits of the *particularity motif* are, in some way, accessible through the *universality motif*. Exponents of this version of inclusivism include Karl Rahner,⁴⁹ Hans Kung,⁵⁰ and Heinz Robert Schlette.⁵¹

The other construal of inclusivism, favored by some theologians from Protestant traditions, holds that the religious knowledge and experience of God in non-Christian religions is, in some sense, connected to Christian faith. This connection may be either one of *fulfillment*, where Christian faith fulfills the non-Christian religion, or, it may be

⁴⁹ Karl Rahner, "Anonymous Christianity and the Missionary Task of the Church," in *IDOC Internazionale* 1 (April 4 1970): 70-96; *Theological Investigations*, vol. 5, *Later Writings*, trans. by Karl-H. Kruger (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1966); vol. 6, *Concerning Vatican Council II*, trans. by Karl-H. Kruger and Boniface Kruger (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1966).

⁵⁰ Hans Küng, *On Being a Christian*, translated by Edward Quinn (Garden City: Doubleday, 1976), A 3, 1-4, 89-112; *The Church*, translated from the German by Ray and Rosaleen Ockenden (London: Burns & Oates, 1967), D II 2, or pp. 313-319; "The World Religions in God's Plan of Salvation," in *Christian Revelation and World Religions*, edited and introduced by Joseph Neuner (London: Burns & Oates, 1967), 25-66.

⁵¹ Heinz Robert Schlette, *Towards a Theology of Religions*, translated by W. J. O'Hara (New York: Herder and Herder, 1966).

preparatory, where some forms of religious experience in a non-Christian religion may prepare one to receive Christian faith. Among the exponents of this version of inclusivism are mainline Protestant theologians including some from Reformed traditions like Emil Brunner,⁵² John Nichol Farquhar,⁵³ Lesslie Newbigin,⁵⁴ and Stephen Neill;⁵⁵ those from Lutheran traditions include Paul Tillich,⁵⁶ Wolfhart Pannenberg,⁵⁷ and Carl Braaten.⁵⁸ Other theologians, not consistently mentioned in relation to this discussion, but

⁵² Emil Brunner *Revelation and Reason: The Christian Doctrine of Faith and Knowledge* (Zurich: Westminster Press, 1941); *God and Man: Four Essays on the Nature of Personality*, translated with an introduction by David Cairns (London: Student Christian Movement Press, 1936).

⁵³ J. N. Farquhar, *The Crown of Hinduism* (London: Oxford University Press 1913).

⁵⁴ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in A Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989); "The Gospel among Other Religions," in *Faith Meets Faith*, Missions Trends 5, ed. Gerald H. Anderson and Thomas F. Stransky (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), 3-19; "The Basis, Purpose and Manner of Inter-Faith Dialogue," in *Interreligious Dialogue: Facing the Next Frontier*, edited by Richard W. Rousseau (Scranton: Ridge Row Press, 1981), 13-31; "The Centrality of Jesus for History," in *Incarnation and Myth: The Debate Continued*, edited by Michael D. Goulder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 197-210; *The Open Secret: Sketches for a Missionary Theology* (London: SPCK, 1978); *The Finality of Christ* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1969).

⁵⁵ Stephen C. Neill, *Christian Faith and Other Faiths: The Christian Dialogue With Other Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961).

⁵⁶ Paul Tillich, "Religion as the Depth Dimension in Culture," in *Ways of Understanding Religion*, edited by Walter H. Capps (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 49-53; *What Is Religion?* edited and with an introduction by James Luther Adams (New York: Harper and Row, 1969); *Revelation as History*, trans. by David Granskou (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1968); *The Future of Religions* edited by Jerald C. Brauer (New York: Harper & Row, 1966); *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953-64); *Christianity and the Encounter of the World Religions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963); "Missions and World History," in *The Theology of the Christian Mission*, edited Gerald H. Anderson (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961); 281-289.

⁵⁷ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Theology and the Philosophy of Science* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976); "Nature of a Theological Statement," in *Zygon* 7, 1 (March 1972): 6-19; *Basic Questions in Theology*, Vol. I (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970-1971); "Dogmatic Theses on the Doctrine of Revelation," in *Revelation as History*, translated by David Granskou (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1968), 125-158; "The Revelation of God in Jesus of Nazareth," in *Theology as History*, New Frontiers in Theology, vol. 3, edited by James M. Robinson and John Cobb, Jr. (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1967), 101-133; *Jesus: God and Man* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964).

⁵⁸ Carl E. Braaten, *No Other Gospel: Christianity Among the World's Religions* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992); "The Uniqueness and Universality of Jesus Christ," in *Faith Meets Faith*, Mission Trends, no. 5, edited Gerald H. Anderson and Thomas F. Stransky (New York: Paulist Press, 1981)

whose views place them in the inclusivism camp, include missionary and orientalist Sir Norman Anderson,⁵⁹ and Baptist theologian Augustus Hopkins Strong.⁶⁰ There are also somewhat atypical exponents of inclusivism from among conservative evangelical Protestants like Clark Pinnock,⁶¹ and John Sanders.⁶²

This is also the right place to return to those exponents of the Pentecostal-Charismatic traditions mentioned earlier—Yong and Kärkkäinen—whose pneumatological understanding of other religions tends to push their otherwise traditionally exclusivist position into the inclusivist camp.⁶³ Yong, Kärkkäinen and others wish to avoid the impasse precipitated by the exclusivist emphasis on the particularity motif (Christocentric paradigm) by approaching other religions from the standpoint of the “the mission of the Holy Spirit into the world relative to, yet distinct from that of the

69-89; *The Flaming Center: A Theology of the Christian Mission* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977); *The Future of God: The Revolutionary Dynamics of Hope* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969).

⁵⁹ Norman Anderson, *Christianity and World Religions: The Challenge of Pluralism* (InterVarsity Press, 1984).

⁶⁰ Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology, A Compendium and Commonplace-Book Designed for the Use of Theological Students*, 3 volumes (Philadelphia: Griffith & Rowland Press, 1907-1909).

⁶¹ Clark H. Pinnock, *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit; A Wideness in God's Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992); “Acts 4:12 – No Other Name under Heaven,” in *Through No Fault of their Own: The Fate of Those Who Have Never Heard*, edited by William V. Crockett and James G. Sigountos (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991), 107-115; “Toward an Evangelical Theology of Religions,” in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 33, 3 (Summer 1990): 359-368; “The Finality of Christ in A World of Religions,” in *Christian Faith and Practice in the Modern World: Theology from an Evangelical Point of View*, ed. Mark A. Noll and David F. Wells (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 152-168.

⁶² John Sanders, *No Other Name: An Investigation into the Destiny of the Unevangelized*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992).

⁶³ Both claim to be proposing a pneumatological theology of religions that is also fully Trinitarian.

Son.”⁶⁴ This approach, which is initially broached by Pinnock,⁶⁵ is based on a non-*Filioque* distinction made between the economy of the Son and the economy of the Spirit that is typical of the Eastern Orthodox Tradition.⁶⁶ The reason they opt for this distinction is that it enables them to “speak of the presence and activity of the Spirit [in other religions] in a way this is not strictly Christological.”⁶⁷ It allows them to view other religions as “*providentially sustained by the Spirit of God for divine purposes.*”⁶⁸

C. Pluralism

From the standpoint of pluralism, the distinction made between the *universality motif* and the *particularity motif* is irrelevant and unnecessary. The universal salvific presence of God is assumed to be already immanently available and accessible in human experience apart from the person of Jesus Christ. Christ is no more than a remarkable

⁶⁴ Amos Yong, *Beyond the Impasse: Toward a Pneumatological Theology of Religions; Discerning the Spirit(s): A Pentecostal-Charismatic Contribution to Christian Theology of Religions* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000); and, *Trinity and religious pluralism: the doctrine of the Trinity in Christian Theology of Religions* (Aldershot, UK; Burlington, Vt: Ashgate, 2004), 164-184; “Toward a Pneumatological Theology of Religions: A Pentecostal-Charismatic Inquiry.” *International Review of Mission* 91, no. 361 (April 1, 2002): 187-198.

⁶⁵ Clark H. Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions*, 77-110; “Acts 4:12 – No Other Name under Heaven,” 107-115; “Toward an Evangelical Theology of Religions,” 359-368.

⁶⁶ An advocate of an approach to other religions—based on this distinction—is George Khodr, Metropolitan of the Mount Lebanon Diocese of the Greek-Orthodox Patriarchate of Beirut. See his “Christianity in a Pluralistic World—The Economy of the Spirit,” in *Ecumenical Review* 23, no. 2 (April 1, 1971): 118-128. Yong and others find some justification and adumbration for their own use of this Eastern distinction in the patristic metaphor of the Word and Spirit as “the two hands of the Father” used by Irenaeus in *Against Heresies* 4, preface, 4. See *Beyond the Impasse*, 43-44 Clark H. Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions*, 78; *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit*, 57-64.

⁶⁷ Yong, *Discerning the Spirit(s)*, 122.

⁶⁸ Yong, *Beyond the Impasse*, 46; Pinnock, “Acts 4:12 – No Other Name under Heaven,” 96. The emphasis is in the original.

example of a human being who was “extraordinarily open to God’s influence.”⁶⁹ It follows from this that there are any number of equally valid means of salvation. The various religious traditions in the world are merely different manifestations of this polymorphic reality. Ernst Troeltsch⁷⁰ and Arnold Toynbee⁷¹ are considered to be the godfathers of this position. Others following in this tradition include Wilfred Cantwell Smith, and John A. T. Robinson.⁷² But, by far the leading contemporary exponents of this

⁶⁹ John Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate: Christology in a Pluralistic Age* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 12. For Hick the exclusive claims made of Christ are entirely metaphorical. Thus he says, “That Jesus was God the Son incarnate is not literally true....it is a mythical concept.” Then he adds “For to say without explanation that the historical Jesus of Nazareth was also God is devoid of meaning as to say that this circle drawn with a pencil on a paper is also a square,” in *The Myth of God Incarnate*, 178.

⁷⁰ Troeltsch’s theology of religions was shaped by what he saw to be a clash between historical facts and consciousness on the one hand, and Christian truth claims on the other. He saw the former as constantly changing, and therefore relative, and the latter, as making claims that are assumed to be unchanging truths and values. In his first attempt to resolve this – *The Absoluteness of Christianity and the History of Religions*, Research in Theology Series (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1971)—he argued that although Christianity is a “purely historical phenomenon” it is nevertheless the absolute religion (the truth of which is guaranteed by miracles) in which the absolute spirit is realizing itself, and toward which all other religions are tending. He later came to disavow this view in a favor of a radical individuality of all religions as conditioned by their respective cultures. Religions, he claimed, are “always-new and always-peculiar individualizations” of “Divine reason” or “Divine Life.” Christianity in this regard is the religion that has grown out of and is best adapted to European culture and civilization and therefore is valid only for Europeans. See “Christianity among World Religions,” published posthumously in *Christian Thought: Its History and Application*, Being part of Lectures written for delivery in England during March of 1923, translated into English by various hands and edited with an introduction and index by F von Hügel (London: London University Press, 1923), 3-35. Other relevant publications of Troeltsch’s work include, *The Christian Faith*, edited Gertrud Le Fort, translated by Garrett E. Paul, with a foreword by Marta Troeltsch (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1991); and *Writings on Theology and Religions*, translated and edited by Robert Morgan and Michael Pye (London Duckworth 1977).

⁷¹ For Toynbee all religions are from God, they each contribute a partial facet of God’s truth. They all exhibit a fundamental alignment “with the good against evil” and a quest for “harmony with [the] spiritual present in the Universe.” They are all “light radiating from the same source,” *Christianity Among the Religions of the World* (New York: Scribner’s, 1957), passim, 98-107. Also see his *An Historian’s Approach to Religion*, Based on Gifford lectures delivered at the University of Edinburgh in the years 1952 and 1953 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), passim 176-178, 203-207, 257-260.

⁷² Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Towards a World Theology: Faith and the Comparative History of Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981); *Questions of Religious Truth*. (New York: Scribner, 1967); *The Meaning and End of Religion; A New Approach to the Religious Traditions of Mankind* (New York: New American Library, 1964); John A. T. Robinson, *In the End, God: A Study of the Christian Doctrine of the Last Things*, Theology for Modern Men, 4 (London: James Clarke, 1950; reprint, New

position are Paul Knitter⁷³ and Raimundo Panikkar⁷⁴ on the Roman Catholic side, and John Hick on the Protestant side.⁷⁵

Hick is the leading contemporary exponent of pluralism, in large measure, because he has expended great effort to clarify and popularize the pluralistic hypothesis (originally advanced by Troeltsch) on which it is based. The pluralistic hypothesis has three controlling assumption or claims. The first is *historical consciousness*, the view that human experience is part of a correlative matrix of history. There is therefore nothing that can be absolutely unique in human experience. The second is divine *ineffability*, the notion that the definitive theological principle for religion is that God or the divine transcends human experience and comprehension absolutely. This means that no one can claim privileged access to God, or revelation from God. The third is the limits of *human knowing*, the view that human epistemological powers and possibilities are tied to and limited by reason and empirical experience. This means that all human knowing is

York: Harper & Row, 1968); *On Being the Church in the World* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960); and, "Universalism – Is It Heretical?" *Scottish Journal of Theology* 2 (1949): 139-155.

⁷³ Paul Knitter, *No Other Name: A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward The World Religions; Towards a Protestant Theology of Religions: A Case Study of Paul Althaus and Contemporary Attitudes (Mit Deutscher Zusammenfassung)*, Marburger theologische Studien, 11 (Marburg: N.G. Elwert, 1974).

⁷⁴ Raimundo Panikkar, *The Intrareligious Dialogue* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978); "Have 'Religions' the Monopoly on Religion," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 11, no. 3 (Summer 1974): 515-517; *The Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man* (New York: Orbis Books, 1973); "Category of Growth in Comparative Religion: A Critical Self-Examination," *Harvard Theological Review* 66, 1 (January 1973): 113-140; *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1964.)

⁷⁵ John H Hick, "The Possibility of Religious Pluralism: A Reply to Gavin D'Costa," *Religious Studies* 33, no. 2 (June 1997): 161-166; "A Pluralist View," in *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, 29-64; *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (Basingstoke, England: Macmillan, 1989); *Problems of Religious Pluralism* (New York: Macmillan, 1985); *God has Many Names: Britain's New Religious Pluralism* (London: Macmillan, 1980); "Whatever Path Men Choose Is Mine," in *Christianity and Other Religions*, edited by Brian Hebblethwaite and John H. Hick (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), 171-190; "Pluralism and the Reality of the Transcendent: How My Mind Has Changed; 15th in A Series," in *Christian Century* 98, 2 (January 21 1981): 45-48; "On Grading Religions," *Religious Studies* 17, 4 (December 1981): 451-467; *God and the Universe of Faiths: Essays in the Philosophy of Religion* (London Macmillan, 1973).

necessarily partial. Absolute claims, especially in area of religious belief, are either misguided or wrong. The debate on Christianity and other religions is therefore, not about determining which of them is true or false but, about establishing the rules of engagement—what he refers to as the “Golden Rule”—among what, in fact, are equally matched culturally conditioned human responses to the transcendent.⁷⁶ For Hick therefore, “the great world religions are different human responses to the one divine Reality.”⁷⁷ They share a “common ethical ideal and a common “soteriological structure.”⁷⁸

III. The Debate on Christianity and African Religious Traditions

The discussion on the third and final type, pluralism, in Western debate brings us to the African debate. Due to missionary links and shared theological and ecclesiastical traditions there are strong corollaries between the Western debate and the African debate. On many of the issues the arguments are practically the same. This means that the task in this section is a little easier because in presenting the African debate the Western debate can be assumed as a background both historically and organically. Four remarks need to be made to put the connection between these two debates in clearer perspective—the first two together, then the third, and the fourth.

First, it is not for no reason that exclusivism, in the African debate, is a prevalent position among conservative evangelical Protestant churches and movements—both

⁷⁶ Hick, “The Pluralistic Hypothesis,” in *An Interpretation of Religion*, 233-251; “The Possibility of Religious Pluralism: A Reply to Gavin D’Costa,” *Religious Studies* 33, 2 (June 1997): 161-166.

⁷⁷ Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths: Essays in the Philosophy of Religion*, 131; *God has Many Names: Britain's New Religious Pluralism*, 5-6. Also see, “In Defense of Religious Pluralism,” in *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, 96-109.

⁷⁸ Hick, “On Grading Religions,” 464-465, 453.

missionary founded and indigenously initiated—that have links either with their founding traditions or with Christian traditions in North America or Europe that have similar theological views. Second, inclusivism is the prevalent position of evangelical mainline Protestants churches that have connection with sister traditions in North America and Europe. What differentiates them is that, until recently, the latter have had a more established and articulate theological traditions than the former.

Third, the shape which the third position or type, pluralism, takes in African debate is different from the shape it has in the Western debate. This is because protagonists of this third type or position in the African debate do not necessarily subscribe to the philosophical assumptions on which pluralism in the Western debate is based. True, the third position in the African debate makes claims that have resonances with the pluralistic position in the Western debate. In truth, however, the proximate funding bases of the third position or type in the African debate are cultural and historical, rather than philosophical. The position they take is better described as protest or conscientious objection. The exponents of this third position are both from within and from outside of the Christian community.

Fourth, there is slight difference in the nomenclature used in the two debates. Whereas the Western debate commonly uses exclusivism-inclusivism-pluralism, the African debate tends to use discontinuity-continuity-universalism. This poses no real problem because the basic meaning of both nomenclatures is the same. This dissertation will retain the exclusivism-inclusivism-pluralism nomenclature although the right to use the other nomenclature, either for variation or as and when necessary, is also retained. These three positions in African debate will now be outlined.

A. Exclusivism in the African Debate

The approach of the major proponents of exclusivism in the African debate—Byang Kato, Tokunboh Adeyemo, Yusufu Turaki, and Lenard Nyirongo⁷⁹—to African religious traditions is based on two major considerations. Of first importance is scripture as the only true source of knowledge of God and the basis of true religion. Closely related to this is the understanding of the relationship between general and special revelation. On their understanding, special revelation is salvific while general revelation is non-salvific, that is, it does “not possess soteriological merit.”⁸⁰ These two considerations have shaped the debate on Christianity and African traditions in three ways. First, the debate has had an inquisitorial character the chief goal of which is to separate truth from error, religion based on will of God from that based on human desires, and the worship of God from the worship of ancestors and demons.⁸¹ Second, the approach to the discussion has proceeded

⁷⁹ Byang Kato, *Biblical Christianity in Africa: A Collection of Papers and Addresses* (Achimoto, Ghana: Africa Christian Press, 1985); *Theological Pitfalls in Africa* (Kisumu, Kenya: Evangel Publishing House, 1975); “A Critique of Incipient Universalism in Tropical Africa” (Ph.D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1974); “Limitations of Natural Revelation” (S.T.M Thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1971); Tokunboh Adeyemo, *Salvation in African Tradition* (Nairobi: Evangel Publishing House, 1979); Yusufu Turaki, *The Unique Christ for Salvation: The Challenge of the Non-Christian Religions and Cultures* (Nairobi, Kenya: International Bible Society Africa, 2001); *Christianity and African Gods: a method in theology* (Potchefstroom, South Africa: PU vir CHO, 1999); Lenard Nyirongo, *The gods of Africa or the God of the Bible: The Snares of African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective*, Scientific Contributions of the Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education. Series F2: Brochures of the Institute for Reformational Studies, no. 70 (Potchefstroom, South Africa: Institute for Reformational Studies, 1997). Richard J. Gehman is a missionary exponent of the exclusivist position, *African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective* (Kijabe, Kenya: Kesho Publications, 1989). Bulus Galadima is representative of lesser known African theologians whose views fall in the exclusivist camp, “Evaluation of the Theology of Bolaji Idowu,” in *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* 20, no. 2: (2001): 105-131, and his “The Quest for an African Religious Language: A Critical Evaluation of Bolaji Idowu’s Religious Language and Theology” (M.A. Thesis, Wheaton College, 1988).

⁸⁰ Byang Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*, 17, 103, 113; *Biblical Christianity in Africa: A Collection of Papers and Addresses*; Tokunboh Adeyemo, *Salvation in African Tradition*, 13-14, 24-29, 36, 38, 47; Lenard Nyirongo, *The gods of Africa or the God of the Bible: The Snares of African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective*, 3, 4, 15, 37.

⁸¹ Nyirongo, *The gods of Africa or the God of the Bible*, 15.

on the assumption that there is little or no “common ground” between Christianity and African traditions; indeed for some, on the assumption that there is an “antithetical” relationship or “dogmatic . . . separation” between them (2Cor. 6:14-15, 17).⁸² Third, given the aforesaid, there is a general reluctance among proponents of exclusivism to give a favorable or sympathetic reading of African religious traditions, not least of all, to avoid the danger of appearing to be flirting with syncretism, or to be undermining biblical revelation.⁸³

B. Inclusivism in the African Debate

There are two related but distinct accents within inclusivism in the African debate. The first is represented in the views of theologians like Bolaji Idowu, Samuel Kibicho, and Gabriel Setiloane.⁸⁴ This accent of inclusivism takes its character from the emphasis it places on the universality and significance of general revelation. Its point of departure is the universal or unlimited “scope” of “God’s self-disclosure.”⁸⁵ On the strength of this emphasis, this accent of inclusivism highlights the names, idioms, and concepts of God in

⁸² Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*, 17, 93; Adeyemo, *Salvation in African Tradition*, 14; Nyirongo, *The gods of Africa or the God of the Bible*, 3

⁸³ Nyirongo, *The gods of Africa or the God of the Bible*, 12, 15; Adeyemo, *Salvation in African Tradition*, 13.

⁸⁴ Bolaji Idowu, *Olódùmare: God in Yoruba Belief* (London: Longmans, 1962); *Towards an Indigenous Church* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965); “Introduction,” “God,” both in *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs*, ed. Kwesi Dickson and Paul Ellingworth (London: Lutterworth Press, 1969), 9-16, and 17-29 respectively; *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1973); Gabriel M. Setiloane, *The Image of God among the Sotho-Tswana* (Rotterdam: A. A. Balkema, 1976); “How the Traditional Worldview Persists in the Christianity of the Sotho-Tswana,” in *Christianity in Independent Africa*, 402-412; Samuel Kibicho, “The Continuity of the African Conception of God into and through Christianity: A Kikuyu Study,” in *Christianity in Independent Africa*, 370-388; “The Kikuyu Conception of God, Its Continuity into the Christian Era and the Question It Raises for the Christian Idea of Revelation” (Ph.D. thesis, Vanderbilt University, 1972); and a reworked version of this dissertation published more recently as *God and Revelation in an African Context* (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2006).

⁸⁵ Idowu, *Olódùmare*; 30-31; *African Traditional Religion: A Definition*, 56-57

African traditions. In the view of this accent, African names and concepts of God are, in themselves, proof of their divine origin, namely, that they originate from “none other than the revelation of the living God Himself.”⁸⁶ The understanding of the relationship of African traditions to Christianity within this accent is mainly in terms of continuity, especially the continuity of belief in God. Indeed, for some protagonists, like Kibicho, the relationship is, not just continuity but, “radical sameness and continuity.”⁸⁷

The second accent of inclusivism is represented in the views of theologians like John Mbiti, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Kwame Bediako, Lamin Sanneh.⁸⁸ It has much in common with the first accent except that it draws its character from the emphasis it places on the significance of wider network of beliefs concerning the spiritual universe of

⁸⁶ Idowu, *Olódùmarè: God in Yoruba Belief*, 202. According to Kibicho the names and concepts of God also indicate that God was “fully-known” and “worshipped” in African traditions just as he is in Christian faith, “The Continuity of the African Conception of God into and through Christianity: A Kikuyu Study,” 370-372, 388. Setiloane, *The Image of God among the Sotho-Tswana*, 228-229; “How the Traditional Worldview Persists in the Christianity of the Sotho-Tswana,” 411 note 16.

⁸⁷ Kibicho, *God and Revelation in an African Context*, 171-172, and in “The Continuity of the African Conception of God into and through Christianity: A Kikuyu Study,” 388.

⁸⁸ John S. Mbiti, “Christianity and East African Culture and Religion,” in *Dini na Mila: Revealed Religion and Traditional Culture* 3, no. 1 (1965): 1-6; *African Religions & Philosophy; Concepts of God in Africa* (London, S.P.C.K., 1970); Kwesi Dickson and Paul Ellingworth, ed., *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs; New Testament Eschatology in an African Background: A Study of the Encounter Between New Testament Theology and African Traditional Concepts*; “African Indigenous Culture in Relation to Evangelism and Church Development,” in *The Gospel and Frontier Peoples: A Report of a Consultation December 1972*, ed. R. Pierce Beaver (South Pasadena, Calif: William Carey Library, 1973), 75-95, “Some African Concepts of Christology,” in *Christ and the Younger Churches*, 51-62; Archbishop Desmond Tutu, “Whither African Theology?” in *Christianity in Independent Africa*, 364-369; Kwame Bediako, “How Is Jesus Christ Lord?: Aspects of an Evangelical Christian Apologetics in the Context of African Religious Pluralism,” in *Exchange* 25, no.1 (1996): 27-42, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of Non-Western Religion* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995), 91-96, “Jesus in African Culture: A Ghanaian Perspective,” in *Emerging Voices in Global Christian Theology*, ed. William A. Dyrness (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 93-121, “Biblical Christologies in the Context of African Traditional Religion,” in *Sharing Jesus in the Two-Thirds World*, eds. V. Samuel and C. Sugden (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 81-111; Lamin Sanneh, “Gospel and Culture: Ramifying Effects of Scriptural Translation,” in *Bible Translation and the Spread of the Church: The Last 200 Years*, ed. Philip C. Stine (Leiden: E J Brill, 1990), 1-23; *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989); “Pluralism and Christian Commitment,” in *Theology Today* 45, no. 1 (April 1988): 21-33; “The Horizontal and the Vertical in Mission: An African Perspective,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 7, no. 4 (October 1983): 165-171.

African religious traditions. In particular, it draws attention to the way in which this network of beliefs are the building blocks of an African view of reality and way of life, sometimes referred to as the African religious ontology.⁸⁹ This accent of inclusivism also highlights, in particular, the African understanding of God and the transcendent realm—a view which has been described as entailing the postulate of the “‘multiplicity’ of the Transcendent.”⁹⁰ Within this accent, some aspects of African traditions are considered to provide a *praeparatio evangelica* to Christian faith. The African religious ontology is seen as predisposing people in African tradition to appreciate various aspects of Christian faith.⁹¹ It is with this in view that Archbishop Desmond Tutu—chiding the missionary demonization of African traditions—can claim that “African religious experience and heritage” ought to have been used as the “vehicle” for “conveying the Gospel verities to Africa;” and, Lamin Sanneh can argue that the reception of the gospel in Africa via the

⁸⁹ There are different renderings of the African religious ontology. Mbiti’s fivefold model – which includes God, spirits, humanity, animals and plants, and inanimate phenomena – is the better known one, *African Religions & Philosophy*, 16. However, there is a six-feature model developed by Harold Turner which, in some ways, is preferable because it helps one to recognize the affinities between Christian faith and religious traditions like those in Africa and other places. See “The Primal Religions of the World and their Study,” *Australian Essays in World Religions*, ed. Victor Hayes (Bedford Park: Australian Association for World Religions, 1977), 27-37. These six features are the subject of Bediako’s article, “The Primal Imagination and the Opportunity for a New Theological Idiom,” in *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of Non-Western Religion*, 91-108. For more discussion on these features see Andrew Walls, “Primal Religious Traditions Today,” in *Religion in Today’s World: The Religious Situation of the World From 1945 to Present Day*, ed. Frank Whaling (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1987), 250 -78; Philippa Baylis, *An Introduction to Primal Religions* (Edinburgh: Traditional Cosmology Society, 1988), 1-3; Gillian Bediako, “Primal Religions and Christian Faith: Antagonists or Soul Mates?” *Journal of African Christian Thought* 3, no.1 (June 2000): 12-16.

⁹⁰ The postulate of the multiplicity of the transcendent refers to the fact that African conceive of the transcendent as comprising not only God, but also a host of spiritual powers and beings—divinities, spirits, and ancestors—who participate in divine activity in the world. See Bediako, “The Primal Imagination and the Opportunity for a New Theological Idiom,” in *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of Non-Western Religion*, 99.

⁹¹ For John Mbiti, the “intensely religious life” and “communality and corporateness” of the Africans is a “God-given *praeparatio evangelica*.” See his “Christianity and East African Culture and Religion,” 4.

vernacular translation of scripture is proof that God has “adequately anticipated” himself in the indigenous African cultures and languages.⁹²

C. Conscientious Objectors in the African Debate

The corollaries between the African debate and Western debate on the pluralist position are a little more limited compared to the ones between the other two positions—exclusivism and inclusivism. Although the rhetoric of the conscientious objector position in the African debate suggests affinity with the pluralist position in the Western debate, in reality the similarities between them are superficial. For, in point of fact, the conscientious objector position is not based on the same assumptions that fund pluralism in the Western debate—historical consciousness, divine ineffability, and the boundedness of human knowing. Rather, it is rooted in a much wider intellectual critique of empirical Christianity, especially its perceived relationship to and dependence upon, what some have referred to as, “European ‘mental maps of Africa’”—the attitudes and perceptions that have framed and still frame the way Christianity engages Africa and African realities, and the way Europe and Western world in general have related to Africa culturally, politically and economically.⁹³ It is not possible to go into a detailed treatment of

⁹² Tutu, “Wither African Theology?” 366; Lamin Sanneh, “The Horizontal and the Vertical in Mission: An African Perspective,” 166. Also see same author, “The Changing Face of Christianity,” *The Changing Face of Christianity: Africa, the West, and the World*, ed. Lamin Sanneh and Joel A. Carpenter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 3-18; and Kwame Bediako “Understanding African Theology in the Twentieth Century,” 17-18.

⁹³ P. J Marshall and Glyndwr Williams, *The Great Map of Mankind: British Perceptions of the World in the Age of Enlightenment* (London: J.M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1982) is a modest but fairly balanced assessment of the attitudes behind British Empire. Standard works that depict the prejudices that shaped European interaction with Africa include Basil Davidson, *Black Mother: The Years of African Slave Trade* (Boston: Little Brown, 1961); Philip Curtin, *The Images of Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press: 1964); Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (Washington: Howard University Press); Okot p’Bitek, *African Religions in Western Scholarship* (Kampala: East African

intellectual critique within the limited scope of this section. It will suffice to note that the conscientious objector position is given traction by two historical factors—concern for the cultural integrity and identity of African religious experience, and moral objections against the ideological overtones of Christianity rooted in the negative vestiges of colonialism and the missionary legacy. There are two kinds of protests made against Christianity.

The first protest, represented most strongly in thought of Eboussi Boulaga,⁹⁴ is against what is perceived as the intellectual arrogance and religious intolerance of the Christian religion. According to Boulaga, Christianity relates to other religions through, what he calls, the “logic of discourse and practice...[of]a dominant religion.” Among other things, this logic predisposes Christianity to what he calls “supernatural terrorism,” by which he means the will to power and domination. This attitude leads Christianity to deny or reject the possibility of affinity, what he calls “isomorphism,” with African religious traditions. It also engenders a cultural alienation he calls “African disenchantment.”⁹⁵ In similar fashion, for Samuel Kibicho the intellectual arrogance and

Literature Bureau, 1970). There is more recent by in work of African Philosophers like V Y. Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994); *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988); and, Kwasi Wiredu, *Philosophy and an African Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980). A more recent but helpful reassessment of the impact of European attitudes on the study of African religions in particular is a group of essays in *European Traditions in the Study of Religion in Africa*, ed. Frieder Ludwig and Afe Adogame in cooperation with Christoph Bochinger (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2004).

⁹⁴ F. Eboussi Boulaga is a former Jesuit priest now teaching philosophy at the National University of Cote d’Ivoire. His better known work is *Christianisme sans fétiche*. Paris: Présence Africaine, 1981; English edition *Christianity without Fetishes: An African Critique and Recapture of Christianity* (Maryknoll/New York: Orbis Books, 1984). Citations and page references will be from the English edition. For critique of Eboussi Boulaga’s position see Parratt, *Reinventing Christianity: African Theology Today*, 105-121.

⁹⁵ For Eboussi Boulaga, Christianity, as a religion of power and domination, has led to “African disenchantment,” *Christianity without Fetishes: An African Critique and Recapture of Christianity* (Maryknoll/New York: Orbis Books, 1984), 14, 32-43, 66.

religious intolerance leads Christianity to deny the “sameness” or parity with African traditions.⁹⁶ For Mze Jomo Kenyatta, on the other hand, the source of this intellectual arrogance and religious intolerance is partly ignorance and partly ethnocentric prejudices. His *Facing Mt. Kenya* which describes the way of life of his own people, the Gikuyu of Kenya, is as an apologetic to show that the African worldview and way of life, may be different but, is in every other way as coherent and as warranted as the way of life of people in the Western world.⁹⁷

The second protest is an outcome of the first. It is the view, expressed in the thought of Osofo Okomfo Kwabena Damuah,⁹⁸ that what Africans have suffered in the encounter with Christianity suggests that Christianity is, as a religion, foreign to Africans. That is to say, that Christianity is incompatible with the African ways of being and, therefore, not in the best interests of Africans. It is for this reason that for Damuah, neither Christianity nor Islam can truly represent or satisfy Africa’s quest for identity and self-determination. On this view, the problems of Africa stem, as Ali Al’Amin Mazrui as argued, from the fact that Africa has been seduced into abandoning her own authentic

⁹⁶ Samuel Kibicho, “The Continuity of the African Conception of God into and through Christianity: A Kikuyu Study,” 370-380. Also see his Ph.D. dissertation “The Kikuyu Conception of God, Its Continuity into the Christian Era and the Question It Raises for the Christian Idea of Revelation” (Vanderbilt, 1972), a reworked version of which, *God and Revelation in an African Context* (2006), shows that 35 years later Kibicho’s position has not changed.

⁹⁷ Kenyatta, Jomo. *Facing Mount Kenya: The Tribal Life of the Gikuyu*, an introduction by B. Malinowski. New York: Vintage Books, 1965. Kibicho’s Ph.D. dissertation “The Kikuyu Conception of God, Its Continuity into the Christian Era and the Question It Raises for the Christian Idea of Revelation” (Vanderbilt, 1972) was, in large measure, inspired by and based upon Kenyatta’s description of the Gikuyu way of life in this and other writings.

⁹⁸ Kwabena Vincent Damuah, a former Roman Catholic priest (a.k.a. Father Vicent Kwabena Damuah) “The Changing Perspective of Wasa Amanfi Traditional Religion in Contemporary Africa” (Ph. D. dissertation, Howard University, 1971). For a succinct presentation of Damuah and his thought see Bediako, “African Identity: The Afrikania Challenge,” in his *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of A Non-Western Religion* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995), chap. 2.

ancestral roots to embrace a foreign (Western) culture and religion.⁹⁹ For Okot p'Bitek, therefore, the quest by African theologians to identify “African deities” with the “Christian God” is nothing but a covert repristination of the ideology of the superiority of the West which is contrary to the best interests of African identity.¹⁰⁰ For the exponents of this view, what is needed is an indigenous religious movement that is rooted in “authentic native [African] values and grow[s] from those roots rather than trying to be an extension or offshoot of other traditions.”¹⁰¹ One authentically African value on which an indigenous religious movement of this kind could be built is God’s “self-communication and revelation” within African culture and heritage as “Great Ancestor.”¹⁰²

To sum up on this point, the third position in the African debate (on Christianity and other religions) differs from the pluralist position in the Western debate in two fundamental respects. First it raises important questions concerning the methods and assumptions which Christianity has used to engage African traditions. It finds some of those methods and assumptions either false or objectionable, both morally and

⁹⁹ Ali Al'Amin Mazrui, *The Africans: A Triple Heritage* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company 1986), 11, 14, 21, 211, 295. Paul Gifford, a contemporary critic of Christianity in Africa, views Christianity as a “cultural product” of the West. By opting for Christianity rather than reverting her own indigenous religious root, Africa is succumbing to Western hegemony, *African Christianity: Its Public Role* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 321, 333

¹⁰⁰ Okot p'Bitek, “Is Jok God?” In *Dini na Mila: Revealed Religion and Traditional Culture* 3, no. 2/3 (1965): 1-16; *African Religions in Western Scholarship* (Kampala: East African Literature Bureau, 1970), 7.

¹⁰¹ Kwabena Vincent Damuah, “The Changing Perspective of Wasa Amanfi Traditional Religion in Contemporary Africa” (Ph. D. dissertation, Howard University, 1971), 7-8.

¹⁰² Damuah, “The Changing Perspective of Wasa Amanfi Traditional Religion in Contemporary Africa,” 25-26. A succinct presentation of Damuah and his Afrikania movement is in Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of A Non-Western Religion* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995), chap. 2, especially, 24-33.

theologically. Second, it raises valid questions regarding the suitability of the Christian religion for Africa and Africans overall. Looking at the checkered course of Church history, it has to be conceded that these questions are not without cause or foundation.

IV. The Way Forward for Engaging African Traditions

Now that the two debates have been presented, it is necessary to indicate more clearly where exactly the problem is and how this dissertation intends to address it. It was stated earlier that the problem which this dissertation is addressing is the ambivalence in African Christian thought regarding the place and value of African religious traditions in Christian faith. This ambivalence, it was suggested, is due to the fact the theological debate—which has thus far transpired within the parameters of the threefold typology—fails to illuminate the wider spiritual universe of African religious belief and practice, which is the world of everyday experience of many Africans. The root of the problem is that the typology is limited in its capacity to provide a basis for a broad ranging theological account of the major elements of African religious traditions.

This section addresses three questions which arise out of this situation. First, why is it important to account for African traditions as a whole theologically? Why is it necessary that the wider spiritual universe of African traditions is cast in a theological light? Second, in what way is the threefold typology limited in its capacity to illuminate the wider spiritual universe of African traditions theologically? Finally, what difference does this dissertation intend to make to this state of affairs? In the rest of this section these questions will be answered following the order in which they are raised.

A. The Need to Account for African Religious Traditions Theologically

First, it is important and necessary to account theologically for African traditions as a whole for biblical-theological, and for practical reasons. The biblical-theological reason is divine sovereignty. Insofar as “the earth is the Lord’s and everything in it” (Ps. 24:1 NIV) African religious traditions, in their entirety, fall under the purview of divine prerogative. The practical reason is that African religious traditions are, as a matter of fact and experience, part of the context—the thought world and intellectual frame of reference, within which the gospel is proclaimed and apprehended. According to Bediako, African traditions “form the major religious substratum for idiom and existential experience of Christianity in African life.”¹⁰³ The gravitational pull which this “religious substratum” exerts on Christian faith accounts for the complaints by theologians and Christian leaders regarding what they see as “divided loyalties,”¹⁰⁴ “religious schizophrenia,”¹⁰⁵ or “double-mindedness”¹⁰⁶ in African religious experience. In this regard, the wider spiritual universe of African religious experience needs to be accounted for theologically not least because of the gravitational pull it exerts on Christian faith.

¹⁰³ Bediako, “‘Here We have no Abiding City’: The Perennial Challenge,” in *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of A Non-Western Religion*, 82-83.

¹⁰⁴ Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1973), 205-206. Writes Idowu,

It is becoming clear even to the most optimistic Christian evangelist that the main problem of the church in Africa today is the divided loyalties of most of her members between Christianity with its Western categories and practices on one hand, and the traditional religion on the other. It is well known that in strictly personal matters relating to the passage of life and the crisis of life, African Traditional Religion is regarded as the final succor by most Africans.

¹⁰⁵ Desmond Tutu, “Wither African Theology?” in *Christianity in Independent Africa*, 366.

¹⁰⁶ Enyi Ben Udoh, *Guest Christology: An Interpretative View of the Christological Problem in Africa* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1988), 11-13, 16-19.

Doing so draws one into a process of doing theology which Adrian Hastings has described as a “dialogue with the perennial religious spiritualities of Africa.”¹⁰⁷ It is important to keep in mind that the necessity to account for African religious traditions is a demand of Christian life and discipleship as it relates to personal piety and holiness, and as it relates to the process of integrating culture and worldview with Christian faith.

B. The Limits of the Threefold Typology

What, exactly, makes the threefold typology limited in their ability to shed light on African traditions? This questions calls for some evaluation of the threefold typology. The evaluation here is not concerned with the relative merits of the claims made by the different types, although that kind of evaluation has its place and function.¹⁰⁸ This question is concerned more with inner workings, logic, of the threefold typology itself.

In reality the typology is helpful as a conceptual map to identify and categorize the major Christian positions *vis-à-vis* African traditions. However, its ability to illuminate African religious traditions is curtailed by a structural and theological logic that governs it. The structural logic has two poles. The one, an *ad hominem* pole

¹⁰⁷ According to Hastings, “The African theologian finds that the chief non-biblical reality with which he must struggle is the non-Christian tradition of his own people, and African theology in its present stage is shaping as something of a dialogue between the African Christian scholar and the perennial religious spiritualities of Africa,” *African Christianity: An Essay in Interpretation* (London/Dublin: Geoffrey Chapman, 1976), 50-51.

¹⁰⁸ There is discussion of merits and demerits of each type in much of the secondary literature already cited. Only a representative sample needs to be cited here— Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions*, 27-37, 53-69, and 90-105; John Sanders, *No Other Name: An Investigation into the Destiny of the Unevangelized*, 60-62, 106-115; Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm ed., *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, 7-26; Gabriel Fackre, et al., *What about Those Who Have Never Heard: Three Views on The Destiny of the Unevangelized*, 7-20; Ronald H. Nash, *Is Jesus the Only Savior?*, 11-25; John Sanders, *No Other Name*, 11-34; William V. Crockett and James G. Sigountos, *Through no Fault of their Own: The Fate of Those Who Have Never Heard*; Mark Heim *Is Christ the Only Way?*, chapter 1 and 2; Hans Küng, *On Being a Christian*, A 3, 1-4, or pp. 89-112; “The World Religions in God’s Plan of Salvation,” 25-66.

characterized by the tendency to argue the truth of one type by exploiting the deficiencies of another. The other, a *cherry-picking* pole is characterized by the tendency to overlay the best elements while downplaying the weaknesses in one's preferred type. This explains the antagonism and intransigence between the three types.

The theological logic is connected with the Christocentric-soteriological orientation of the types. The Christocentric-soteriological orientation of the threefold typology is not designed to illuminate non-Christian traditions in themselves. On the contrary it functions as some kind of *litmus test* to identify a particular deficiency in the non-Christian religion. Exclusivism tests non-Christian religions on the uniqueness and finality of Christ; Inclusivism on their soteriological efficacy; and Pluralism on the universal principle which they highlight—be it love (Tonybee), simplicity (Hocking), or divine ineffability (Hick). In the end the threefold typology tells us more about the crucial features of Christian faith than it does about the nature of non-Christian religions in themselves. In this regard Amos Yong may be right in his claim that the logic driving the types is “directed inwardly rather than externally”¹⁰⁹ By that he means that types cater more to the priorities of Christian faith than they do to the priorities of the non-Christian religious tradition in question.

C. The Contribution of the Dissertation

This dissertation uses an alternative approach to engaging African religious traditions theologically. The approach does not seek to replace the threefold typology but

¹⁰⁹ Although Yong's remark is made in relation to exclusivism specifically, the context suggests that it is applicable to other types as well. According to him, exclusivism focuses more on “whether or not those in other faiths experience Christian salvation and if so, how, rather than on understanding religious otherness as such,” *Beyond the Impasse: Toward a Pneumatological Theology of Religions; Discerning the Spirit(s): A Pentecostal-Charismatic Contribution to Christian Theology of Religions*, 26, 27.

to complement it. Unlike Yong who claims that “the exclusivist-inclusivist-pluralist categories may have outlived their usefulness,” this dissertation takes it that the typology plays a specific but vital role as a conceptual tool that focuses the debate on soteriological issues which are important to all religions, and on Christological issues which are decisive for Christian faith. The approach proposed in this dissertation begins from the assumption that—in the encounter with African traditions—the onus or obligation rests squarely with Christian faith to account for *what is already there* in African traditions. This onus or obligation springs from two fundamental theological imperatives, one rooted in the reality of creation and providence, and the other in the message of the gospel. These theological imperatives provide a frame of reference which is comprehensive enough to engage various aspects of African traditions. The focus of the investigation in this dissertation will be the foundational elements of the African traditions—the African “sense of God”, “sense of reality”, and “sense of vocation”. The layout of the investigation will be as follows.

Following the introductory chapter, the second chapter will elaborate on the approach to African religious traditions to be used in this dissertation. It will show that the onus to account for *what is already there* in African traditions flows out of a Christian understanding of God’s work in creation and providence, on the one hand, and out of the message concerning person and work of Christ, on the other. After clarifying the meaning of *what is already there*, theological and biblical arguments for this proposed approach will be given. The chapter will end with a biblical example of how to account of *what is already there* in non-Christian religious tradition, based on Paul’s encounter in Lystra (Acts 14) and Athens (Acts 17).

The third chapter takes up the first of the three foundational elements of African religious traditions, the African “sense of God”. It will show that the African “sense of God” can be accounted for in relation to God’s original purpose in creation and self-revelation, and God’s providential action in creation as it leads up to and points to the revelation of redemption in Christ. This approach seeks to answer questions such as: what is the relationship of the beliefs, concepts, and names of God rooted in African religious experience, to the view of God introduced by Christian faith? Do these African beliefs and concepts represent a view of God that is *the same as*, or *on a par with*, the Christian view of God? What role do they play in conversion, particularly in the apprehension of God as revealed in Christ? Is the African “sense of God” simply *replaced* by or *assimilated* in the Christian view of God, or is it vice versa?

The fourth chapter takes up the remaining elements of African religious traditions, the African “sense of reality”, and the African “sense of vocation”, and addresses them through the eyes of Kwame Bediako’s work. By examining Bediako’s work, the chapter will show that the African religious ontology and way of life—”sense of reality” and “sense of vocation”—have real resonances with a Christian understanding of the created order, and in particular the understanding of the place of the human being within it. These resonances can be recognized when these elements of African traditions—the “sense of reality” and “sense of vocation”—are examined through the lens of divine activity in creation and providence.

The fifth chapter is a practical one in the sense it takes one of the results of theoretical theological process of giving an account of *what is already there* in African traditions and applies it to one area of Christian theology. The area of African religious

experience and practice chosen for this exercise is ancestral beliefs. And the area of Christian theology to which it is to be applied is Christology. This will be done by examining Bediako's Christology. Bediako uses the African religious category of Ancestor to interpret the meaning of the person and work of Christ in the African context. The chapter will examine the biblical and theological warrants for using Ancestor as a Christological metaphor. It will also attempt to show the promise of such an endeavor, and the dangers that need to be avoided.

The sixth and final chapter will recapitulate the main claim of this dissertation, namely that the foundational elements of African traditions—the African “sense of God”, “sense of reality”, and “sense of vocation”—can be accounted for in terms of creation and providence. A proper theological account of these elements is necessary to understand the on-going interaction between Christianity and African traditions. An account of this kind takes its cue from the theological imperative of creation and providence on the one hand, and the theological imperative of the gospel, on the other. The chapter will conclude by showing that the theological imperative of creation and providence points to the need for an African Christian theology of religions, while the theological imperative of the gospel points to the need for an African Christian natural theology. Both are necessary for a proper Christian account of the African religious traditions.

One final clarification needs to be made, namely, that a certain amount of repetition in the dissertation as a whole has been unavoidable and even necessary. To preempt any undue sense of irritation and exasperation that might otherwise distract the reader in this regard, three explanatory notes are offered.

First, it is important to note that much of the repetition occurs in the restatement of most or parts of the arguments of the major positions—exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. In most cases, however, the restatements are paraphrases not verbatim. The alternative would have been not to restate the arguments and let the reader flip back (to the first chapter) and forth each time to ascertain for herself what the positions are.

Second, the restatement of the arguments, however, is never in the same regard or for the same reason. Thus, for instance, in chapter 2, the restatement of the exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism arguments is in regard to evaluating how far or how much the arguments contribute to a broad ranging theological grasp of African traditions as a whole; in chapter 3, it is in relation to the positions taken *vis-à-vis* the African “sense of God” in particular; in chapter 4, it is in regard to the respective positions taken *vis-à-vis* the African “sense of reality” and “sense of vocation”.

The third and final note, the repetition is particularly unavoidable because of the fact that proponents of the types use the same arguments for or against different issues in the debate. It is important to remember that the distinctions and categories employed in this dissertation, namely, the African “sense of God”, “sense of reality”, and “sense of vocation”, are not distinctions or categories every African theologian necessarily makes or adheres to

CHAPTER TWO

THE ONUS TO ACCOUNT THEOLOGICALLY FOR “*WHAT IS ALREADY THERE*” IN AFRICAN TRADITIONS

I. Introduction

The introductory chapter has presented the debate on the relationship of Christianity to other religions in the modern Western Christian tradition and in the African context. The major positions in this debate are summarized in the threefold typology—exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. However, it was shown that the ability of the threefold typology to illuminate African religious traditions is limited by the internal logic—structural and theological—that drives it. The structural logic is either *ad hominem*, arguing the truth of one type by exploiting the deficiencies of another, or *cherry-picking*, over emphasizing the strongest elements in a preferred position while downplaying the weak elements in the same. The theological logic is Christocentric and soteriological in this orientation with the result that the typology sheds more light on the distinctive teachings of Christian faith than it does on the nature non-Christian religious traditions. What is needed is an approach that is concerned about giving an account, theologically, of *whatever is already there* in African traditions.

In this chapter an alternative approach to engaging African traditions is proposed. It is an approach that begins from assumption that there is onus upon Christian faith to account for *whatever is already there* in African traditions. The chapter will show that this onus flows out of a Christian understanding of God’s work in creation and providence, on the one hand, and out of the character of the gospel, on the other. For the

fact that God was or is at work in a special and exclusive way among the people of Israel and in the gospel does not preclude the fact that God was and is at work everywhere else—in creation as whole, but specifically among other peoples and cultures. The Christian is under obligation to account, not only for the former, but for the latter as well. There are at least three reasons why taking this onus or obligation as the entry point into the *problematique* has the potential to lead to a more robust engagement of African traditions as a whole better than is possible within the threefold typology framework.

First, the onus in question is intrinsic to Christian faith in a way that is not true of African or other religious traditions. As far as it is possible to tell within the limits of this dissertation, there are no specific claims by or within African religious traditions which impose a theological onus of this kind. Christianity by contrast has at least two fundamental theological imperatives that impose the duty to account for *whatever is already there* in African traditions—one from creation and providence, and the other, from the gospel itself. This suggests that the onus to account for *what is already there* in African tradition is not the kind of duty Christian theology should shirk or evade.

Second, the onus calls for theological engagement that goes beyond the preliminary stages of highlighting or cataloguing the similarities and differences between Christianity and African traditions—in areas like concept of God. The theological engagement needed should aim to be comprehensive, encompassing areas of known similarities, like belief in God, but extending to the other foundational elements of African religious traditions—the “sense of reality”, and “sense of vocation”—as well. And, in doing this, the theological engagement should not stop merely at the descriptive

level of the *whats* and *wheres* of the foundational elements of African traditions. It is should ask probing questions about the *whys* and *wherewithal* of these particular elements.

Third, the onus calls for a new attitude or disposition to African and other non-Christian religious traditions. For the fact that the onus is intrinsic to Christian faith means that the process of rendering account should not become a contest to prove the superiority of Christian faith over African traditions. Nor should it turn into an inquisitorial campaign to ferret out every aspect of African traditions that is not consistent with Christian faith. Since the motivation to account for *what is already there* in African tradition springs from Christian faith, there is no need for undue defensiveness or hostility in the actual process of theological engagement. Christian faith has ample resources of truth and charity to rise above *ad hominem* and *cherry-picking* tendencies.

The rest of this chapter will have six sections. Following introductory section, the second section will define what is meant by the expression “*what is already there.*” It will clarify why and how this expression is used in this chapter and in rest of the dissertation. The third to fifth sections will examine the arguments of the proponents of exclusivism, inclusivism, and of the conscientious objectors (pluralist?), respectively. The goal will be, not so much to evaluate them overall but, to examine their role in the debate as whole, especially how much they illuminate the ongoing interaction between Christian faith and African traditions. The sixth section will present the two theological imperatives from which the onus to account for *what is already there* in African (and other non-Christian) religious traditions derive—creation and providence, and the gospel. The goal is to show how these motifs provide a theological framework that sheds light on African traditions and their interaction with Christian faith. The seventh section will present Paul’s

encounter in Lystra and Athens (Acts 14:8-18; 17:16-32) as a biblical example of how a Christian can account for *what is already there* in a non-Christian religious tradition. The goal is to show that there is some basis in scripture for the approach to African tradition used in this dissertation.

II. The Meaning of “What Is Already There”

The expression “*what is already there*” [emphasis is added] is taken from Kwame Bediako and Andrew Walls who use it to explain what they consider to be the right understanding of the experience and process of conversion to Christian faith, in the context of non-Christian religious traditions. They make a contrast between what they call the “proselyte model” of conversion conceived as changing or “substituting something new for something old,” and conversion as a *turning* or a “change of direction.” Whereas the “proselyte model” of conversion involves the repudiation of “one set of beliefs and customs” in order to “take up those of another people,” conversion as change of direction—which Bediako and Walls take to be the biblical view of conversion—involves a “redirection of *what is already there*, turning it in the direction of Christ.”¹ It is in this sense that the phrase *what is already there* has been adopted and adapted for the present discussion.

¹ See Bediako, “Towards a New Understanding of Christian History in the Post-missionary Era,” in *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995), 165; Andrew Wall, “Old Athens and New Jerusalem: Some Signposts for Christian Scholarship in the Early History of Mission Studies,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 21, no. 4 (October 1, 1997): 148; “Culture and Conversion in Christian History,” in *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996), 43-54; “Converts or Proselytes? The Crisis over Conversion in the Early Church,” in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 28, no. 1 (January 2004): 2-6.

Admittedly, to say “*what is already there*” may, to some, sound a little gratuitous, even melodramatic, especially because it seems to accentuate the obvious. However, it is being used here, advisedly, to draw attention to an important factor in the cross-cultural transmission of the gospel. This is the fact that the proclamation or introduction of gospel or Christian faith anywhere is never into a vacuum but, into an already existing complex of human realities—social, economic, intellectual, and so on. In its most basic use, therefore, *what is already there* refers to the complex of human realities and experiences in and within which the gospel is introduced. In the African context this complex of human realities is characteristically thematized in a religious vision of life dubbed, by Hastings, the “perennial religious spiritualities of Africa,”² and which is also observable in every aspect of life, language, and ritual.³ This complex of beliefs and practices is a major part of the “*what is already there*” in African traditions that needs to be accounted for.⁴

² According to Hastings, “The African theologian finds that the chief non-biblical reality with which he must struggle is the non-Christian tradition of his own people, and African theology in its present stage is shaping as something of a dialogue between the African Christian scholar and the perennial religious spiritualities of Africa,” *African Christianity: An Essay in Interpretation*, 50-51.

³ See Mbiti, “Christianity and East African Culture and Religion,” in *Dini na Mila: Revealed Religion and Traditional Culture* 3, no. 1 (1965): 1-6; *African Religions & Philosophy* (New York: Praeger 1969), 16; “African Indigenous Culture in Relation to Evangelism and Church Development,” in *The Gospel and Frontier Peoples: A Report of a Consultation December 1972*, ed. R Pierce Beaver (South Pasadena, Calif: William Carey Library, 1973), 75-95; Tutu, “Whither African Theology?” 366; Lamin Sanneh, “The Horizontal and the Vertical in Mission: An African Perspective,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 7, no. 4 (October 1983): 165-171; “The Changing Face of Christianity,” *The Changing Face of Christianity: Africa, the West, and the World*, ed. Lamin Sanneh and Joel A. Carpenter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 3-18; Kwame Bediako “Understanding African Theology in the Twentieth Century,” *Themelios* 20, 1 (1994) 17-18.

⁴ Hence the key question in African theology, according to John Pobee, is “where does the inherited tradition which is still part of the African Christian identity fit into theology in Africa? And how is it to be used?” See his “African Theology Revisited,” in *Religious Plurality in Africa: Essays in Honor of John S. Mbiti*, eds. Jacob Olupona and Sulayman S. Nyang (Berlin/New York: Mouton De Gruyter, 1993), 139.

In the context of this dissertation *what is already there* includes the foundational elements of African traditions—the “sense of God”, “sense of reality”, and “sense of vocation”. The question with which the next three sections are concerned is this: How have the arguments within the three types contributed to a Christian theological understanding of these foundational elements of African traditions and their interaction with Christianity?

III. How Much Does Exclusivism Illuminate African Traditions?

There are three arguments advanced by proponents of exclusivism to be examined in this section: the argument from the *superiority* of Christian revelation, the argument from the *authority* of Christian revelation, and the argument from the *fall and its effects* on humanity. These argument will received a little more detailed treatment—than those of the inclusivism counterparts—for two main reasons. First, since the exclusivism position contains major Christian doctrinal affirmations, it is vital that the argument in this section is presented with circumspection in order to avoid creating the misleading impression that Christian truth is being undermined or contradicted. Second, the task itself is tricky because it requires doing two things that might, on the face of it, appear to involve a contradiction. For, on the one hand, the truth in the exclusivism position is acknowledged. On the other, it will be necessary to show that the way in which the exclusivism position is sometimes presented has the potential or runs the risk of obscuring other important truths.

A. Argument from the Superiority of Christian Revelation

In this argument, proponents of exclusivism approach African traditions from the standpoint that Christianity has the superior revelation. The assumption is that a religion ought to be judged on the merits of what the revelation on which it is based is able to achieve. This view is based on the distinction that is usually made between special revelation and general revelation. According to Adeyemo, Christianity is based on special revelation, that is, on the kind of revelation which leads to salvation. African religious traditions, on the other hand, are based on general revelation, that is, on a kind of revelation which is “by its very purpose... non-redemptive,” or which “does not possess soteriological merit by its very essence.”⁵

Proponents of exclusivism are quite right, of course, to invoke the general-special relation distinction, and to identify Christian faith with the latter and African traditions with the former.⁶ What is often missed or not stressed sufficiently, however, is that this very affirmation involves a tacit acknowledgment that African religious traditions derive, at least in part, from divine activity in creation. The problem seems to be that while the reality of divine presence in African traditions is formally acknowledged, its theological significance and religious potential are not taken into account in the argument as a whole.

⁵ Adeyemo, *Salvation in African Tradition*, 13, 23, 24, 25, 27. Richard J. Gehman, agreeing with Adeyemo says general revelation was “intended to point men to God but it was inadequate for the purpose of redemption,” *African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective* (Kijabe, Kenya: Kesho Publications, 1989), 41.

⁶ According to Bavinck the general/special revelation distinction was “accepted and defended” and “upheld and highly valued” by Christian theologians from Patristic, Medieval, to the time the Reformation era and into modern times, *Reformed Dogmatics* vol.1, 311. Aquinas recognized the distinction as supernatural and natural revelation *Summa Theologica*, trans. by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger, 1948; repr. 5 vols. Westminster: Christian Classics, 1981), Ia, q.1 a. 1-2; also see *The Summa Contra Gentiles*, trans. by A. Pegis et al (Garden City: Doubleday, 1955-57), IIIa, 38. John Calvin distinguishes between knowledge of the Creator and knowledge of the Redeemer, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.5.1, 1.5.7-8.

This is because in the exclusivist evaluation of African traditions Christological motifs—the incarnation, atonement, and the doctrine of sin—take precedence over other considerations, including over the theological significance and religious potential of creation-providence. Yet, privileging Christological motifs over the creation-providence motifs too soon, that is, at the onset of theological engagement, has the effect of preemptively narrowing theological field of vision. Given the narrower theological field of vision, much of what is in African religious traditions, some of which ultimately deriving from creation-providence may appear to be of little or no theological value at all.

The argument from the superiority of Christian faith fails to illuminate the value in African religious traditions because of two underlying factors. The first is a tendency to assume or to posit a dichotomy between general and special revelation, and to conclude from this that there can be no kinship between the religions which might arise from these two kinds of revelations—general and special—or that the religions based on them are, as Kato suggests, intrinsically “antithetical.”⁷ The second is the assumption that for one to claim or acknowledge kinship between Christianity and other religions is, *ipso facto*, to “challenge....the unique claims of the Bible,” specifically “the incarnation and atonement of Christ,”⁸ and to “undermine [and] ... despise God’s plan for salvation.”⁹

⁷ Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*, 96.

⁸ Adeyemo, *Salvation in African Tradition*, 13. It is worth noting that Adeyemo’s view is a direct criticism of a statement issued by African theologians, under the auspices of the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) in 1966, affirming, among other things, that the prior work and activity of God in creation and providence is the source of African religious traditions, and because of it Africans “know of Him,” and their present knowledge of God in Christ “is not discontinuous with [the] previous traditional knowledge of God.” The salient part of the statement which can be found in *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs*, ed. Kwesi Dickson and Paul Ellingworth (London: Lutterworth Press, 1969), 16 says

⁹ Nyirongo, *The gods of Africa or the God of the Bible: The Snares of African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective*, 11-12, 15.

It truth, however, these assumptions are, at best, mistaken, or else erroneous. The tendency to posit a dichotomy between general and special revelation overshadows an important truth concerning the organic relationship between divine action in creation and redemption—the truth, as Bavinck puts it, that “special revelation” is not only “founded on general revelation” but that it actually takes “over numerous elements from it;”¹⁰ and, the truth that all salvation history takes place within creation and providence.¹¹ The argument also erroneously denies kinship between Christianity and other religions because it loses sight of a fundamental axiom, namely that all religions presuppose divine revelation—be it general or special.¹² Therefore, acknowledging the kinship between that which stems from general and that which stems from special revelation in no way undermines one or the other.

B. Argument From The Authority and Finality Of Christian Revelation

The authority argument is closely connected to the superiority argument in the sense that superiority suggests authority. But, while the superiority argument is based largely on Christological motifs, the authority argument is based on formal considerations regarding the mode of Christian revelation. Christian revelation, in the view of this argument, is mediated in a better or more reliable form (scripture or the bible) than

¹⁰ Herman Bavinck, *Philosophy of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), 22; *Reformed Dogmatics* vol.1, *Prolegomena*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 284-285, 362.

¹¹ According to Bavinck, “in creating the world by his word and making it come alive by his Spirit, God already delineated the basic contours of all subsequent revelation, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, 307.

¹² According to Bavinck it is precisely in the area of revelation that Christianity is “similar to other historical religions” for, like them, it “stands or falls” on revelation. As far he is concerned for both Christian and other religions, the presumption of revelation is neither “incidental,” nor “arbitrary,” but in fact “an essential component of religion,” *Reformed Dogmatics* vol.1, 284-285, 362; *The Philosophy of Revelation*, 163, 165, 203.

African traditions. According to Nyirongo, for instance, what makes Christian revelation authoritative is the fact that it is based on “God’s self revelation in the Bible” which is without error, while, by contrast, African religions are based on “fragmentsor lumps of truths” from “natural revelation” which have been “wrenched out of their natural surrounding.”¹³ For Kato, the scriptures, being the foundation of “Christian orthodoxy,” are authoritative especially because they are “the propositional revelation of God to man” which, according to him, means that they are, “as such, without error.”¹⁴ According to Richard Gehman, by “propositional revelation” Kato means “cognitive content” involving “propositional truth” expressed in a “verbal” form that is “transferable and comprehensible by all people in all cultures.”¹⁵ By contrast, the “fragments” and “lumps” of truth concerning God in African religious traditions are expressed in the form of idolatrous religious practices.¹⁶ The point of this argument is that the scriptural form of Christian revelation provides “an assured knowledge” of God which gives Christianity the right to “speak authoritatively, not only to its own faith but, to other faiths, too.”¹⁷

¹³ Lenard Nyirongo, *The gods of Africa or the God of the Bible: The Snares of African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective*, 3, 11-12, 15.

¹⁴ Byang Kato, “Limitations of Natural Revelation” (S.T.M thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1971), 51.

¹⁵ Richard Gehman, *Doing African Christian Theology: An Evangelical Perspective*, 52, 78, 82.

¹⁶ Nyirongo, *The gods of Africa or the God of the Bible*, 3, 37; Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*, 103; Adeyemo, *Salvation in African Tradition*, 36, 38, 47.

¹⁷ Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*, 101. Kato’s view that Christian revelation is propositional mirrors that of some of the proponents of exclusivism in Western theological tradition. See Harold Lindsell, *An Evangelical Theology of Missions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970), 99; more recently Ronald Nash for whom Christianity is authoritative because of its objective “access to revealed truth” in contrast to other religious claims which are based on “inward personal experience with God devoid of any objective, cognitive means of testing [their] validity,” *Is Jesus the Only Savior* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 12-21, 117-120. Also see his *The Word of God and the Mind of Man* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1992), chapters 1-4.

It is true, of course, that in traditional understanding, Christian faith and the authority of the scriptures are closely connected. Christian faith arises out of a trust in the scriptures as the Word of God. The authority of the scripture is twofold. It is linked, first, to the identity of its essential *content* or message with Christ who is the eternal Word of God identical with the second person of the Trinity (John 1:1-2, 14, 18; Heb. 1:1-3; Rev. 3:14; 19:11-13), and who also spoke through the prophets (2 Pet. 1:19-21). It is linked, second, to the scriptures or the bible as the authoritative transcript or *form* in which the Christian message is both preserved and transmitted (John 20:30-31; 2 Pet. 1:12-15). Proponents of exclusivism are therefore justified in appealing to the authority of scripture. Scripture after all is, in traditional orthodox understanding, the cognitive foundation of Christian theology.¹⁸ The main issue at stake, however, is not the authority of Christian revelation, as such, but whether appealing to it or asserting it settles the argument. Is it true, as Kato seems to suggest, that the authority of Christian revelation negates “all other revelations?”¹⁹ Other unanswered questions also remain: Is the authority of the Christian message the appropriate argument to make in this context—a context in which one is trying to understand those beliefs in non-Christian traditions that appear to be similar to beliefs in Christian faith? Does making the authority argument shed any more light on the

¹⁸ See François Turretini, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, Vol. 1 *First through Tenth Topics*, trans. George Musgrave Geiger, ed. James T Dennison, Jr., (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 1992), II.i.1 Louis Berkhof, *Introductory Volume to Systematic Theology in Systematic Theology*, The New Combined Edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 93-96; Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* vol. 1, *Prolegomena*, 86.

¹⁹ “With the coming of Christ,” says Kato, “all other revelations come to an end. It is unlikely that either Jaba [African] or any other non-Christian peoples have received a direct revelation from God,” *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*, 44. Kato’s view is similar to Mark Heim’s view that what matters in the context of other religious claims is “whether it is *objectively* true that Jesus Christ is the way, the truth and the life,” *Is Christ the Only Way: Christian Faith in a Pluralistic World* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1985), 8, 129-150.

interaction between Christian faith and the other religion? And, can or should the authority of Christian faith be merely asserted?

The problem with the authority argument, in the context of engaging a non-Christian tradition, lies in the fact that it is an essentially Christological argument. In other words, it is an argument which, by its very nature, is based on premises that make Christianity quintessentially different from all other religions. As an argument, therefore, it offers the narrowest of margins (or perhaps none at all)—either formally, materially, or epistemologically—for common ground with other religious traditions. *Formally*, the authority argument is predicated on the identity of the person of Christ and his work and mission with the scriptures as the Word of God. *Materially*, it is impossible to make a case for the authority for Christian faith without invoking those events in which other religions having little or nothing to contribute—the incarnation, atonement, resurrection, and salvation history as whole. *Epistemologically*, it is in the nature of the case that neither the *nature* of the authority of the Christian message nor the *means* of arriving at it, are things which can be settled in the court of human reason. There are at least two reasons for this. In the first place, the authority of the Christian message is the authority of a divine person, the Creator God, who by definition is not the kind of subject/object which human reason is competent to establish or deny.²⁰ In the second place, although the authority of the Christian message may be self-evident in itself and to the eyes of faith as

²⁰ The idea that the finite (human) is not capable of fathoming the infinite (God) is a fundamental assumption of Christian theology. There has always been, more or less, a tacit understanding that Christian theology, as Barth put it, is “handling an intractable object with inadequate means,” *Church Dogmatics I/1*, 23. See also *Summa Theologica*, Ia. q. 1, a. 7 and 8; Calvin, *Institutes I. iii*, 21; Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, I, 310-311.

well, it is not necessarily self-evident to everybody—at least, not in a way reason can demonstrate decisively.²¹

This means that it is important for the Christian to recognize both the limits and the proper place or occasion to invoke the authority argument. The nature of the subject from which it derives, the divine person himself, means that the authority of Christian revelation stands on the recognizance of its own testimony. It is therefore something that is accepted only by those who recognize it for what it is. And, since the message itself comes by revelation, the recognition and acceptance of its authority is also arrived at by revelation (Matt. 11:27; 16:16-17; John 1:18; 6:44; 14:6). Christians believe that the process of recognizing and accepting the authority of Christian revelation is superintended and enabled by the activity of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor.2:6-16).

At the same time, however, it is important to acknowledge that the authority argument throws an unmistakable gauntlet. For *if it is true* that God has appeared and spoken authoritatively in Christ, and in Christ alone, then the claim that scripture—as the primary *form* in which God’s authoritative message is preserved and conveyed—is authoritative for right relationship with God, is valid.²² Yet, even though the authority argument is a valid and important one for Christian faith, merely asserting it does little to facilitate a Christian understanding of non-Christian religious traditions.

²¹ Aquina, *Summa Theologica*, I, q. 2, a. 1.

²² This claim also presupposes the Christian understanding of the human predicament as involving what Barth conceived of as some kind of double bind: the one stemming from the ontological chasm between creature and creator; and the other from the fall or human rebellion which put humanity under divine judgment. Only one who is truly God can bridge the chasm between divinity and humanity; and only one who is truly human and absolutely perfect can reconcile humanity with God. See Barth *Church Dogmatics*, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956-75), I/1, 295-333; I/2, 280-325; II/1, 63-254.

C. Argument from the Human Fall and Its Effects

For proponents of exclusivism the effects of the human fall undermine whatever might have been of value in African religious traditions. This is most evident in three areas: belief and conception of God and of the transcendent, religious practice and piety, and the role of ancestors and other spirit beings. Three charges are leveled against African religious traditions. First, the fact that belief in God, in African traditions, is often intertwined and overlain with belief in other beings, such as divinities, supernatural beings, spirits, and ancestors,²³ betrays a predisposition to idolatry.²⁴ Second, religious practice and piety in African traditions is too anthropocentric and not sufficiently theological. That is to say, it is more preoccupied with human survival and physical well being than it is with the worship of God.²⁵ Third, the fact that belief in ancestors and other spirit beings plays a prominent role in African religiosity points to a theological

²³ This has sometimes been referred to as the “‘multiplicity’ of the Transcendent.” See Bediako, “The Primal Imagination and the Opportunity for a New Theological Idiom,” in *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of Non-Western Religion*, 91-108, especially 99.

²⁴ This conception allows for beings who are not truly deity to share in the worship that belongs to the creator God alone, Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*, 17, 103, 112-113, *Biblical Christianity in Africa: A Collection of Papers and Addresses*; Adeyemo, *Salvation in African Tradition*, 14, 26, 36, 38; Nyirongo, *The gods of Africa or the God of the Bible: The Snares of African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective*, 3, 9, 37. See also Harry A. E. Sawyerr, *God, Ancestor or Creator: Aspects of Traditional Belief in Ghana, Nigeria and Sierra Leone* (London: Longman, 1970), 6;

²⁵ Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy* (New York: Praeger 1969), 67; *Concepts of God in Africa* (London, S.P.C.K., 1970), 179, 219; “ὁ σωτηρ ἡμῶν as an African Experience,” in *Christ and Spirit in the New Testament*, Studies in honor of Charles Francis Digby Moule, edit. Barnabas Lindars and Stephen S. Smalley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973): 404-412, 408 Tokumboh, *Salvation in African Tradition*, 36, 47; Nyirongo, *The gods of Africa or the God of the Bible*, 4.

deficit in African religious traditions, a clear indication that God is remote in African religious conception and experience.²⁶

The wider implications of these criticisms will be addressed in subsequent chapters. The issue under consideration now is whether these criticisms reflect a fair and accurate theological assessment of *what is already there* in African religious traditions. Should it be inferred from these criticisms that there is nothing of value in African traditions? Is it possible to concede these criticisms—on conception of God, religious piety, and the role of ancestors—but still find some value in African religious traditions?

On the charge of idolatry, for instance, it is quite obvious that a Christian cannot and should not defend idolatry. For not only is it forbidden by God, it has deleterious moral and spiritual consequences (Rom. 1:21-30). Yet, is it not possible to look beyond the idolatry to the reality to which it points and presupposes? That is to say, to God and his revelation? Could idolatry be looked at as a form of negative witness to the necessity of worship as part of God's design for human beings? Calvin, for instance, points out that "even idolatry is ample proof" that human beings do apprehend divine revelation in creation sufficiently to be culpable. He recognizes that even in its distorted form religion points to the reality of divine revelation and presence in the world.²⁷ If this is true, then condemning idolatry is only one part of the Christian response. The other involves

²⁶ Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*, 72-25; John Vernon Taylor, *The Primal Vision: Christian Presence Amid African Religion* (London: SCM Press 1963), 75-84; Diedrich Westermann, *Africa and Christianity* (London: Oxford University Press, 1937, Reprint, New York: AMS Press, 1977), 65, 68, 74.

²⁷ Religion, according to Calvin, is not "an arbitrary invention," but rather the manifestation of an "inclination" springing from "a firm conviction about God" with which "men's minds" have been "imbued," *Institutes* I, iii. 1-2. Similarly for Bavinck, revelation is "an essential component of religion." It is precisely in this aspect that Christianity is "similar to other historical religions," *Reformed Dogmatics* Vo.1, 284, 285, 362. Also see, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, 163, 165, 203

discerning and expositing or excavating the legitimate theological roots of the human religious predilection which idolatrous religious activity point to.

The charge that African religious traditions are too anthropocentric can also be looked at differently. For while it is true that God is the right object of Christian revelation and worship, there is an undeniable anthropocentric motif both in the Old and the New Testament, and especially in the gospels. Therefore, a preoccupation with survival and physical wellbeing need not be seen as conflicting with the imperative worship to God. There is an unabashed emphasis on physical provisions and material wellbeing in the kind of piety which scripture prescribe and encourages.²⁸

The remoteness of God in African religious experience also need not be construed negatively, as if it were an aberrational religious experience. Indeed, given that humanity lives in a fallen world, the feeling that God is remote is to be expected. The remoteness or hiddenness of God is a recognized feature of religious experience in Old and New Testament, and in the lives of saints down the ages. In the Old Testament God threatens to hide himself (Deut. 31:17-18; 32:20; Isa. 1:15; Jer. 33:5; Mic. 3:4) or hide his face (Isa. 50: 6; Ezek. 39:29) as punishment against his people Israel. Lamenting the hiddenness of God is a recurrent theme among God's people (Job 13:24; 39:29; Ps. 10:1; 13:1; 27:9; 44:24; 69:17; 88:14; 89:46; 102: 2; 104:29; 119:19; 143: 47). The hiddenness of God is a less pronounced theme in the New Testament but by no means absent. God is absent to the proud but close to the humble (James 4:6; 1 Pet. 5:5; Prov. 3:34). The hiddenness of

²⁸ Genuine piety includes concern for the physical well being of God's people. Doing good, and helping the needy, poor, and those who are disadvantaged is positively commended as a mark of Christian virtue in the kingdom of God, Mat. 25:31-45, Acts 10: 3, 31, Rom. 2:7, 10, Gal. 6:9, Eph. 4:28, Col. 1:10, 1Tim. 6:18-19. True faith or authentic religion bears the practical fruits of love and care for others, Mat. 3:7-9, Luke 3:7-8, Luke 10:25-37, James 1:22-27; 2:1-24. Genuine Christianity issues in good works which are sure marks of the work and presence of the Holy Spirit in the believer, 1Cor. 1-11, 2 Cor. 9:8, Gal. 5:22, Eph. 2:10, 5:9.

God which is ultimately rooted in the human alienation as a result of the fall, is reenacted in the temporary hiddenness of Father from the Son as the price of redemption (Matt. 27:46; Mark 15:34; Rom. 8:32).

IV. How Much Does Inclusivism Illuminate African Traditions?

There are three arguments by proponents of inclusivism to be examined in this section: the *identity of the divine subject* in African traditions and in Christian faith, the *originality of African apprehension of God*, and the *affinity of the African religious ontology* with Christian faith. Clearly, these arguments are based on a more positive view of African traditions than those by their exclusivism counterparts. Does this mean that the inclusivism position presents a more accurate theological account of *what is already there* in African religious traditions than the exclusivism? This remains to be seen.

A. Three Arguments Presented: Identity, Originality, and Affinity

The first argument, regarding the *identity of the divine subject*, claims that the God revealed in Jesus Christ is “none other than the One who has continually made Himself known to African religious experience.”²⁹ The God apprehended under African names of deity is the same as the Creator God whom Christianity proclaims.³⁰ The second, concerning the *originality of the African apprehension of God*, is the claim that

²⁹ Malcolm J. McVeigh, *God in Africa: Conceptions of God in African Traditional Religion and Christianity*, 81.

³⁰ Bolaji Idowu, *Olódùmarè: God in Yoruba Belief*, 202; Gabriel M. Setiloane, *The image of God among the Sotho-Tswana* (Rotterdam: A A Balkema, 1976); “How the Traditional Worldview Persists in the Christianity of the Sotho-Tswana,” in *Christianity in Independent Africa*, ed. Edward Fashole-Luké et al, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 402-412; Samuel Kibicho, “The Continuity of the African Conception of God into and through Christianity: A Kikuyu Study,” in *Christianity in Independent Africa*, 370-388; *God and Revelation in an African Context* (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2006), 171-172.

knowledge of God in African traditions is original or indigenous. That is to say, that it is not derived from other peoples or cultures. This is what Idowu means to underscore in his spirited insistence that the God apprehended in African religious experience is neither “an imported divinity from a European pantheon,” nor “a loan-God from the missionaries.”³¹ In similar fashion Archbishop Desmond Tutu argues that the knowledge of God in African religious experience is “genuine” because it arises out of indigenous “ways of communion with deity.”³² The third argument contends that the fundamental features of the African religious worldview have resonance with the world of the Old and New Testaments and with the major themes of the gospel. The resonances are discernable particularly in features of the African religious ontology—whether the fivefold model by Mbiti³³ or the six-feature one by Harold Turner.³⁴ It is not necessary to go into details of the African ontology at this stage because it will be dealt with in later chapters. What is important to note is that proponents of inclusivism believe that the African religious ontology has resonances that favor the spread of Christianity in Africa.

³¹ Idowu, *Towards and Indigenous Church*, 49; and, “God,” in *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs*, 29.

³² Desmond Tutu, “Wither African Theology?” in *Christianity in Independent Africa*, 366.

³³ Mbiti’s fivefold model includes beliefs regarding God, spirits, humanity, animals and plants, and inanimate phenomena *African Religions and Philosophy*, 16.

³⁴ Harold Turner, “The Primal Religions of the World and their Study,” in *Australian Essays in World Religions*, ed. Victor Hayes (Bedford Park: Australian Association for World Religions, 1977), 27-37.

B. Three Arguments Critiqued: Identity, Originality, and Affinity

Various criticisms have been leveled against inclusivism especially by proponents of exclusivism.³⁵ The main concern here, however, is how well the claims of inclusivism illuminate African tradition and the interaction with Christian faith. In this regard, it is important to note that the arguments advanced by inclusivism have a significant apologetical dimension which needs to be taken into account. The *identity of the divine subject* argument is directed against those who either doubt or deny that what people in African religious traditions apprehend to be God is truly the Creator God.³⁶ The *originality of the African apprehension* argument is directed against those who suggest that the knowledge of God in African religious traditions is not indigenous, that is, that it is either derived from other cultures or introduced by missionaries.³⁷ The *affinity* argument is directed against those who assume that African traditions are fundamentally incompatible with Christian faith.

³⁵ Proponents of exclusivism charge that inclusivism advocates underestimate the noetic effects of the fall and are therefore too optimistic about human nature; that they gloss over human misunderstanding of divine revelation which results in idolatry; and that they overemphasize the general revelation to point of undermining the uniqueness of divine revelation in Christ. See Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*, 92–100; Parratt, *Reinventing Christianity* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press), 1995 55-76; Bulus Y. Galadima, “Evaluation of the Theology of Bolaji Idowu,” *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* 20, no. 2: (2001): 105-131 especially 116, 121.

³⁶ There is a history of this doubt and denial in older anthropological and missionary literature. See Sir A. B. Ellis, *The Tshi-Speaking Peoples of the Gold Coast of West Africa: Their Religion, Manners, Customs, Laws, Languages, Etc* (London: Chapman and Hall, limited, 1887), 28, 24; Père Noel Baudin, *Fetichism and Fetich Worshipers* (New York: Cincinnati Benziger Bros, 1885), 9; Percy Amaury Talbot, *The Peoples of Southern Nigeria: A Sketch of Their History, Ethnology and Languages, with an Abstract of the 1921 Census*, vol. 2 (London: Oxford University Press, H. Milford, 1926), 1; Diedrich Westermann, *Africa and Christianity* (London: Oxford University Press, 1937, Reprint, New York: AMS Press, 1977), 65, 68.

³⁷ This explains Idowu’s emphatic insistence that African knowledge of God is neither that of “an imported divinity from a European pantheon,” nor that of “a loan-God from the missionaries,” *Towards an Indigenous Church* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), 49; and, “God,” in *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs*, ed. Kwesi Dickson and Paul Ellingworth (London: Lutterworth Press, 1969), 29.

Even then, there are some questions that can be raised in regard to the claims made by proponents of inclusivism. Does the *identity of the divine subject* argument mean to suggest that the knowledge which Christianity and African traditions provide about that divine subject is *identical* too? Is it not conceivable and even possible that two different religious groups could affirm the same divine subject and yet have different and even contradictory apprehensions of that divine subject? And, should the religious affinity between Christianity and the African traditions be understood to suggest that they are *ipso facto* theologically compatible?

These questions draw attention to the fact that affirming the *identity of the divine subject*, the *originality of the African apprehension of God*, and the *religious affinity* between African traditions and Christianity does not in itself answer all the theological questions raised by the encounter between Christian faith and African traditions. Phenomenological similarities may suggest or imply some theological concordance between Christianity and African traditions but such similarities do not prove or provide a basis for it. A Christian theological account is still necessary to, among other things, show: *why* and *how* it is that the divine subject in Christian faith and in African traditions is deemed to be the same; why it is that the apprehension of God in African traditions is original (underived) yet not thereby incompatible with Christian faith; and why and how it is that there is affinity between Christianity and African traditions even when fundamental differences between them remain.

V. How Do The Views of Conscientious Objectors Illuminate African Traditions?

It was pointed out in the introductory chapter that the conscientious objector position in the African debate differs from its counterpart, the pluralist position, in Western debate. The pluralist position in Western debate is funded by three elements (of the pluralistic hypothesis)—historical consciousness, divine ineffability, and the boundedness of human knowing. The conscientious objector position in the African debate is funded mainly by cultural and historical factors which include: the quest to preserve African cultural and religious integrity and identity; the need to voice the moral objections against ideological aspects of Christianity, in particular the negative missionary legacy and Christianity's links with colonialism. The arguments advanced by conscientious objectors against Christianity are of two kinds, the one to be referred to as the *cultural thesis*, and the other as the *foreignness thesis*.

A. The Cultural and Foreignness Theses Presented

According the *cultural thesis*, Christianity is inextricably linked with Western or European intellectual and cultural values, and with Western political and power structures.³⁸ According to Boulaga, Christianity insists on a “monopoly over ‘truth,’” and prefers a “discourse” with other religions based on a relational “logic” in which Christian

³⁸ Okot p'Bitek, *African Religions in Western Scholarship* (Kampala: East African Literature Bureau, 1970), 7; Ali Al'Amin Mazrui, *The Africans: A Triple Heritage* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company 1986), 11, 14, 21, 211, 295.

is presumed to be the “dominant religion.” All this goes to make Christianity intrinsically suspicious of other religions and, therefore, incapable of accepting religious diversity.³⁹

The *foreignness thesis*, based partly on the *cultural thesis*, claims that as a religion, Christianity is foreign to Africa. It is worth noting that proponents of this view tend to identify what Christianity is *essentially* with what Christianity has been *empirically*, especially in the history and experience of many African societies. The fact that empirical Christianity has historically been tainted by, among other things, European ethnocentrism in missionary practice, and by apparent complicity in the enslavement and colonization of Africans is, in the view of this thesis, a strong indicator that it is foreign to and against Africans. The demonization of African peoples and culture in Western scholarship, both Christian and secular is, on this view, additional collateral evidence that confirms Christianity’s foreignness credentials.⁴⁰

³⁹ Eboussi Boulaga, *Christianity without Fetishes: An African Critique and Recapture of Christianity*, 14, 44. By linking the absolute truth claims of Christianity to the mission imperative and to the imperial designs of Christian nations (colonial powers) Boulaga echoes ideas originally voiced by Troeltsch. According to Troeltsch, the “missionary enterprise has always been, in part, simply a concomitant of the political, military, and commercial expansion of a state or nation, but also an outcome of the religious enthusiast’s zeal for conversion [which is itself] intimately connected to the claim to absolute validity,” in “Christianity Among World Religions,” in *Christian Thought: Its History and Application*, 28.

⁴⁰ Osofo Okomfo Kwabena Damuah, a former Roman Catholic priest – a.k.a. Father Vincent Kwabena Damuah – repudiated Christianity because he believed that it was incapable of affirming true African cultural identity. A succinct presentation of Damuah and the alternative African religious movement he founded, Afrikania, is in Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion*, chap. 2.

B. The Cultural and Foreignness Theses Critiqued

There is no doubt that the *cultural* and *foreignness theses* shine a spotlight on the sins of the church over which Christianity is rightly criticized.⁴¹ And, while a Christian apologetic response to counter unfair or misleading criticisms is entirely in order, it should not gloss over or attempt to justify evils in which Christians may have been complicit. Most Christians agree that racial discrimination and the willful participation in unjust political and economic power structures like slave trade, slavery, and colonialism, is incompatible with the gospel. The issue with which this discussion is concerned, however, is whether the *cultural* and *foreignness theses* sheds new light on *what is already there* in African religious traditions. Although these theses are inspired by and appeal to real facts in the history and experience of the church in Africa, questions can be raised in regard to the claims and conclusion they make on two fronts.

First, it is debatable whether it is appropriate or even justifiable for the *cultural thesis* to conclude *à la* Troeltsch⁴² that Christianity is intrinsically European simply because of Christianity's extended sojourn within the cultural matrix and territorial

⁴¹ Racial discrimination, slavery, slave trade, and colonialism are some of the blots on the story of Christianity for which it is sadly true, as Frank Russell Barry has observed, that "The one really formidable argument against the truth of the Christian religion is the record of the Christian Church," *The Relevance of the Church* (London: Nisbet and Co. Ltd., 1935), 46.

⁴² Ironically this argument is similar to Troeltsch's regarding the European nature of the Christian religion. In his "Christianity Among World Religions," in *Christian Thought: Its History and Application*, 24, Troeltsch says:

It is historical facts that have wielded Christianity into the closest connection with civilizations of Greece, Rome, and Northern Europe. All our thoughts and feelings are impregnated with Christian notions and Christian presuppositions; and conversely, our whole Christianity is indissolubly bound up with elements of the ancient and modern civilizations of Europe. From being a Jewish sect Christianity has become the religion of all Europe. It stands or falls with European Civilization whilst on its part it has entirely lost its oriental character and has become Hellenized and Westernized.

Paul Gifford, a contemporary critic of Christianity in Africa, views Christianity as a "cultural product honed in West," *African Christianity: Its Public Role* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 321, 333.

boundaries of Europe. Equally questionable is the fact that the *foreignness thesis* deduces what Christian is essentially based, not on Christianity's official claims but, on what are clearly aberrational events and practices of empirical Christianity—ethnocentrism in the missionary enterprise, slavery, slave trade, and colonialism—in the history of the church. It fails to take into consideration the fact that by the church's own admission these events and practices are not representative of what Christianity is or what it stands for. Both theses also ignore a distinction usually made between the Christian message and its cultural embodiment; between divine action and the human response to that activity, obedient or otherwise. For if this distinction is valid, it means that although failure at the level of the human response undermines the credibility of the human witness, yet it does not necessarily undermine the credibility of the message itself or the authority it may possess.⁴³

Second, the worldwide movement of Christianity into countless cultures calls into question the *cultural* and *foreignness theses*. Both stand contradicted by the contemporary religious demographic shift that is rapidly making Christianity less a 'European' religion and more a religion of Africa and other parts of the global south.⁴⁴

⁴³ According to Paul, for instance, the utter failure of the people of Israel to obey God's law did not invalidate the veracity of God's law and promises regarding the salvation to Jews and Gentiles, Rom. 3:1-3, 21-26; 4:5; 15:7-9.

⁴⁴ Regarding the contemporary demographic shift of Christianity from the global north to the peoples of the global south see David B. Barrett, George Kurian, and Todd M. Johnson, *World Christian Encyclopedia: A Comparative Survey of Churches and Religions in the Modern World*. Vol. I, *The World by Countries: Religionists, Churches, Ministries*, and Vol. II, *The World by Segments: Religions, Peoples, Languages, Cities, Topics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). For a recent comment on the growth of Christianity in Africa see Philip Jenkins' *The New Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, and *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South*, both published by Oxford University Press, 2002 and 2006 respectively. Also see his "The Next Christianity," in *The Atlantic Monthly* 290, no. 3 (October 2002): 53-68. For other helpful reflections on this topic see a collection of essays edited by Joel A. Carpenter and Lamin Sanneh, *The Changing Face of Christianity: Africa, the West, and the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) – especially the "Preface," vii-viii; and another by

This development raises a counter question to the claims made by proponents of the *cultural* and *foreignness* theses: If Christianity is intrinsically European and therefore foreign to Africans, then its rapid spread all over Africa is wholly inexplicable. For how is it possible that a religion that, presumably, has no intrinsic or organic connections with the religious aspirations of Africans could appeal to them so strongly? Does this not suggest that proponents of the *cultural* and *foreignness* theses both fail to read or interpret African traditions correctly? And, aren't they contradicted, even more fundamentally, by scripture and Christian theology? For, according to scripture, God intended the church to be, not only multiracial, multiethnic, and multilingual (Acts 10:35; Rev. 5:9; 7:9; 11:9; 13:7; 14:6; 22:2) but also, fundamentally non-sectarian (Rom. 3:22, 29; 9:24; 10:12; Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11). Besides, the history of salvation is based on promises whose scope includes all the peoples and nations of the earth (Gen. 12:1-3; Is. 42:6; 49:6; 51:4; 60:3; Luke 2:32; Acts 13:47; 26:23). Paul himself, as will be shown in later section, casts a theological vision which locates all humanity, both Jews and Gentiles, within a single universal religious trajectory marked out by divine revelatory activity (Acts 14:8-18; 17:22-32).

It is quite clear that some of the claims made conscientious objectors deserve a fair amount of skepticism for two main reasons. First, its critique of Christianity is deficient theologically since it is done, not on the basis of Christianity's fundamental claims and beliefs but, on the basis of its mistakes and abuses. Second, its overall position is incapable of explaining the appeal the gospel still has in Africa suggesting that it, rather than Christianity, is out of step with the heart bit of African religious traditions.

Craig Ott, Harold Netland, and Wilbert R. Shenk, *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006).

From what has been said in this section, it is apparent the threefold typology framework does not necessarily facilitate a deeper African traditions or their interaction with Christian faith. The next section presents a framework or approach that does this. This approach, as has already been indicated, begins from the assumption there is onus upon Christian faith to account of *what is already there* in African traditions.

VI. The Onus on Christianity to Account for African Religious Traditions

The discussion in three preceding sections (III, IV, and V) shows that the debate within the threefold typology is more inwardly inclined towards presenting and defending specific Christian truths, than it outwardly towards providing a better theological grasp of African traditions. In order for the latter to happen, the debate needs to be pivot away from its inward focus to a more broadly defined mission and focus. This broader mission and focus is found in the assumption there is *prima facie* onus on Christianity to account for *what is already there* in African traditions. The *prima facie onus* derives from two theological imperatives—one from creation and providence, and the other, from of the character of gospel. These theological imperatives will now be examined in some detail.

A. The Theological Imperative from Creation and Providence

The duty to account for *what is already there* in African traditions flows out of a Christian understanding of creation and its relations to God. Christians believe, and it is indeed an article of faith, that God created the world and everything in it (Gen. 1-2).⁴⁵

Affirming the divine creation of the world means that there are at least two *givens*—

⁴⁵ This is stated explicitly in scripture and affirmed or assumed in all the major creeds and confessions of the church – the *Apostles Creed*; *Nicene Creed*; *Athanasian Creed*; *Heidelberg Catechism*, Q & A 6, 23, 26-28; *Belgic Confession*, articles 12-14.

things which are necessarily the case—that shape a Christian conception of the world. The principal *given* is the lordship and sovereignty of the creator God over creation. The subordinate *given* is the creatureliness of everything created (Ps. 24:1). The principal *given*, lordship and sovereignty, derive from God’s singularity as creator. The subordinate *given* is dependent on the principal *given*.

Several things entail from this, among them: that God is, as such, the owner and absolute Lord of all that is created (Ex. 9:29b; Ps. 14:1); that everything in creation is transparent to the creator (Heb. 4:13); that there nothing in creaturely experience that does not fall within the purview of divine interest and care (Ps. 139:1-12); all creaturely existence is immediately related to God, not least of all, because it has no independent capacity to subsist or exist except by the divine will and grace;⁴⁶ that nothing in creation is truly or fully accounted for unless it is accounted for in relation to the creator on whom it is absolutely dependent. Ultimately, it means that the onus to account for *what is already there* in African traditions is ultimately, no more or no less than, placing that which is of the creaturely realm in its proper ratio to the Creator.

Closely connected to the way God is related to world is the Christian understanding of *divine revelation*. The connection lies in the fact that in choosing to create a creaturely realm God also willed to reveal himself through it, most especially to humanity (Ps. 19:1-4; Rom. 1:19-20). There are two things involved in this process: First, God, to use Bavinck’s words, “deposited” his “divine and eternal thought in creatures in a creaturely way” in such a way that they would be apprehended by means of “human

⁴⁶ God, according to Herman Bavinck, sustains creation in such a way that “his will, his power, his being is immediately present in every creature and every event,” *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, *God and Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 610.

thought processes.⁴⁷ Second, God willed to sustain creation in such a way that it continues to witness to his power and presence. Divine revelation or witness in creation, far from being an intrinsic quality of the created order, is, in fact, the product of direct divine activity and imprint on the created order.⁴⁸ There is, therefore, a duty upon Christians to discern, name, and describe the features of this original divine self-communication in nature and in every sphere of human life.

B. The Theological Imperative from the Gospel

The theological imperative of the gospel flows from the life, teaching, and work of the person of Christ. What the gospel claims leaves little room for neutrality or equivocation. It is the claim that God appeared in the man Jesus Christ, and that through his life, death, and resurrection has secured salvation and reconciliation with God for all humanity once for all (2 Cor. 5:19; Heb.1:1-4). The claim that salvation is possible only through faith in Christ (Matt. 11:27; John 14:6; Acts 4:12; 1Tim. 2:5) means that all other religions, including African traditions, are thereby called into question.⁴⁹ This raises several questions, among them: Of what value are other religious traditions in view of the

⁴⁷ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, 310.

⁴⁸ T. H. L. Parker rightly points out that the marks of divinity on the created order should not be taken casually, as if they were an integral or intrinsic attribute of the created order. In his view, God “need not have left these *notae* [marks] on His work.” The fact that God did so means that the *notae* are “a deliberate self manifestation” for the benefit of humanity, “Calvin’s Concept of Revelation,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 2 (1949), 33.

⁴⁹ The challenge, which the gospel poses to African and other non-Christian religious traditions, has sometimes been referred to as the ‘scandal of particularity.’ See Sir Norman Anderson discussion in *Christianity and World Religions: The Challenge of Pluralism* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1984), 138-143. It is this scandal which John Hick objects to. As far as he is concerned, to take the gospel claims to be true “literally” is to suggest what is unacceptable to him, namely that “the whole religious life of mankind, beyond the stream of Judaic-Christian faith is thus by implication excluded as lying outside the sphere of salvation,” and therefore that “the large majority of the human race so far has not been saved,” *The Myth of God Incarnate* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977), 179, 180

gospel? What role do they play? And, what is the meaning and value of their continued existence?

The primary burden of answering these questions rests squarely with Christian faith. For, it is the Christian message, after all, that calls into question, not only the value but ultimately, the *raison d'être* of other religious traditions. This means that the duty to account for other religious traditions does not arise from external instigation but from the character of the gospel itself. This duty can be conceived of as having a negative and a positive side. On negative side it is fact what the gospel claims jettisons all other religions. The positive side is in regard to the identity of the one who is revealed in the gospel. For the one who revealed himself as Redeemer in the man Jesus Christ cannot be regarded as a total stranger to those in other religions. He, the Redeemer is, in fact, the Creator who has already revealed himself through what he created (Rom. 1:19-20), and who is, in effect, coming (or returning) to what he created (John 1:11). He, as it were, is the one who has never left himself without a witness (Acts 14: 15-17; 17:24-31); and is, ultimately, the owner who is returning to reclaim what rightfully belongs to him (Luke 20:9-19).

It ought to be clear from what has been said so far that the duty to account for *what is already there* in a non-Christian tradition is not motivated primarily by the narrower or more restricted Christocentric concern to demonstrate the uniqueness and finality of divine revelation in Christ. Nor is it motivated by the soteriological concern to answer questions regarding the ultimate status or fate of those—in African traditions or other religious traditions—who have not yet heard the gospel or who died without hearing it. Rather, the duty to account for other religious traditions is motivated by

theological imperative that derives from what Christians affirm regarding divine activity in creation and providence, and divine activity in the person of Christ. Are there any scriptural examples that illustrate how to account for *what is already there* in a non-Christian religious tradition? The next section answers this question in the affirmative.

VII. Biblical Example of How to Account for Non-Christian Traditions

Are there places or stories in scripture in which a process like the one suggested here, to give account for *what is already there* in a non-Christian religious tradition, is illustrated, implied, or assumed? An argument could be made that the promise-fulfillment relationship between the Old and New Testament has adumbrations of giving an account of *what is already there*. There is a sense in which the New Testament explains or gives an account—and in this case, the definitive account—of *what is already there* in the Old Testament, laying bare its meaning, significance, and fulfillment. The road to Emmaus story would certainly qualify as an instance in which Christ gives an account of the Old Testament, that is, of “Moses and all the Prophets,” in terms of himself and the events surrounding him (Luke 24:13-35). The Sermon on the Mount contains a pre-Passion elaboration of the same point (Mat. 5-7). Christ portrays his own work and ministry in relation to the Old Testament.⁵⁰ He portrays the “organic relation” between the Old and New insofar as he fulfills the Law and Prophets (Mat. 5:17-19). But he also portrays the “tension” in other areas such as divorce, oaths, and retributive justice (revenge?),

⁵⁰ According to C. H. Dodd, Matthew presents the Sermon on the Mount “as the new law which supersedes the law of the Old Testament, [that is], the law of the Kingdom of God,” *Gospel and Law: The Relation of Faith and Ethics in Early Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951), 64-65.

seemingly suggesting that he, perhaps, came to abrogate the law (Mat. 5:31, 33, 38)?⁵¹

For our purposes, however, the biblical example that best illustrates how and what it means to account of *what is already there* in a non-Christian religious traditions is found in Paul's missionary encounters. The most relevant of these are two encounters with non-Christian religious groups, one in Lystra (Acts 14:8-18), and other in Athens (Acts 17:16-32).

A. Paul's Encounters in Lystra and Athens as a Paradigm for How to Account for Non-Christian Traditions (Acts 14:8-18; 17:16-32)

There are two considerations which make Paul's encounters in Lystra and Athens ideal for this discussion. First, the stories in these passages—almost always read in relation to Rom. 1:18-24—are important loci in African Christian theology. There are various reasons for this, among them that (i) many African theologians see in the Lycaonian and Athenian stories a reprisal of the encounter that is taking place between Christianity and African religious traditions (ii) they also see, in Paul's messages, a clear instance of the use of natural revelation in the proclamation of the gospel—something which is relevant to their own quest to integrate indigenous African knowledge of God into Christian faith and theology, and (iii) they see, in Paul's overall response to the religious traditions of the Lycaonians and Athenians, a model for how to respond to their own African religious traditions. It worth noting, however, that African theologians differ in how they have appropriated these stories. On the one hand, proponents of inclusivism

⁵¹ Daniel J Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 1991), 83. According to Calvin, the Sermon on Mount shows that there is “agreement between *the law* and the Gospel,” that the new covenant, not only “confirmed and ratified” the old covenant, but that “its design was to give a perpetual sanction” to the old covenant, *Calvin Commentaries*, vol. 16, *Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979. Reprint, 2005), Matt. 5:17-19.

read these stories as, *mutatis mutandis*, showing that Paul acknowledged and took into account or took seriously the non-Christian religious apprehension of the reality of God or of the transcendent.⁵² For proponents of exclusivism, on the other hand, these stories show, among other things, that the non-Christian religious apprehension of God is altogether idolatrous and therefore not to be taken seriously.⁵³

The second consideration for choosing these passages is strategic. The context and exegetical history surrounding these passages is relevant to the argument in this chapter. Much of the critical scholarship takes the book of Acts to be a work of literary composition not history. Luke, they claim, chooses characters, places, and situations for the purpose of describing the movement of the gospel from Jerusalem to major centers of Gentile culture and intellectual life, Athens and Rome. For the critical scholarship, the

⁵² See Bolaji Idowu, *Olódùmare: God in Yoruba Belief* (London: Longmans, 1962), 30-31, 202; *Towards an Indigenous Church* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), 24-26; "God," both in *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs*, ed. Kwesi Dickson and Paul Ellingworth (London: Lutterworth Press, 1969), 24-29; *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1973), 165-173; Osadolor Imasogie, "Christian Apologetic Theology in A West African Context." *Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* 7, no. 2 (March 1, 1980): 134-143 "African Traditional Religions and Christian Faith," *Review & Expositor* 70, no.3 (Summer 1973): 289-292; "Langmead Casserley's Understanding of Christian Philosophy As a Basis for Apologetics" (Th.D. thesis, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1972), 205-224, 251-261; Kwame Bediako, "The Primal Imagination and the Opportunity for a New Theological Idiom," in *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of Non-Western Religion* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995), 101-102.

⁵³ Byang Kato, "The Theology of Eternal Salvation," in *Biblical Christianity in Africa: A Collection of Papers and Addresses* (Achimoto, Ghana: Africa Christian Press, 1985), 15-22; "Christianity as an African Religion," in *Biblical Christianity in Africa*, 32-39; *Theological Pitfalls in Africa* (Kisumu, Kenya: Evangel Publishing House, 1975), 110, 115-126; "A Critique of Incipient Universalism in Tropical Africa" (Ph.D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1974), 182-198; "Limitations of Natural Revelation" (S.T.M thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1971); Tokunboh Adeyemo, *Salvation in African Tradition* (Nairobi: Evangel Publishing House, 1979), 22, 46; Lenard Nyirongo, *The gods of Africa or the God of the Bible: The Snares of African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective*, Scientific Contributions of the Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education. Series F2: Brochures of the Institute for Reformational Studies, no. 70 (Potchefstroom, South Africa: Institute for Reformational Studies, 1997), 16-19.

main value of the book of Acts is in its theology not its history.⁵⁴ Fortunately this is not the only line of Acts scholarship that is available. This chapter and dissertation prefers the scholarship that is in line with the traditional view that the book of Acts is “an authentic transcript of the recollections of an eye witness.”⁵⁵

From this viewpoint then, it is possible to see that notwithstanding the differences between the critical and more traditional scholarship, there is agreement in four key areas (i) although the passages relate two different encounters, the parallels and similarities between them are such that the exegetical scholarship almost always deals with one in relation to each other (ii) it is generally acknowledged that Paul is the chief protagonist in both encounters, and that in each encounter he addresses a non-Christian religious audience—the Lycaonians in Lystra, and the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers in Athens (iii) in both encounters Paul’s message is based *primarily* on the evidence of divine activity in creation and only *secondarily* on the facts of the gospel, and (iv) it is also generally agreed that there are least three main theological motifs in Paul’s message: God and creation (Acts 14:15c; 17:23b-24), natural revelation and human religious

⁵⁴ See Martin Dibelius, *Studies in the Acts of the Apostles*, ed. Heinrich Greeven (London: SCM 1956); Bertil Gärtner, *The Areopagus Speech and Natural Revelation*, trans. Carolyn Hannay King (Uppsala: C. W. K. Gleerup, 1955); Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible, vol. 31 (New York: Doubleday, 1998).

⁵⁵ A. D. Nock, *Essay on Religion and the Ancient World II* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1972), 823. Also F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, rev. edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988); C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, vols. 1 and 2 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994, 1998). Robert W. Wall, “The Acts of the Apostles,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, General Articles & Introduction, Commentary, & Reflections for each Book of the Bible including the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, vol. 10 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 198-202, 241-250.

predilection (Acts 14:15c; 17:23b-24), and a critique of idolatry (Acts 14:15; 17:24-25, 29-30).⁵⁶

In looking at these stories, therefore, the goal of this subsection is to show that Paul's response to the Lycaonian and Athenians is a model for how to account for *what was already there* in a non-Christian religious tradition theologically. To do this, we will examine first, the content of Paul's messages, and then draw some lessons for it.

B. The Content of Paul's Message

As has already been indicated, Paul's message to the Lycaonians and Athenians is based more on divine activity in creation and providence than on the gospel. Some of the theological premises Paul uses—God and creation, revelation, humanity, and the human religious response to God—appear to have been known to, or at least shared by, his non-Christian audience. This has led some exegetes to argue that Paul's message is “neither kerygmatic nor Christological,” but merely “theological.”⁵⁷ As far as they are concerned, the Lycaonian and Mars hill messages fail to hit the high-water mark of the gospel sufficiently to raise some doubts about their Pauline origin.⁵⁸ In other words, those who take this view feel that Paul's message was not evangelistic enough. They are troubled by the fact that Paul uses theological premises his audiences are likely to have been familiar with. In taking this view they seem to suggest, or at very least assume, that the content of

⁵⁶ See Gärtner, *The Areopagus Speech and Natural Revelation*, 37, 49, 75.

⁵⁷ The speech, adds Fitzmyer, “is more *praeparatio* than *evangelium*,” *The Acts of the Apostles*, 529, 532, 602.

⁵⁸ According to Dibelius, the theology of the Lycaonian and Athenian messages is “absolutely foreign to Paul's own theology...[and that of] the entire new Testament,” *Studies in the Acts of the Apostles*, 71.

Paul's sermons merely reprised what the Lycaonians and Athenians already knew about God, and nothing more. A closer look at the message suggests otherwise.

Two things may be noted. First, while it is true that Paul's message relies on familiar theological motifs, it is not true that the content of his message is identical with what the Lycaonians and Athenians would have known about those motifs. There is no doubt that Paul assumes the gospel. His message is presented from a standpoint made possible by revelation in Christ. Second, the content of Paul's message to the Lycaonians and Athenians is not indicative of the full repertoire of what a gospel proclamation could or should ordinarily include. For, as will soon be shown, there is more that Paul could have said on each of the major points of his message, but which he deliberately omits. Since the omission cannot be attributed to ignorance or carelessness on Paul's part, a more suitable explanation is called for. The best explanation for the omission is that this was part of Paul's strategy. Paul delimited or accommodated his message to the circumstances and needs of his audience. In analyzing the content of Paul message, therefore, it is as important to pay attention to what he explicitly states as it is to what he apparently leaves out. There are five points in Paul's message to consider:

1. God and Creation

Although there is criticism of idolatry in Paul's message (Acts 14:15; 17:24-25), yet it is also clear that neither idolatry nor the existence of God, as such, are the main focus of his message. If that were the case Paul would have launched-out into theistic proofs and polemic against idolatry, especially given the idolatrous religious beliefs and

practices of the Lycaonians and Athenians.⁵⁹ As a matter of fact, his audience would have had some familiarity with this approach given their much older contacts with Jewish apologetics.⁶⁰ Instead, the focus of Paul's message is on two related things. First, on *who* or *what* the divine being is, namely that he is the *One* creator God who is absolute and distinct from creation, and the Lord of it all (Acts 14:15c; 17:24-25). Second, on the sovereignty of God exhibited in the providential ordering of the created order, particularly in the determining of the place, purpose, and boundaries of human life within the created order (Acts 14:17; 17:26).

Paul, it would seem, wished to underline the fact that only to a creator God, such as the one he was preaching, to borrow Bavinck's words, "belongs the one undivided legislative, judicial, and executive power."⁶¹ He surmised that the idolatry of the Lycaonians and Athenians stemmed, not from uncertainty about the reality and the existence of God, but from uncertainty concerning the "nature of God" or concerning, as Calvin put it, "what God was [or is] who is the creator of heaven and earth."⁶² His message, therefore, sheds new light on *who* this creator God is. Yet it is precisely here

⁵⁹ According to John Chrysostom Paul (in Acts 14:14-17) "does not wish to swell the accusation [concerning idolatry] against them [the Lycaonians]." He would rather that "they themselves should refer all to God," *The Homilies of St. John Chrysostom: Acts of the Apostles*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series*, Vol. 11, ed. Philip Schaff, trans., with notes and indices by Rev. J. Walker, Rev. J. Sheppard, and Rev. H. Browne (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994).

⁶⁰ The problem with Lycaonians and Athenians was not, as far as Calvin was concerned, about the existence of God. The former had "persuaded themselves that it [the miracle] is the work of God; this is well," while the latter "were [already] persuaded that there was some divinity," *Calvin Commentaries*, vol. 16, Acts 14:11-12, 15; 17:24. Similarly, according to Barret, Paul is not presenting the usual Hellenist Jewish apologetic that God is known through creation. Rather, he is presenting "truth about God and his relation to world" which is "known only by the Word or gospel," *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, vol. 2, 839, 840.

⁶¹ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* vol. 2, 616.

⁶² Calvin, *Calvin Commentaries*, vol. 16, Acts 17:24.

that a question has to be raised. Why was Paul not more explicit about *who* this creator God is, especially as revealed in Christ? The lone reference to the resurrection and final judgment (Act 17:31) seems more cryptic than explicit. Why didn't he say that this creator God had revealed himself in his Son, the man Jesus Christ, who is also the "exact representation" and "image of the invisible God," in whom the "fullness of deity" dwells (Heb. 1:3; Col. 1:15; 2:9)? Shouldn't he have filled out his portrait of the creator God with the history of salvation, including the incarnation and atonement, before presenting the resurrection?

2. *Revelation*

It is worth noting that Paul makes no attempt to argue or to justify divine revelation. He seems to assume that his audience knew or believed that God or the gods did or could reveal themselves. His focus, instead, is on the meaning and significance of divine self revelation or witness in and through creation. God's self revelation in creation is double edged. On the one hand, divine revelation in creation points to the existence and being of God as, among other things, the Being from whom all life and being derives, as the One who is present in all his creation, and as the One who may be found by all those who seek him (Acts 17:26-27; Rom. 1:19-20; Heb. 11:6). On the other hand, divine revelation in creation points to God's relationship to his creatures, especially to human beings. In this regard, revelation is God's gracious approach and invitation to human beings to be his children, and to participate in the riches of his grace and love; it is his

gracious condescension to fraternize with human beings (Acts 17:26-27).⁶³ That being the case, it means that all the physical and material conditions that make human life both possible and enjoyable ought to be looked at, not merely as brute evidence of divine omnipotence and power—which, in a sense, they are—but most really, as sure tokens of God’s tender care and goodwill towards all humanity (Acts 14: 17).

The reason Paul’s message focuses on the meaning and significance of revelation is not too hard to divine. For although people generally concede the existence of God, especially his essential attributes—his deity, omnipotence, omniscience, goodness, justice, and so on—the reality of evil, hardship, suffering, and depravity in human experience is such that it is not always self evident that God is loving and well disposed towards humanity. There is, therefore, need for authoritative witness to the fact of God’s steadfast goodness and love towards human beings. It is to this authoritative witness that Paul’s message speaks. Yet even here, it seems uncharacteristic of Paul not to make more direct use of the incarnation as one might expect him to in evangelistic situations like these. The incarnation, after all, is the event in which God’s love for humanity has been singularly demonstrated (John 3:16; Rom. 5:6-8; 8:31-35; Heb. 2:14-18; 4:14-16).

3. *Humanity*

Paul’s message dwells at length on humanity (Acts 14:17; 17:26-28). He focuses on the fact that human beings are the product of God’s loving will, and that they derive from a common ancestor and share in a common human nature. They also share in a

⁶³ It has already been noted by T. H. L. Parker that far from being a necessary fact of nature or a casual happenstance, God’s self revelation in creation is “a deliberate self manifestation” for the benefit of humanity, “Calvin’s Concept of Revelation” in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 2, (1949), 33. “Revelation therefore,” says Bavinck, “is always an act of grace; in it God condescends to meet his creature, a creature made in his own image, *Reformed Dogmatics*, Vol. 1, 310.

common divine determination which is manifested in a common religious predilection. According to Bruce, the common religious predilection indicated in Acts 17:27-28 is the same idea expressed in Rom. 1:20, namely that all humanity possesses a culpable knowledge of God.⁶⁴ It has also been suggested that Paul's emphasis on the common human origin and nature was meant to challenge and to correct those who, like the Athenians, might claim to be either racially autochthonous or racially superior.⁶⁵ Still, even here there are important aspects of a Christian anthropology that one would have expected Paul to mention—like the *imago dei*, the doctrine of sin and total depravity—but which he does not.⁶⁶ Of course it might just be the case that it was neither feasible nor expedient for him to include all the major truths of the Christian message in single sermon. It is nevertheless true that in both Lystra and in Athens explicit gospel themes, though undoubtedly assumed, are muted.

4. *Human Religious Response to God*

Since it is obvious that the Lycaonians and Athenians took religion to be a normal or integral part of the human vocation (Acts 17:22), there was no need for Paul to argue or justify religion as such. For by appealing to God and creation, common human nature, and the common religious predilection, Paul seems to assume that all humanity, Jews and

⁶⁴ There is, says Bruce, “no hint [in Paul’s message or tone]...that the Athenians’ confessed ignorance of the divine nature [Acts 17:23] was blameless,” *The Book of Acts*, 338.

⁶⁵ In his commentary on Acts 17:26 F. F. Bruce points out that Athenians took “pride” in the legend regarding their autochthonous origin, that is, that they “sprung from the soil of their native Attica.” According to him, however, what Paul says clearly indicates that “Neither in nature nor in grace, neither in the old creation nor in the new, is there any room for ideas of racial superiority,” *The Book of Acts*, 337.

⁶⁶ Given the idolatry in Lystra and Athens, a Calvin-like description of human nature as “a perpetual factory of idols” would have been entirely appropriate, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), I. x. 8.

Gentiles alike, are participants in a single universal religious trajectory whose path is marked out by divine revelatory activity in creation, on the one hand, and by the human response to it, on the other (Acts 14:8-18; 17:22-32). Instead Paul is more concerned to draw attention to the dilemma or paradox which religion or the creaturely worship of God (henceforth referred to as the dilemma or paradox of religion) poses.⁶⁷

The dilemma or paradox of religion arises from two competing or parallel truths. On the one hand, there is the truth regarding the *necessity* and *propriety* of the creaturely or human worship of the creator God. For it is axiomatic that the creator God is, not only the *sole* true object of worship but that he is also, the *supremely worthy* object who must be worshipped (Rev. 4:11; 2 Sam. 22:4; 1 Chr. 16:25; Ps. 18:3; 48:1; 95:1-7; 96:4; 145:3).⁶⁸ In other words, the reality of the creator God imposes a universal creaturely duty to worship him.⁶⁹ This may explain why Paul acknowledges the religiosity of the Athenians without disparaging it (Acts 17:22). On the other hand, the creaturely worship of God falls in class apart among all human activities. Unlike most human activities, the creaturely worship of God (religion) faces obstacles that make it a complicated, even

⁶⁷ In his sermon which is based on Acts 17:22-32 titled “The Theologian” (Part III) Paul Tillich suggests that Paul’s message highlights a “paradox” in human religious experience. For him, the Athenian worship directed to “an unknown God...[was] witness to their religious knowledge in spite of their religious ignorance.” The episode as whole exemplifies the universal paradox that though “mankind [humanity] is not strange to God” yet they are “estranged from Him;” is “never without God” yet continually “perverts the picture of God;” is “never without the knowledge of God” yet “is ignorant of God,” *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Charles Scribners’s Sons, 1948), 125-129.

⁶⁸ By laying down his life to redeem sinful humanity, Christ, the Son, has attained the honor that is due God alone. Like God the Father he is fully deserving of worship and adoration (Rev. 5:6-11).

⁶⁹ Scripture, especially the Old Testament, is full of claims where it is either assumed or explicitly stated that all creation – humans, non-human creatures, all physical phenomena – responds or ought to respond to God in worship and praise. The earth is exhorted to shout for joy, to sing praises, and to bow down to God simply because he is the author of life, and because he is the Lord whose reign brings gladness and rejoicing to all (1Chro. 16:23-34; Ps. 9:7-20; 66:1-4; 93; 96:1, 11-13; 97: 1-6; 99:1-3; 146:5-10; 148).

impossible undertaking. There are three obstacles worth mentioning. The first is that the transcendence of God poses the problem of the *possibility* of religion. The *infinite gulf* between creature and creator means that God is so absolutely transcendent in himself that all human attempts to approach him are futile (1Tim. 6:16).⁷⁰ Second, God's aseity—absolute independence and self-sufficiency—poses the problem of the *basis* and *justifiability* of religion. God's aseity renders human worship utterly superfluous since God neither needs nor craves it (Acts 17:24-25). Third, the *holiness of God* poses the problem of the *acceptability* of human worship. God's holiness antecedently disqualifies worship from creatures who are in fact sinful (Acts 17:27; Rom 1:19-21).⁷¹

The dilemma then is this: Humans have a duty to offer worship to God freely because he is the creator who is worthy to be worshipped. Yet, given that the object of worship is a transcendent God, it is not within their human powers or prerogatives to determine what acceptable worship of God is. The onus to do so rests upon the object of worship himself, for it is he (God) alone who knows the mind and will of God, and who is authorized to speak on God's behalf. Since only God knows what God thinks and wills (1Cor. 2:10-12), only God himself is qualified to prescribe what worship is or ought to be.⁷² What is striking in this regard is that Paul's message on the human religious

⁷⁰ According to Bavinck, a gulf comes into view "the moment we dare to speak of God." It is the "gulf between the Infinite and the finite, between eternity and time, between being and becoming, between the All and the nothing," *Reformed Dogmatics*, Vol. 2, 30.

⁷¹ Chief among human sinful predilections is what Calvin describes as the "common [human] vice...to be perverse and wrong interpreters of the works of God." *Calvin Commentaries*, vol. 16, Acts 14: 11.

⁷² Since God, according to Calvin, is the only "fit witness of himself, and is not known except through himself," *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), I. iii, 21, it follows that "God is no otherwise rightly worshipped than according to his appointment," Calvin, *Calvin Commentaries*, vol. 16, Acts 14:15.

response is not more polemical than it actually is. It is true he offers a critique of idolatry but in a very gentle and indirect way. His critique is basically that the idolatry of the Lycaonians and Athenians is inconsistent with what they know or ought to know God to be (Acts 14:15; 17:24-25, 29). It is noticeable that his critique does not have the sharp edge of rebuke and “blame” which one finds in Romans 1:20ff.⁷³ Indeed, given the corollary emphasis on divine forbearance with human waywardness the rebuke here is comparatively mild (Acts 14:16-17; 17:30).

5. *Divine Response to the Human Religious Response*

The divine response to the human religious response (to divine revelation) is perhaps the one aspect of Paul’s message which does not have a corollary in the religious traditions of his audience. For, the divine response in the work and person of Christ—signaled by the resurrection—is not same as the original revelation. It is revelation of a different kind. For, it is divine revelation that addresses the dilemma of religion. For Christ, by his incarnation has bridged the *infinite gulf* between humanity and divinity; he has inaugurated and made *possible* a dispensation of friendship and goodwill between God and humanity (Luke 1:30-37; 2:10-14; Heb. 2:9-18). By his utter obedience and submission to the Father, Christ has manifested and demonstrated the true *basis* and *justification* of religion, that is, the true creaturely response and attitude to God (John 6:28-29; Heb. 10:1-14). By his suffering and death, Christ has removed all obstacles that rendered human worship *unacceptable* to God; and, by his resurrection, he has proved his victory over sin and death, and obtained the seal of divine approval of his mission and

⁷³ Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 529.

Lordship (Col. 2:13-15; Acts 17:29-32). Although this part of Paul's message is not fleshed-out in so many words, a case could be made that his reference to the resurrection and judgment (Act 17:31) assumes it.

C. Lessons from Paul's Approach to Non-Christian Traditions

The question for us is: Is there anything to be learned from Paul's response to the Lycaonians and Athenians concerning how to account for *what is already there* in a non-Christian religious tradition? The answer to this question is yes. Three things stand out as factors that need to be considered in any Christian engagement of non-Christian religious traditions: the theological frame of reference, the presumption of a universal religious trajectory, and the presumption of a divine plan.

1. A Theological Frame of Reference: Relative Priority of the Theological over the Christological

The frame of reference which can be discerned in Paul's approach is one which puts general theological motifs—God and creation, common human nature, and a common religious predilection—in the foreground, and Christological motifs—Trinity, incarnation, atonement, and so on—in the background. There are several things in such a theological frame of reference which create a climate that can facilitate a deeper penetration of non-Christian religious traditions. First, it casts all human existence, without exception, in theological perspective. Second, by holding the Christological motifs in abeyance it creates room and grants permission for the liberty examine all human activity, good or bad, from the standpoint of relationship to God. In other words, all aspects of human existence and activity are legitimate objects of theological

investigation. Third, it enables the theological engagement to take place on premises which the non-Christian tradition either shares in or is familiar with.⁷⁴ This has pedagogical advantages as well. Calvin, for instance, observes, with regard to Paul's Lycaonian encounter, that by choosing to "begin with things which are better known" to his audience he gained their hearing.⁷⁵ Finally, this frame of reference also puts the non-Christian tradition on the defensive because it challenges them on territory they regard as their own, thereby preempting some of the likely objections.⁷⁶

2. *Presumption of A Universal Religious Trajectory*

Also discernable in Paul's approach is the presumption of a universal religious trajectory. The appeal to general theological motifs—God and creation, common human nature, and the common religious predilection—has the effect of placing all humanity, Jews and Gentiles alike, in a single universal religious trajectory defined by divine revelatory activity, on the one hand, and by the human response, on the other (Acts 14:8-18; 17:22-32). This presumption has several implications. First, it means that the

⁷⁴ Wall observes that Paul's message at Lystra differs from the gospel proclamations at his previous stop in Pisidian (Acts 13:1-41) primarily because he presents it in an "idiom...apropos to this pagan audience," *The New Interpreter's Bible*, 199; Fitzmyer similarly notes that at the Mars Hill event Paul's "starting point is Athenian religious piety," *The Acts of the Apostles*, 607.

⁷⁵ According to Calvin, because a frontal presentation of the gospel by Paul and Barnabas would have "in vain essayed," the "expedient" course of action was "for them to begin with some other point which was not so far separate from common sense [perception], that they might, afterward, pass over unto Christ," *Calvin Commentaries*, vol. 16, Acts 14:15. According to Chrysostom Paul was following a convention of the time to accommodate one's message to what "is profitable for the hearers," *The Homilies of St. John Chrysostom: Acts of the Apostles*.

⁷⁶ It is important to remember that there were, within the non-Christian religious traditions of the Greco-Roman period, trajectories or sub-traditions, among them: a tradition of philosophical monotheism exemplified in Plato's Demiurge (*Timaeus*); a materialistic and rationalistic critique of idolatry by Epicureans and Stoics, respectively; and, a critique of the notion that human worship was something God needed or required in Euripides and Zeno. See Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, vol. 1, 680; vol. 2, 839-840; Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 532, 607-608; Wall, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, 242-246.

Christian engages the non-Christian tradition, not as a complete outsider or detached observer but, as one who is, at some level, an insider. This is because the Christian, as a participant in an analogous religious trajectory, recognizes herself to be under the same religious obligation which every human being has toward the creator God. Second, the Christian can identify with the non-Christian religious experience without compromising her faith as a Christian. Third, the capacity to identify with the non-Christian religious experience means that the Christian has the ability, so to speak, to walk with the non-Christian the distance between a general religious awareness of God as revealed in creation to an explicit knowledge and response to God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

3. *Presumption of the Divine Plan or Design*

The theological frame of reference and the presumption of a universal religious trajectory suggested above presuppose a divine plan or design. The divine design is implied in the fact of creation and providence (Acts 14:16-17; 17:26-27). The reality of such a design means that the relative priority given to general theological motifs over specifically Christological motifs, in the approach to non-Christian religious traditions, need not be construed as inappropriate subordination of the latter to the former. Both motifs, after all, are comprehended in the divine plan. God's plan of human salvation in Christ presupposes and includes the divine mercy and forbearance which God has towards humanity in general. In other words, in recognizing the grace that saves through Christ one should not lose sight of the grace by which God permits—*εἶσεν*—and overlooks—*ὑπεριδὼν*—the ignorance and error in non-Christian religious traditions (Acts 14:16; 17:30). To use an optical analogy, *spectacles*, prised from Calvin, the divine

plan as revealed in scripture can be likened to a bifocal pair of *spectacles* inset with two lenses: the creation-providence lens that gives one a panoramic view of the general truths given through creation and, the Christological lens whose telescopic power enable one to read the fine print of the truth of the message of salvation.

VIII. Conclusion

There is a great need to understand the ongoing interaction between Christianity and African religious traditions. But to do so presupposes a broad ranging Christian theological grasp of African religious traditions as whole. The ability to achieve a broad ranging theological grasp of African traditions, however, is hampered by the fact that the logic behind the dominant paradigm in this process, which in this case is the threefold typology (exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism), does not lend itself to this goal easily. The logic that drives the typology revolves around the Christocentric and soteriological concerns of Christian faith. The Christocentric logic pulls in the direction of the uniqueness of Christ and the finality of his work. The soteriological logic pulls in the direction of the need or quest to determine the salvific value of other religions, and the ultimate fate of those who have not yet heard the gospel or have died without hearing it. This means that the threefold typology has limited latitude to investigate African traditions, as a whole, for the broader theological significance they might have.

This chapter has proposed an alternative approach to African traditions that is driven by a broader logic—a logic that flows out of the theological imperative of divine activity in creation and providence, on the one hand, and divine activity in Christ, on the other. Moreover, these imperatives are grounded in God's eternal plan or counsel in

which all his activities in creation and redemption are ultimately comprehended. Together, they offer a framework that enables a wide ranging theological grasp of African traditions.

CHAPTER THREE

THE SENSE OF GOD IN AFRICAN TRADITIONS

I. Introduction

This chapter takes up the first of the three foundational elements or *sensibilities* of African religious traditions, the African “sense of God”, introduced in the first chapter—the other two, being the African “sense of reality”, and “sense of vocation”. Following a path indicated in the preceding (second) chapter the goal of this chapter is to give a theological account of the African “sense of God”. Although the African “sense of God” has received more attention in African theology than any other aspects of African religious experience, there are, nevertheless, lingering uncertainties that need resolution and questions the need answers, such as these: What is the relationship of the beliefs, concepts, and names of God rooted in African religious experience to the view of God introduced by Christian faith? Do these African beliefs and concepts represent a view of God that is *the same as*, or *on a par with*, the Christian view of God? What role do they play in conversion, particularly in the apprehension of God revealed in Christ? Is the African “sense of God” simply *replaced* by or *assimilated* in the Christian view of God, or is it vice versa?

The approach of African theologians to the African “sense of God” reveals, not only a difference of opinion but, ambivalence as well. Proponents of exclusivism¹ have

¹ Exponents of the exclusivism position, introduced in chapter 1, include Byang Kato, *Biblical Christianity in Africa: A Collection of Papers and Addresses* (Achimoto, Ghana: Africa Christian Press, 1985); *Theological Pitfalls in Africa* (Kisumu, Kenya: Evangel Publishing House, 1975); “A Critique of Incipient Universalism in Tropical Africa” (Ph.D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1974); “Limitations

been very cautious and restrained in their appropriation of the African “sense of God”.

Proponents of inclusivism,² by contrast, have enthusiastically embraced the African

“sense of God” and been quick to incorporate it in Christian teaching and theological

of Natural Revelation” (S.T.M thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1971); Tokunboh Adeyemo, *Salvation in African Tradition* (Nairobi: Evangel Publishing House, 1979); Yusufu Turaki, *The Unique Christ for Salvation: The Challenge of the Non-Christian Religions and Cultures* (Nairobi, Kenya: International Bible Society Africa, 2001); *Christianity and African Gods: a method in theology* (Potchefstroom, South Africa: PU vir CHO, 1999); Lenard Nyirongo, *The gods of Africa or the God of the Bible: The Snares of African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective*, Scientific Contributions of the Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education. Series F2: Brochures of the Institute for Reformational Studies, no. 70 (Potchefstroom, South Africa: Institute for Reformational Studies, 1997); Bulus Galadima, “Evaluation of the Theology of Bolaji Idowu,” in *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* 20, no. 2: (2001): 105-131, and his “The Quest for an African Religious Language: A Critical Evaluation of Bolaji Idowu’s Religious Language and Theology” (M.A. Thesis, Wheaton College, 1988); Richard J. Gehman, *African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective* (Kijabe, Kenya: Kesho Publications, 1989).

² Exponents of the inclusivism position, also introduced in the first chapter, include Bolaji Idowu, *Olódùmare: God in Yoruba Belief* (London: Longmans, 1962); *Towards an Indigenous Church* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965); “Introduction” and “God” both in *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs*, ed. Kwesi Dickson and Paul Ellingworth (London: Lutterworth Press, 1969), 9-16, and 17-29 respectively; *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1973); John S. Mbiti, “Christianity and East African Culture and Religion,” in *Dini na Mila: Revealed Religion and Traditional Culture* 3, no. 1 (1965): 1-6; *African Religions & Philosophy*, (New York: Praeger 1969); *Concepts of God in Africa* (London, S.P.C.K., 1970); *New Testament Eschatology in an African Background: A Study of the Encounter Between New Testament Theology and African Traditional Concepts* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971); “African Indigenous Culture in Relation to Evangelism and Church Development,” in *The Gospel and Frontier Peoples: A Report of a Consultation, December 1972*, ed. R Pierce Beaver (South Pasadena, Calif: William Carey Library, 1973), 75-95, “Some African Concepts of Christology,” in *Christ and the Younger Churches*, ed. with an introduction by Georg F. Vicedom (London: S.P.C.K., 1972), 51-62; Gabriel M. Setiloane, *The image of God among the Sotho-Tswana* (Rotterdam: A. A. Balkema, 1976); “How the Traditional Worldview Persists in the Christianity of the Sotho-Tswana,” in *Christianity in Independent Africa*, ed. Edward Fashole-Luké et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 402-412; Archbishop Desmond Tutu, “Whither African Theology?” in *Christianity in Independent Africa*, 364-369; Samuel Kibicho, “The Continuity of the African Conception of God into and through Christianity: A Kikuyu Study,” in *Christianity in Independent Africa*, 370-388; “The Kikuyu Conception of God, Its Continuity into the Christian Era and the Question It Raises for the Christian Idea of Revelation” (Ph.D. thesis, Vanderbilt University, 1972); and a reworked version of this dissertation published more recently as *God and Revelation in an African Context* (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2006); Lamin Sanneh, *Gospel and Culture: Ramifying Effects of Scriptural Translation*, in *Bible Translation and the Spread of the Church: The Last 200 Years*, ed. Philip C. Stine (Leiden: E J Brill, 1990), 1-23; *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989); “Pluralism and Christian Commitment,” in *Theology Today* 45, no. 1 (April 1988): 21-33; “The Horizontal and the Vertical in Mission: An African perspective,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 7, no. 4 (October 1983): 165-171; Kwame Bediako, “How Is Jesus Christ Lord?: Aspects of an Evangelical Christian Apologetics in the Context of African Religious Pluralism,” in *Exchange* 25, no.1 (1996): 27-42, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of Non-Western Religion* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995), 91-96, “Jesus in African Culture: A Ghanaian Perspective,” in *Emerging Voices in Global Christian Theology*, ed. William A. Dyrness (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 93-121, “Biblical Christologies in the Context of African Traditional Religion,” in *Sharing Jesus in the Two-Thirds World*, eds. V. Samuel and C. Sugden (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 81—111.

construction. An important consideration in all this is the fact that the African “sense of God” is so deeply embedded in the African view of life and reality that one can neither afford to ignore or to trivialize it. Therefore, attempts by some proponents of exclusivism to understate, trivialize or even demonize it, as well as those by some proponents of inclusivism to overstate and, perhaps even, romanticize it, are unhelpful and counterproductive. Both tendencies do little to facilitate a proper Christian theological understanding of the religious phenomenon of the African “sense of God”.

This chapter will approach the African “sense of God” from the theological imperative of creation and providence, on the one hand, and of the gospel, on the other. It will show that the African “sense of God” is a primal endowment rooted in the divine act of self-revelation in creation and providence. Its relationship to Christian faith is best understood in relation to God’s original purpose in creation and self-revelation, and God’s providential action in creation as it leads up to or points toward the revelation of redemption in Christ. This argument will be developed in three sections.

Following the introductory section, the second section presents the African “sense of God” delineating, among other things, belief in God as a *sensibility*, the multiplicity in the African “sense of God”, and the problem of authority and method. The third section presents the contemporary debate on the African “sense of God” focusing on the exclusivist and inclusivist positions. It is not necessary to discuss the conscientious objectors (pluralist) position on the African “sense of God” separately mainly because it adds little to debate. And, whatever issues it might otherwise raise are addressed adequately the inclusivist position. In fourth section the exclusivist and inclusivist positions on the African “sense of God” are critically appraised from the standpoint of

scripture, theology, and the Christian tradition. And, in the fifth and final section a brief conclusion is offered.

II. The African “Sense of God”

The primacy and pervasiveness of the idea or “sense of God” in African religious traditions can hardly be overstated. According to Mbiti, belief in the Supreme Being is not only “the most minimal and fundamental” idea in the African conception of reality, it is also at the heart of the African notion that human beings exist in “a religious universe.”³ However, it is not the primacy or pervasiveness of belief in God, as such, that has attracted the most attention in theology. Rather, it is the nature or character of the African “sense of God” itself that has been the focus of the debate. In order to understand the debate and the kind of issues it has raised, it is necessary to begin with the *African* “sense of God”. What does it mean? What is unique about it? What challenges and opportunities does it pose to or for a Christian understanding of God?

A. Belief in God in African Traditions as a Sensibility

The expression “sense of God” is adopted in this dissertation to draw attention to the manner in which belief in God is held in African traditions. In African traditions belief in God is not arrived at primarily through argument or instruction. It is not even official dogma enshrined in formal declaration or inculcated through formal catechetical processes. This is not to say that belief in God is something that is left up to the private opinion of the individual either. “God’s existence,” as Enyi Ben Udoh puts it, “is taken

³ Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy*, 29, 48. Also see Gwinyai H. Muzorewa, *The Origins and Development of African Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1985), 8-11.

for granted in Africa.”⁴ In reality, belief in God is the unheralded presupposition of all reality.⁵ Since being human involves participating in this presupposition, becoming aware of or *sensing* God is believed to be existentially inescapable or inevitable. It is part of the commonwealth of human existential awareness. Therefore it needs no defense, no proof, and no formal declaration or ritual to bolster it. It is for this reason that Mbiti can say, “there are no irreligious people” in African traditions, and “no atheists [because] everybody knows of God’s existence almost by instinct.”⁶ Attempting to capture what belief in God means for the person in African religious traditions, this is what Walbert Bühlmann has to say:

The African believes in God “on whom he knows he is completely dependent, [who] is the light by which he sees, the air he breathes, the skin in which he lives – not merely the clothes that cover him partly. The African does not simply believe in God and the spirits of his ancestor but lives, in the full sense of the term, under the eyes of the creator, the hidden cause of all causes. Anyone denying this would not be considered normal in Africa.”⁷

What Bühlmann is trying to convey is that in African traditions the “sense of God” is deeply intertwined with what it means to be or exist as a human being.

It is a little too early to enter upon a critique of the African “sense of God” at this juncture. An appropriate moment will present itself once much of this background picture has been presented. For now, however, it will suffice to draw attention to two

⁴ Enyi Ben Udoh, *Guest Christology: An Interpretative View of the Christological Problem in Africa* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1988), 77.

⁵ This may help explain John Vernon Taylor’s observation that in “the great majority” of African traditions there are “no shrines raised to him [God] and no sacrifices offered [to God], *The Primal Vision: Christian Presence Amid African Religion* (London: SCM Press 1963), 79. The God simply is.

⁶ Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy*, 2, 29.

⁷ Walbert Bühlmann, *The Coming of the Third Church: An Analysis of the Present and Future of the Church* (Slough: St. Paul, 1976), 152.

characteristics of the African “sense of God” which stand out, especially when considered against the Christian view of God.

First, the African “sense of God” does not have clearly or explicitly defined doctrinal boundaries that mark it off from other religious beliefs that might be considered secondary or tertiary. This is clearly shown by the fact that the “sense of God” in African traditions often occurs side by side with belief in other realities—like divinities, spirits, and ancestors—which, in the African ontology, are part of the transcendent realm. To put it another way, the “sense of God” in African traditions occurs amid what some have described as the “postulate” of the “multiplicity” or “plurality” of the transcendent.⁸

Second, the African “sense of God” does not have formal or written sources to underwrite or authorize it. Its main source is human experience in the encounter with divine presence and activity in the world. The encounter with divine presence takes place in ordinary circumstances of life. According to John V. Taylor, the evidence of the encounter with the divine in African traditions is found in “references everywhere in songs and proverbs and riddles [which] reveal the deep sense of a pervading presence.”⁹ This means that what is now known and written about the African “sense of God” comes,

⁸ ‘Multiplicity’ or ‘plurality’ here refers to the fact that in African traditions the transcendent realm is conceived of as including, not only God but, other beings under him—divinities, spirits, ancestors—who play a role in the religious economy. For this reason African religiosity is centered, not only around God but, around the activity of these other beings as well. See Bediako, “The Primal Imagination and the Opportunity for a New Theological Idiom,” in *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of Non-Western Religion* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995), 97-99; “Christian Tradition and the African God Revisited: A Process in the Exploration of a Theological Idiom,” in *Witnessing to the Living God in Contemporary Africa*, ed. D. Gitari and P. Benson (Nairobi: Uzima Press, 1986), 85, 87-88. In his *The Prayers of African Religion* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1976), 2-3, Mbiti observes that although “most of the prayers” in African traditions “are addressed directly and specifically to God” still a few, by his reckoning “not more than ten percent,” are addressed to other beings in the religious universe—divinities, spirits, the living dead (ancestors), and so on.

⁹ John Vernon Taylor, *The Primal Vision: Christian Presence Amid African Religion*, 75.

as Mbiti rightly reminds us, from sources “written not on paper but in people’s hearts, minds, oral history and religious personages,” and in “corporate beliefs and acts.”¹⁰

What is important to note is that these two characteristics of the African “sense of God”—the absence of doctrinal boundaries, and the lack of formal or written sources—are at the heart of the two problems that have occupied the theological debate on belief in God in Africa. The former, the absence of doctrinal boundaries, manifests itself in the problem of multiplicity in the African “sense of God”. The latter, the lack of formal or written sources, manifests itself in the problem of authority and method in the formal study of the African “sense of God”. These two problems deserve some elaboration, beginning with problem of multiplicity in the African “sense of God”. Depending on how one approaches it, the problem of multiplicity can be a major obstacle to Christian faith, or an opportunity for Christian faith.

B. Multiplicity in the African Sense of God as a Major Obstacle

The apparent lack of doctrinal specificity has attracted a more skeptical and somewhat negative assessment of the African “sense of God” on two fronts: on the front of the human *awareness* of God, and on front of the human *acknowledgment* or *response* to God.

On the first front, the concern is that God, as the object of religious belief, is not clearly or distinctly conceived of in African traditions. At issue is the fact that African religious belief is directed, not only towards God but also, towards a spiritual realm that,

¹⁰ Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy*, 3-4. According to Kofi Asare Opoku, “the religion of Africa does not live in pages of books on ‘world religions,’ rather it lives in the hearts and lives of people who practice it,” “African Traditional Religion: An Enduring Heritage,” *Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* 16, no. 1-2 (1989): 15.

as Mbiti puts it, is “very densely populated with spiritual beings” some of whom are categorized as divinities.¹¹ Belief in God and belief in other beings are so intertwined that it is not that easy to tell which among them is primary, secondary, or even tertiary. Even Idowu, an intrepid defender of belief in God in African traditions, concedes that often belief in other beings “so predominate the scene that it is difficult for the casual observer to notice that under them there is one vital cultic basis”—a cultic basis which, for him, is or ought to be the worship of *Olódùmare*, God.¹² In part because of this, there was a tendency among some early missionaries and anthropologists to assume that all clear notions of God found in African traditions had to have been the product of influences from the outside. Sir A. B. Ellis, for instance, argued that the concept of God as Supreme Being, *Nana-Nyankupon* or *Nyankupon*, among the Akan (*Tshi* speaking people) of West Africa had to have been “borrowed from Europeans” through missionaries and “only thinly disguised.”¹³ Others, clearly bamboozled by the dense forest of African beliefs, concluded that they were dealing with polytheism or pantheism,¹⁴ while others have

¹¹ Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy*, 75.

¹² Idowu, *Olódùmare*, 141. In the case of the Yoruba the tertiary religious beliefs and practices which, for Idowu, overshadow the worship of *Olódùmare* are those associated with the “cults of the *oriṣa*,” derivative divinities who serve as ministers of *Olódùmare*. See discussion in chapters 7-9.

¹³ A. B. Ellis, *The Tshi-Speaking Peoples of the Gold Coast of West Africa: Their Religion, Manners, Customs, Laws, Languages, Etc* (London: Chapman and Hall, limited, 1887), 28, 24. According to Geoffrey Parrinder, Ellis did modify his position, somewhat, but still stopped short of identifying the Akan concept of the Supreme being with the Christian God, *West African Religion* (London: Epworth Press, 1961), 13.

¹⁴ For Père Noel Baudin African religions comprised “an odd mixture of monotheism, polytheism, and idolatry... similar in all things to the old polytheism of the ancients,” and then again, as “a vast pantheism, *Fetichism and Fetich Worshipers* (New York: Cincinnati Benziger Bros, 1885), 9; Similarly, Percy Aumary Talbot described African religions as “compounded of ... polytheism, anthropomorphism, animism, and ancestor worship,” *The Peoples of Southern Nigeria; A Sketch of Their History, Ethnology and Languages, with an Abstract of the 1921 Census*, vol. 2 (London: Oxford University Press, H. Milford, 1926), 1.

followed E. B. Tylor's categorization of African traditions as "animism."¹⁵ At any rate, the central concern among these views is the status of the creator God *vis-à-vis* other beings and realities in African religious experience. As far as they are concerned, it is not always clear, from the religious beliefs in African traditions, whether the creator God, as Geoffrey Parrinder puts it, is "above the other" beings or merely the "first among equals."¹⁶

On the second front, the concern is that even if one grants that the African "sense of God" is real, the response to God as evidenced in African religious practices suggests that this *sense* is ambiguous rather than genuine or vital. This concern fixes upon what Bediako describes as an "existential gulf" in African religious experience which manifests itself in a paradoxical manner—on the one hand, as an "intense awareness" of the "existence of God," and on the other, as a real sense or feeling that God is 'remote,' far, or "withdrawn."¹⁷ Thus for instance, speaking of the religious traditions of the people of Rwanda and Burundi, Rosemary Guillebaud observes that although *Imana*, God, is acknowledged as the "First Cause of all good" who is "continually in the people's thoughts," yet he is not expected to "enter into [their] daily life...in a practical sense."¹⁸

¹⁵ Sir Edward Burnett Tylor coined the term *animism* to describe African religions, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art and Custom*. London: Murray, 1903. See Mbiti's discussion of this label in *African Religions & Philosophy*, 6-8. Also, Imasogie Osadolor, "Langmead Casserley's Understanding of Christian Philosophy As a Basis for Apologetics" (Th.D. Thesis, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1972), 205-210.

¹⁶ Geoffrey Parrinder, *West African Religion*, 12.

¹⁷ Bediako, "Biblical Christologies," 102; "Jesus in African Culture," 101.

¹⁸ Rosemary Guillebaud, "The Doctrine of God in Ruanda-Urundi," in *African Ideas of God*, ed. Edwin W. Smith (London: Edinburgh House Press, 1950), 186. Continuing her thought (p.119), Guillebaud says: "Though...*Imana*, God, is bound up in the lives of the Ruanda-Urundi peoples, it is very difficult to assess properly the full extent of his actual influence. Clearly [the Ruanda-Urundi]...would be filled with

Ellis also observes that among the Yoruba, God is conceived of as “too lazy or too indifferent to exercise any control over earthly affairs.”¹⁹ Similar perceptions may be what led Leo Frobenius to make the claim that in the religious traditions of the African peoples among whom he travelled, God was “neither worshipped nor considered in any way.”²⁰ Diedrich Westermann makes an observation along the same lines. According to him, Africans have “belief in a supreme being or personified power who, in a general sense, rules the world,” but God remains “the great unknown power,” and the “feeling” which they have towards him is “at highest...dim awe or reverence.” In the final analysis the “African’s God is a *deus incertus* and a *deus remotus*,” one whom Africans “neither fear nor love nor serve.”²¹ Parrinder, on his part, thinks it “strange” that African people (the Yoruba in this case) know the Supreme God, *Olódùmare*, but have “built Him no temples.”²² According to him, therefore, Africans have a “faint idea of the true God...but they do not pray to Him, or offer sacrifices to him.”²³

terror at the prospect of living without him. But he is more a convenience than any real influence for good, as far as their moral conduct is concerned.”

¹⁹ A. B. Ellis, *The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples of the Slave Coast of West Africa: Their Religion, Manners, Customs, Laws, Language, Etc: with an Appendix Containing a Comparison of the Tshi, Gã, Ewë, and Yoruba Languages* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1894), 34.

²⁰ Leo Frobenius, *The Voice of Africa: Being an Account of the Travels of the German Inner African Exploration Expedition in the Years 1910-1912* (New York: B. Blom, 1968), 198.

²¹ Diedrich Westermann, *Africa and Christianity* (London: Oxford University Press, 1937, Reprint, New York: AMS Press, 1977), 65, 68, 74.

²² Geoffrey Parrinder, *Religion in an African City* (London: Oxford University Press, 1953), 8.

²³ Geoffrey Parrinder, *West African Religion*, 14.

C. Multiplicity in the African Sense of God as an Opportunity

In contrast to the preceding view, there are others who have studied the African ““sense of God”,” taking into account the element of multiplicity—among them Stephen S. Farrow, Wilhelm Schmidt, and Andrew Lang—²⁴but arrived at conclusions which are significantly different from, and in some areas quite the opposite of, those arrived at by Ellis, Parrinder, and others. Farrow, for instance, found “strong evidence of... a primitive monotheistic belief” not only among the Yorubas but, “among other races whose religion is [ostensibly] animistic.”²⁵ Lang points out that missionaries often found in “savage religion”—pace the expression—a “native name and idea” of God that “answer[s] so nearly their own conception of God.”²⁶ For him, the religion of “negroes,” contrary to those who consider it to be a “particularly rude form of polytheism,” can be considered to be “standing on the boundary of monotheism.”²⁷ For Schmidt, despite the evidence of “contaminations of later origin,” the one common factor among the religions of primitive

²⁴ Stephen S. Farrow studied the Yoruba of Southern Nigeria. See his *Faith, Fancies and Fetich or Yoruba Paganism: Being Some Account of the Religious Beliefs of the West African Negroes, Particularly of the Yoruba Tribes of Southern Nigeria*, with a foreword by R. R. Marett (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969); Andrew Lang studied the Australian Aborigines, the Zulus and Bushmen of South Africa, and the Fuegians of Magellan’s Straits. See his *The Making of Religion* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1898); Wilhelm Schmidt studied various primitive cultures, so called, among them, the Pygmies of Congo; various peoples of the Arctic like the Samoyeds, Koryaks, Eskimos, and Ainus; and native peoples of the Americas. See his *The Origins and Growth of Religions: Facts and Theories*, trans. from the original German by H. J. Rose (New York: Dial Press, 1935), and *Primitive Revelation*, trans. Joseph J. Baierl (London: B. Herder Book Co., 1939).

²⁵ Farrow, *Faith, Fancies and Fetich or Yoruba Paganism*, 157.

²⁶ Andrew Lang, *The Making of Religion*, 250. Louis Berkhof observes that contrary to history of religions evolutionary assumptions that “the original form of religion was polytheistic,” the evidence from studies conducted by Lang and Schmidt amongst the ‘so called’ primitive peoples suggests “an original monotheism” instead, *Introductory Volume to Systematic Theology in Systematic Theology*, The New Combined Edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 110.

²⁷ Andrew Lang, *The Making of Religion*, 239.

cultures (including the Pygmies of Congo) was “the ethical belief in a Supreme Being.”²⁸
What do these findings mean in the context of this debate?

According to Osadolor Imasogie, what Farrow, Lang, and Schmidt discovered through their research shows that belief in “the Supreme Being remains [the] one golden thread running through the heart” of African religion.²⁹ In his view, they confirm what many African Christians assume as a matter of course, namely that the God of their religious heritage and ancestor, and the God of Christianity are in fact one and the same. In the same vein Malcolm McVeigh says that the “God who revealed Himself fully in Jesus Christ is none other than the One who has continually made Himself known to African religious experience.”³⁰

Yet, merely assuming the identity of the divine subject in Christianity and African traditions does not answer questions raised by the fact of multiplicity in African traditions. Multiplicity raises questions in relation to three fronts: the African religious ontology and ancestors, “sense of reality” and *vocation*, and in relation to the status divinities. The first two fronts will be dealt with in the chapters to come. This chapter will focus on the third, multiplicity in relation to the status of divinities: There are three main approaches to the problem of multiplicity, especially to the status and role of divinities and ancestors in relation to God.

²⁸ According to Schmidt “This Supreme Being is to be found among all the peoples of the primitive culture, indeed everywhere in the same form or the same vigor, but still everywhere prominent enough to make his dominant position indubitable,” *The Origins and Growth of Religions: Facts and Theories*, 251, 256, 257.

²⁹ Osadolor Imasogie, “Langmead Casserley's Understanding of Christian Philosophy as a Basis for Apologetics,” 217.

³⁰ Malcolm J. McVeigh, *God in Africa: Conceptions of God in African Traditional Religion and Christianity* (Cape Cod, Mass.: Claude Stark, 1974), 81.

The first approach to the problem of multiplicity is one that begins from the assumption that divinities either have, or could be considered to have an ontological status that is real. According to this view, divinities are created by God. They are spiritual beings who, according to Idowu, are of a “higher order than [humans],”³¹ or who, as Mbiti prefers to put it, are “created...in the ontological category of spirits.”³² In other words, divinities are of an order which is analogous to that of angels in the bible. They are “associates” and “servants” of God (Mbiti), or “ministers” of *Olódùmare* (Idowu), charged with responsibility over natural phenomena especially as it relates to human experience.³³ In that position they are necessarily intermediaries whose role can be compared to that of different royal agents who represent one King in different regions of the Kingdom. They are, as Idowu puts it, “refractions” of a “Diffused Monotheism.”³⁴ Their role has also been compared, by Imasogie, to that of bureaucratic functionaries having different positions of responsibility in a single governmental system which he dubs “bureaucratic monotheism.”³⁵ Others have preferred to look beyond or beneath the multiplicity to discern “a presumed African monotheism.”³⁶

³¹ Idowu, *Olódùmare: God in Yoruba Belief*, 62.

³² Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy*, 75-76.

³³ Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy*, 75-78; Idowu, *Olódùmare: God in Yoruba Belief*, 62. See chapter 8.

³⁴ In his *Olódùmare: God in Yoruba Belief* Idowu defines “Diffused Monotheism” as a kind of monotheism “attenuated through the many divinities whose cults form the objective phenomena of the religion,” p. 204. Divinities are believed to have been “engendered” by or ‘emanate’ from God, and are “employed” by God, “ministers of *Olódùmare*” in earthly matters, p. 62.

³⁵ Osadolor Imasogie “African Traditional Religions and Christian Faith,” *Review & Expositor* 70, no.3 (Summer 1973), 287-290: “Langmead Casserley’s Understanding of Christian Philosophy as a Basis for Apologetics,” 214-224.

³⁶ Bediako, “The Primal Imagination and the Opportunity for a New Theological Idiom,” 98.

A second view treats the ‘multiplicity’ in African traditions as a development that is not altogether consistent with belief in one creator God. According to Idowu, for instance, the “crowd of divinities” in Yoruba religious traditions is most likely “a later accretion”—and one not entirely beneficial—whose source is the “weakness” of its human actors, especially “the priests” who are “the sole repositories of its doctrines and traditions.”³⁷ On this view belief in divinities is, not a legitimate development but rather, a sign of how far religious belief and practice have “drifted away from...correct traditions.”³⁸ For Bediako, in similar fashion, the “postulate” of the “multiplicity” or the “plurality of the transcendent” may indeed be a “fundamental misconception” arising out of a “fragmentary and partial” apprehension of the “witness of the Living God” in African traditions. If that is indeed the case, then the postulate of the multiplicity of the transcendent is religiously more detrimental than beneficial because of its potential to “ultimately weaken the human grasp of the unity of all things in the Supreme God.”³⁹

A third approach to divinities is related to the second. It gives divinities an ontological status that is grounded, mostly, in human psychological, social, and cultural factors. According to Mbiti, for instance, divinities are “personifications” of divine activity and manifestations in the physical world. They are a “creation of [the human] imagination” which are bound to fade as the Christian view of God takes root, and as “scientific knowledge” of the world increases. Perhaps to preempt the temptation to

³⁷ Idowu, *Olódùmare: God in Yoruba*, 202-203.

³⁸ Idowu, *Olódùmare: God in Yoruba*, 210.

³⁹ Bediako, “Christian Tradition and the African God Revisited: A Process in the Exploration of a Theological Idiom,” 85, 87-88.

dismiss them as purely psychological—something his view might be construed to be suggesting—Mbiti insists that “divinities are *real beings* for the peoples concerned.”⁴⁰ For Bediako, the postulate of the multiplicity in African traditions may be the result of a human desire to “resolve” and “overcome” the “religious dilemma posed by the transcendence and immanence of God” in African religious experience.⁴¹ This dilemma manifests itself in a religious paradox—mentioned earlier—in which an “intense awareness” of God is side by side with the sense or feeling of an “existential gulf” in which God is experienced as remote or far removed from human affairs.⁴² According to him, the “postulate” of multiplicity in African religious traditions is an attempt to resolve this paradox. What happens in this case is that the attributes or “derivative powers” of God manifested in the universe are postulated or conceived of as “having the ability to act independently and sometimes capriciously.”⁴³ Over time and, perhaps, quite imperceptibly, the pluralized and personified aspects of divine activity—divinities and spirits—become major “foci of religious devotion.”⁴⁴

It would appear then, from the above, that the problem of multiplicity in African traditions stems, at least in part, from the fact that the African “sense of God” does not have the benefit of formally recognized doctrinal boundaries or standards to demarcate or

⁴⁰ Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy*, 76, 77.

⁴¹ Bediako, “Christian Tradition and the African God Revisited: A Process in the Exploration of a Theological Idiom,” 91-92.

⁴² Bediako, “Biblical Christologies,” 102; “Jesus in African Culture,” 101.

⁴³ Bediako, “Christian Tradition and the African God Revisited: A Process in the Exploration of a Theological Idiom,” 85.

⁴⁴ Bediako, “Christian Tradition and the African God Revisited: A Process in the Exploration of a Theological Idiom,” 91-92.

delimit it more precisely. This brings into view a second problem, the problem of authority and methodology, in the formal or systematic study of the African “sense of God”. The absence of formally recognized doctrinal standards for the African “sense of God” is directly related to the fact that there are no formally written sources that underwrite the African “sense of God.”

D. The Problem of Authority and Method in the Study of the African Sense of God

The connection between the lack of formal or written sources for the African “sense of God”, on the one hand, and the problem of multiplicity, on the other, is something Idowu recognized. From what has been said above, the postulate of multiplicity African traditions was, in Idowu’s mind, indicative of a “departure from a primitive state of purity” due to a structural weakness in African (Yoruba) religious tradition as a whole:

It appears that [the] main *weakness* [of African or Yoruba religion] is that the sole repositories of its doctrines and traditions are priests upon whose individual character or caliber depends its ordering. And these priests are guided in their task by several motives...[and] follow as matter of course the only lead available to them. There [are] no ‘prophets’ to awaken and keep alive in the people the sense of the primitive purity of their religion and save the religion from the retrogression which thus became inevitable. This lack of prophecy as a thing which *stands apart* from the set-up of cults with the main function of emphasizing with reiterated force that which is the substance of the religion, is our main explanation of the fate which has now overtaken it.⁴⁵

It is clear from the above quotation that Idowu understands the weakness in African traditions to consist in three factors. The first is human—the human ‘weakness’ of the priests that renders their role as ‘repositories’ of the true African “sense of God”

⁴⁵ Idowu, *Olódùmare: God in Yoruba*, 202-203.

vulnerable and unreliable. The second is the lack of an authoritative ‘prophetic’ dimension that calls people back to the original revelation from which the religious tradition came into being in the first place. And the third is the lack of an objective or stable *medium* to convey the prophetic revelation—a *medium* which, according to him, “stands apart” from the religious tradition itself. Presumably, an objective and stable medium that conveys that revelation would have provided a standard against which to measure African (Yoruba) religious traditions as a whole.

These three factors—human weakness, lack of prophetic dimension, and lack of an objective and stable medium to convey the revelation—highlight the problem of authority and methodology in the sense that there are no formally recognized criteria or standards, within African traditions, to guide one in the formal or systematic study of the African “sense of God”. In the absence of formally written sources, the most common approach to the study of the African “sense of God” has been the one of phenomenological description. Knowledge regarding the African “sense of God” is gleaned from the beliefs, names, attributes, and concepts of deity found in African religious heritage. There has been a comparative element in this approach in the sense that African theologians delineate the African “sense of God” following what they see as conceptual, phenomenological, and linguistic similarities and affinities, between African traditions and Christian faith. Invariably, this involves an attempt, declared or tacit, to correlate African names and concepts of God with their counterparts in Scripture and Christian faith. This phenomenological orientation, however, means that the actual systematic study of the African “sense of God” has been open to a variety of approaches

depending on the preference and judgment of the individual theologian. A few examples will suffice to illustrate the diversity of approaches.

Idowu's *Olódùmare: God in Yoruba Belief* (1962), which is among the earliest theological forays in the post-colonial period by an African theologian on this subject,⁴⁶ is a detailed descriptive study of belief in God, *Olódùmare*, among the Yoruba people of Nigeria. *Olódùmare* is, among other things, creator, King, Omnipotent, All-wise-knowing-seeing, judge, immortal, and holy.⁴⁷ In his later *African Traditional Religion* (1973), Idowu presents the attributes under four thematic categories, namely, that God is "real" to Africans, that he is "unique," that he is the absolute controller of the universe, and that "God is One."⁴⁸

Mbiti's *Concepts of God in Africa* (1970) remains perhaps the most systematic descriptive glossary or anthology of African names, concepts, and attributes of God, organized under five general topical categories one would normally find in a Christian systematic theology work, namely: "Nature of God," "Active Attributes of God," "Providence and Sustenance of God," "Anthropomorphic and Natural Attributes of God," and "God and Man." His earlier *African Religions and Philosophy* (1969) gave a more synthetic and analytical treatment of the African "sense of God" under six major categories: nature of God, works of God, God and nature, worship of God, spiritual

⁴⁶ Mention is made here of J. B. Danquah's earlier *The Akan Doctrine of God: A Fragment of Gold Coast Ethics and Religion* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1944). Although Danquah's book contains true Akan wisdom, its contribution as a work on the African knowledge of God is limited by the fact that his aim was to recast the African view of God in Kantian perspective. As a result he dismisses as superstition everything that did not fit the Kantian framework.

⁴⁷ Idowu, *Olódùmare: God in Yoruba Belief*, chapters 5-6.

⁴⁸ Idowu, *African Traditional Religion*, chapter 5.

beings, and the creation and original state of man.⁴⁹ Worth highlighting is the concept and attribute of God as “Creator” which, according to Mbiti, is “the commonest attribute of the works or activities of God” held by “practically all African peoples”⁵⁰

Malcolm J. McVeigh employs a thematic approach, grouping African ideas of God under such questions as: Is God “a Person?” Is he “One?” “Does he Love Man?” “Does he Reveal Himself?” and, “Is God Worshipped?”⁵¹ In his *African Image of the Ultimate Reality* Cosmas Okechukwu Obiego does a detailed study (similar to Idowu’s *Olódùmare*) of belief in God, *Chukwu*, among the Igbo. He offers a classification of the names of God in which he distinguishes between “natural,” “historical,” “social,” and “proverbial,” names of God. The attributes of *Chukwu* which he discusses include *Chukwu* as Creator, Omnipotent, Omnipresent and Omniscient; and, *Chukwu*, as Just Judge, Unique, and as Transcendent, Sublime and Immense.⁵² Ikenga Emezie Metuh offers a typology of names, attributes, and concepts of God from different African tribes or people groups, based on metaphors or images organized around four major categories including: names of *God as creator*; names of *God by his many attributes* such as power, omnipresence, omniscience, and eternity; names of *God according to his nature*, such as Spirit or Great Spirit, self-existent, source of Being, and the Unknown one; and, names of

⁴⁹ Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa; African Religions & Philosophy*, chapters 4 – 9.

⁵⁰ Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa*, 45.

⁵¹ Malcolm J. McVeigh, *God in Africa: Conceptions of God in African Traditional Religion and Christianity*, chapters 2–7.

⁵² Cosmas Okechukwu Obiego, *African Image of the Ultimate Reality: An Analysis of Igbo Ideas of Life and Death in Relation to Chukwu-God* (Frankfurt am Main: P. Lang, 1984), chapter 4.

God by analogy with natural phenomena, such as [God] as Owner of the sky, and as Giver of Rain.⁵³

What this means is that irrespective of one's views, the African "sense of God" is part of the reality which Christian theology has to engage in the African context. In the final analysis, the debate regarding the specific characteristics of the African "sense of God"—be it the absence of doctrinal definition and the problem of multiplicity it causes, or the lack of formal or written sources and the problem of authority and methodology it precipitates—boils down to practical concerns and questions such as: What is the value and role, if any, of the African "sense of God" in African Christian experience and theology? Many African Christians and theologians assume that the God known in African religious experience is the same one revealed in Christ. To what extent and on what basis is this true, especially given the postulate of multiplicity which accompanies the African "sense of God"? The contours of the contemporary debate are drawn around such questions.

III. The Contemporary Debate on the Value of the African Sense of God

The main protagonists in the debate regarding the value and role of the African "sense of God" in Christian faith and theology fall in two camps. As has already been indicated, theologians in the inclusivism camp tend to have a more generous reading of the African "sense of God". On the other hand, those in the exclusivism camp have a more pessimistic view of the African "sense of God". There is nevertheless a margin of

⁵³ Ikenga Emefie Metuh, *God and Man in African Religion: A Case Study of the Igbo of Nigeria* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1981), chapters 2–5; *Comparative Studies of African Traditional Religions* (Onitsha, Nigeria: IMICO Publishers, 1987), chapters 5–7.

agreement between the two sides—even with the most critical proponents of exclusivism—in two areas. First, all of them concede the fact of divine revelation in and through the created order.⁵⁴ According to Adeyemo, divine revelation is mediated through the *imago dei*, and through God’s providential or “sustaining and preserving work.”⁵⁵ Nyirongo, also, notes that the fact that African societies have moral beliefs which are similar to the Ten Commandments “confirms” that “God spoke to their [African] hearts before He gave the law to Israelites and continues to do so” today.⁵⁶

Second, there is agreement that people in African traditions have, to some extent, apprehended divine revelation in the created order. For Adeyemo divine revelation in the created order is “perceived by all intelligent creatures.”⁵⁷ According to Nyirongo the beliefs and concepts of God among African people exemplifies “the power of God’s Word” to create the “universe *out of nothing*.”⁵⁸ And, precisely for this reason, it “cannot be denied” that the “pre-Christian African generation,” and the “tribes of Africa” today apprehend this revelation.⁵⁹ For Adeyemo, no matter how “indistinct” African

⁵⁴ Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*, 113; Adeyemo, *Salvation in African Tradition*, 21-24; Gehman, *African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective*, 39-42; Nyirongo, *The gods of Africa or the God of the Bible: The Snares of African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective*, 12-16, 60-61.

⁵⁵ Adeyemo, *Salvation in African Tradition*, 20-21, 23-26.

⁵⁶ Nyirongo, *The gods of Africa or the God of the Bible*, 61- 62.

⁵⁷ Adeyemo, *Salvation in African Tradition*, 26.

⁵⁸ Nyirongo does not explain how exactly belief in God in African tradition is related to Christian belief regarding creation *ex nihilo*, *The gods of Africa or the God of the Bible*, 12-13. Also see Adeyemo, *Salvation in African Tradition*, 22.

⁵⁹ Nyirongo, *The gods of Africa or the God of the Bible*, 16.

apprehension of God might be, it can still “serve as a common ground in establishing a point of contact” with Christian faith.⁶⁰

What is of interest for this discussion is how and why, despite this margin of agreement, the two sides reach different conclusions on the value and role of the African “sense of God” in Christian faith and theology. It will become clear, in what follows, that the views on both sides are shaped, not only by scriptural and doctrinal claims but also, by specific theological priorities and concerns which each side holds dear. We now move to presenting the respective positions on the African “sense of God”, beginning with the inclusivism view.

A. The Inclusivist View of the African Sense of God

It has already been indicated that proponents of inclusivism tend to have a generally more positive view of the African “sense of God” and its value for Christian faith and theology. The question is, why? What are the biblical bases for their position? What are the theological considerations and concerns that lead up to their position? The inclusivist position is shaped by three concerns for, namely, the *reality* of the African “sense of God”, the *identity* of the divine subject in African religious traditions, and the *cultural authenticity* of African Christian experience. These will now be examined in detail beginning with the concern for the *reality* of the African “sense of God”.

⁶⁰ Adeyemo, *Salvation in African Tradition*, 24. A little later we will see that Adeyemo’s other statements, in which he denies continuity or common ground between African Traditions and Christian faith, contradict what he says here.

1. *Concern to Affirm the Reality of the African Sense of God*

The desire or need to affirm the *reality* of the African “sense of God” is perhaps the first and most fundamental motivation of inclusivism position. It is a desire to highlight, not merely the fact that Africans have awareness of God but, that the African *sense* and *experience* of God prior to contact with the gospel—both in the past and today—is *real*. God, says Idowu, “is real to the Nigerians” [read Africans], not the “shadowy concept” some have attempted to turn him into.⁶¹ For Archbishop Desmond Tutu, far from being “illusory” or imaginary, African religious experience involves “genuine knowledge of God...and ways of communion with deity.”⁶² The importance of this argument is underscored by the fact that God is at the center of what Andrew Walls has referred to as African ‘intellectual maps of reality.’⁶³ All human life and reality is, as Kibicho puts it, “inseparable from conception of God and faith.”⁶⁴ Kibicho even goes so far as to suggest that because human life is rooted in God, African communitarian values could be looked at as incarnations of Jesus Christ in the African context albeit in “a different way.”⁶⁵ According to Setiloane, on the other hand, human life is “a community of vital relationships [which are] subsumed under an intense community of which

⁶¹ Idowu, *God in Nigerian Belief*, October Lectures, 1962 (Lagos, Nigeria: Federal Ministry of Information, 1963), 10. Nor is “Deity,” says Idowu, “as distant from man’s daily life as some would lead us to think, *Olódùmare*, 38.

⁶² Bishop Desmond Tutu, “Whither African Theology?” 366.

⁶³ The expression “intellectual map of reality” is used by Prof. Andrew Walls in a paper delivered via videoconferencing during the seminar on “Primal Religion as a Substructure of Christianity,” organized under the auspices of the Nagel Institute of World Christianity, at Calvin College, July 2007.

⁶⁴ Kibicho, *God and Revelation in an African Context*, 174-176.

⁶⁵ According to Kibicho the idea of “pluralistic revelation” allows for the possibility of multiple incarnations. Thus for him, “the Spirit of God who was in Jesus Christ....may be incarnate in other communities of faith in different ways,” *God and Revelation in an African Context*, 183.

MODIMO [God] is the source.”⁶⁶ For Bediako, the centrality of God in the African conception of reality is such that African traditions are best understood as “traditions of response to the disclosure of the Transcendent.”⁶⁷ The main issue among these claims is that to deny, overlook, or otherwise not take into account, the reality of the African “sense of God” is to miss a vital part of what is necessary to understand how the view of God in African traditions relates to the Christian view of God.⁶⁸

2. *Concern to Highlight the Identity of the Divine Subject in African Traditions and in Christian Faith*

The second concern of proponents of inclusivism, which is closely related to the first, is the *identity of the divine subject* who is the object of religious experience in African religious traditions. This concern is expressed in statement issued by African theologians under the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) in 1966:

We believe that God the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Creator of heaven and earth, Lord of history, has been dealing with mankind at all times and in all parts of the world. It is with this conviction that we study the rich heritage of our African peoples, and we have evidence that they know of Him and worship Him.

We recognize the radical quality of God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ; and yet it is because of this revelation that we can discern what is truly of God in our pre-Christian heritage; this knowledge of God is not discontinuous with our people’s previous traditional knowledge of Him.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Setiloane, *The image of God Among the Sotho-Tswana*, 224.

⁶⁷ Bediako, “How Is Jesus Christ Lord?: Aspects of an Evangelical Christian Apologetics in the Context of African Religious Pluralism,” 41

⁶⁸ Thus Tutu can argue that rather than discount or disparage them as some did, African traditions “should have formed the vehicle for conveying the Gospel verities to Africa,” in “Whither African Theology?” 366.

⁶⁹ The statement of the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) in 1966, is quoted in *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs*, ed. Kwesi Dickson and Paul Ellingworth (London: Lutterworth Press, 1969), 16.

The concern here is twofold. On the one hand, is it concerned to show that people in African traditions “know of Him,” that is, of the one who is revealed in Christ; that the “God who revealed Himself fully in Jesus Christ is none other than the One who has continually made Himself known to African religious experience.”⁷⁰ It seeks to answer the question whether or not, in accepting the God revealed in Jesus Christ, Africans are being “introduced to a *completely* new God who is absolutely unrelated to their history.”⁷¹

On the other, it is concerned to show that the knowledge and experience of God revealed in Christ “is not discontinuous” with and knowledge and experience of God African traditions. This is the reason Idowu’ insists the God revealed in Christian faith is neither “an imported divinity from a European pantheon,”⁷² nor “a loan-God from the missionaries.”⁷³ On the contrary, the God revealed in Christ has genuine roots in African traditions. He is the one who, according Idowu, “has never left Himself without witness in any nation” and who, therefore, is not “absolutely unrelated to their [African] past history.”⁷⁴ It is for this very reason that Mbiti can claim that, even in his historical manifestation in the man Jesus Christ, this God is not a “stranger to African people.”⁷⁵ As

⁷⁰ Malcolm J. McVeigh, *God in Africa: Conceptions of God in African Traditional Religion and Christianity*, 81.

⁷¹ Idowu, *Towards an Indigenous Church*, 24-25. For Idowu this is ultimately the question raised by C. H. Dodd regarding whether “the God of our redemption [is] the same as the God of creation?”, *Gospel and Law: The Relation of Faith and Ethics in Early Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951), 79.

⁷² Idowu, *Towards an Indigenous Church*, 49.

⁷³ Idowu, “God,” in *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs*, 29.

⁷⁴ Idowu, *Towards an Indigenous Church*, 25.

⁷⁵ Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy*, 29.

far as Kibicho is concerned, this means that there is “radical sameness and continuity” in the conception of God, from African traditions “into and through Christianity.”⁷⁶ For Setiloane, the conception of God in the “African worldview persists in Christianity.”⁷⁷

This concern for *identity* of the divine subject presages the third concern—the concern for the cultural authenticity of African Christian experience. Is the experience of becoming a Christian consistent with or contrary to African religious sensibilities?

3. Concern for the Cultural Authenticity of African Christian Experience

The final factor concerns the nature of the religious experience of becoming a Christian. The main point is to show that for Africans, the religious experience of becoming a Christian is not a “pale imitation”⁷⁸ of Western Christianity, but rather one that is authentically Christian and African at the same time. It is authentically Christian, because it arises out of the knowledge of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. But, it is also authentically African, because the God who reveals himself in Christ is also the one who is known by people in African traditions through various names, especially as creator. In general, there are two kinds of arguments to underscore this factor, one focusing on phenomenological similarities, and the other on theological affinities.

The first argument focuses on the phenomenological similarities between Christian faith and African traditions. The area of similarity, which African theologians are keen to highlight, is the names, religious concepts, and idioms designating God,

⁷⁶ Kibicho, *God and Revelation in an African Context*, 171-172, and in “The Continuity of the African Conception of God into and through Christianity: A Kikuyu Study,” 388.

⁷⁷ Setiloane, “How the Traditional Worldview Persists in the Christianity of the Sotho-Tswana”; *The Image of God among the Sotho-Tswana*.

⁷⁸ Tutu, “Wither African Theology?” 366.

especially God as creator. The similarity in this area is considered to be compelling owing to the fact that the God of Christian faith has been received and apprehended through these indigenous names, concepts, and idioms. To highlight the significance of this, comparisons are made between the translation of the gospel into the African context, and similar translations of the gospel into the Greco-Roman context of the early centuries of Christianity, and also into the early European context.⁷⁹

African theologians point out that in the translation of the gospel into the Greco-Roman and in the early European contexts missionaries did not adopt the personal names of the Greek and Roman gods—like Zeus or Jupiter, Hades or Pluto, Hermes or Mercury, Artemis or Diana, and so on. Nor did they adopt the personal names of the gods of the Teutonic (European) peoples—like *Wodan*, god of the dead, *Donar*, god of thunder and the sky, *Tyr*, god of war. Instead they adopted, and invested with new meaning, the more impersonal class-words or names like *theos*, with respect to the Greco-Roman context, and *god*, with respect to the European context.

In the African context, by contrast, missionaries adopted personal names like, for instance, *Ngai* (Kikuyu, Kenya), *Were* (Gisu/Bukusu, Uganda/Kenya), *Modimo* (Sotho-Tswana), *Olódùmare* (Yoruba, Nigeria), and so on.⁸⁰ Concerning the differences in the reception of the Christian God into the African context as compared to European context, this is what Bediako has to say:

⁷⁹ For specific discussion of this point, see Bediako, “Christian Tradition and the African God Revisited: A Process in the Exploration of a Theological Idiom,” 78-80; Edwin Smith, *African Ideas of God*, 34-35.

⁸⁰ For a wider sampling and typology of African names of God which have been adopted by Christianity see Ikenga Emefie Metuh, *God and Man in African Religion: A Case Study of the Igbo of Nigeria*, chapters 2–5; *Comparative Studies of African Traditional Religions*, chapters 5–7.

Whereas Christian proclamation in Northern and Western Europe *swept away the traditional deities* and in the process unified religious apprehension under the governance of a *practically new deity* with the neutral name of ‘God,’ in Africa the bearers of the Christian faith encountered a well-rooted belief in one Great God, Creator and Moral ruler of the universe and one not too distinguishable from the God of the Bible.⁸¹ [Emphasis added]

The thing to note and which, according to Bediako, is also “quite extraordinary” is that whereas in the European context the translation of the gospel message followed a path that “swept away traditional deities,” in the African context translation followed a path in which the “the God of biblical revelation was [identified] with One who has had for generations a venerated name in indigenous [African] languages” and religious experience.⁸² In effect, the ‘Christian God’ is apprehended via the medium of concepts already resident in indigenous religious experience. According to Lamin Sanneh, this is a clear demonstration that God “preceded” both the missionary and the gospel in the African milieu, ensuring that the “central categories of Christian theology” were “adequately anticipated” in the indigenous African cultures and languages.⁸³ For Samuel Kibicho, on the other hand, the remarkable similarity of the names and attributes of God in Christianity and African traditions is a clear indication that “the God worshipped in Christianity is the same God...who is fully known, worshipped...in African traditional religions in ancient time.”⁸⁴

⁸¹ Bediako, “Christian Tradition and the African God Revisited: A Process in the Exploration of a Theological Idiom,” 78-79.

⁸² Bediako, “Christian Tradition and the African God Revisited: A Process in the Exploration of a Theological Idiom,” 79.

⁸³ Lamin Sanneh, “The Horizontal and the Vertical in Mission: An African Perspective,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 7, no. 4 (October 1983): 165-171.

⁸⁴ Kibicho, “The Continuity of the African Conception of God into and through Christianity: A Kikuyu Study,” 388.

The second argument—under the concern for cultural authenticity—focuses on the theological foundations which Christianity and African religious share. According to Idowu, the names and concepts of God, and especially the “lofty conception” of divine attributes in African religious traditions could have originated in “none other than the revelation of the living God Himself.”⁸⁵ These names point to the universality of “God’s self-disclosure” which is “meant for all mankind,” and in which Africans necessarily participate “as a part [members] of the human race.”⁸⁶ Similarly for Bediako, the African “sense of God” derives from the fact that “creation is the original revelation.”⁸⁷ For him, “original revelation” denotes an awareness of God that includes a sensing of his “Kingship,” his “covenant,” and his “call” upon Africans—and for that matter upon all humanity. Only a genuine awareness or sensing of God could have inspired African peoples to see God as the “source of life” and the “illuminator [of] the path of life.”⁸⁸

To sum up this subsection, for proponents of inclusivism these three factors—the *reality* of the African “sense of God”, the *identity* of the divine subject in African religious experience, and the cultural authenticity of African Christian experience—highlight the significance of the African “sense of God” for Christian faith in three ways. First, for people in African traditions the encounter with the God revealed in Christ involves a reckoning with their own religious past, in particular with the meaning of their own “sense of God”—a “sense of God” which they perhaps take for granted. Second, if the God revealed in Christ is the Creator God whom they know of from their own

⁸⁵ Idowu, *Olódùmarè*, 202.

⁸⁶ Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition*, 56-57, 140; *Olódùmarè*, 30-31.

⁸⁷ Bediako, “Jesus in African Culture,” 101; “Biblical Christologies,” 102.

⁸⁸ Bediako, “Jesus in Africa Culture,” 101; “Biblical Christologies,” 102.

religious experience, Christian faith then is a “vital encounter of [with] the Living God made manifest historically [in a new way] in Jesus Christ,” not a “foreign religion transplanted to a foreign soil.”⁸⁹ In other words, Christianity is far from “intrinsically foreign to Africa” as have some have too hastily assumed.⁹⁰ Third, a Christian theological understanding of the relationship between the African “sense of God” and God as revealed in Christ requires a genuine effort to link the whole counsel of “Biblical revelation” with the “revelation already vouchsafed” to Africans.⁹¹

B. The Exclusivist View of the African Sense of God

As has already been indicated, proponents of exclusivism have a more restrained, even pessimistic view of the significance or value of the African “sense of God” for Christian faith. The key question is, why the restraint and pessimism? This question is even more intriguing given, as was shown at the beginning of the preceding subsection, that inclusivism concedes, not only divine revelation in the created order but more specifically, a general apprehension of that revelation in Africa traditions. What theological considerations and concerns fund their more restrained and pessimistic evaluation of the African “sense of God”? There are at least three major considerations that shape their position: religious foundations, religious and spiritual content, and phenomenological affinities.

⁸⁹ Osadolor Imasogie, “African Traditional Religions and Christian Faith,” *Review & Expositor* 70, no.3 (Summer 1973): 283.

⁹⁰ Bediako, “Understanding African Theology in the Twentieth Century,” *Themelios* 20, no.1 (1994):16. The notion that Christianity is a foreign religion has exponents from within Christian faith and those from without. See the discussion in chapter 1, subsection on Pluralist/Conscientious objectors.

⁹¹ Idowu, *Towards an Indigenous Church*, 26.

1. *Different Religious Foundations*

The first source of the pessimism of the exclusivism position is the belief that the African “sense of God” derives from foundations that differ from and are inferior to those from which the Christian view of God derives. For whereas the Christian view of God is based on his redemptive revelation in Christ, now preserved in the form of “propositional revelation”⁹² in “the written Word of God,”⁹³ the view of God in African traditions derives from “non-redemptive” revelation,⁹⁴ that is to say, revelation that “does not possess soteriological merit by its very essence.”⁹⁵ This non-redemptive revelation consists in “fragments . . . or lumps of truths” from general revelation which have been corrupted or “wrenched out of their natural surroundings.”⁹⁶ This fact alone makes the African and the Christian view of God wholly different. For, the fact the Christian view of God is based on redemptive revelation, makes it the true religion. By the same token, the fact that the view of God in African traditions is based on “fragments” of on non-redemptive revelation means that it is defective and, therefore, a false or “man-made religion [view of God].”⁹⁷

⁹² “The Bible, as believed by Christian orthodoxy,” says Byang Kato, “is the propositional revelation of God to man, and as such, is without error,” see his “Limitations of Natural Revelation,” 51.

⁹³ By propositional revelation Richard Gehman means definitive “cognitive content” involving “propositional truth” expressed in a “verbal” form that is “transferable and comprehensible by all people in all cultures,” *Doing African Christian Theology: An Evangelical Perspective* (Nairobi, Kenya: Evangel Publishing House, 1987), 52, 78, 82.

⁹⁴ Adeyemo, *Salvation in African Tradition*, 25.

⁹⁵ Adeyemo, *Salvation in African Tradition*, 26.

⁹⁶ Nyirongo, *The gods of Africa or the God of the Bible*, 3; Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*, 113.

⁹⁷ Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*, 17; Adeyemo, *Salvation in African Tradition*, 36.

2. *Different Religious and Spiritual Content*

For proponents of exclusivism, it follows from the fact of different foundations that Christianity and African religious tradition offer or generate religious experiences and spiritual content that are radically different—the one sanctioned by God, and the other man-made. This radical difference, according to Kato, explains why the scriptures mandate “dogmatic...separation” between Christian faith and other or non-Christian (African) religions.⁹⁸ The Bible passages Kato cites all appear to make, or at least assume, a categorical contrast between Christianity and other religions.⁹⁹ Similarly, Adeyemo assumes a categorical “dichotomy” or what he calls “New Testament ‘separateness,’” between Christianity on the one hand, and “traditional idolatry,” on the other.¹⁰⁰

The radical separateness between the Christian and African view of God manifests itself in two crucial areas. First, it manifests in worship practices and the dispositions associated with them. For Nyirongo, worship in African traditions is directed, not towards God but towards “non human spirits and ancestors.”¹⁰¹ For Adeyemo, the fundamental religious impulse in African traditions is geared to “exploit rather than venerate” God.¹⁰² According to Kato, African traditions are based, not on grace but, on

⁹⁸ Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*, 93.

⁹⁹ It is a contrast between: believers and non-believers (2 Cor. 6:14, 15, and 17); true and false gospel (Gal. 1:8, 9); true doctrine and false teaching (1 Tim. 6:3-5); genuine and counterfeit piety (2 Tim. 3:5); genuine biblical teaching and divisive controversies (Titus 3:10); and, between those who live by wholesome Christian doctrine and those who do not (2 John. 9:11).

¹⁰⁰ Adeyemo, *Salvation in African Tradition*, 14.

¹⁰¹ Nyirongo, *The gods of Africa or the God of the Bible*, 4. According to him “the African God is not a friend and Lord of his life but someone to be used for one’s convenience. The ones who really care are his ancestors and nature spirits, p. 46.

¹⁰² Adeyemo, *Salvation in African Tradition*, 47.

“human efforts,” which he likens to the tower of Babel-like effort (Gen. 11) to build a “ladder to heaven.”¹⁰³ Second, the radical separateness manifests itself in the understanding of sin and evil. According to Adeyemo and others, African religious traditions do not take into account, sufficiently, the gravity of human “rebellion” against God (Gen. 3:5; 11:4; Gal. 3:8; Eph. 2:1, 12, 4:17, 18)¹⁰⁴ or its noetic effects on human nature.¹⁰⁵ They also fail to take into account the Satanic and demonic distortions to which human beings are susceptible since the fall.¹⁰⁶

3. *Superficial Phenomenological Similarities*

For proponents of discontinuity, the differences between Christianity and African traditions, both at the level of religious foundations and religious-spiritual content, strongly suggest that phenomenological similarities between them cannot be taken at face value. Phenomenological similarities should be treated, if not with suspicion, with caution because they are potentially misleading. This suspicion or caution is exercised most especially at the level of methodology and content.

¹⁰³ Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*, 103.

¹⁰⁴ Gehman, *African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective*, 44-47.

¹⁰⁵ The gravity of human fall, according to Adeyemo, includes “total depravity,” and the “distortion of the image of God,” *Salvation in African Tradition*, 26; and, according to Gehman includes, the perversion of the mind and of the religious “passions” (Rom. 1:24-32), *African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective*, 46.

¹⁰⁶ According to Adeyemo, “man is so constantly attacked by Satan that any faint reflection he has made of God is translated into the worship of a creature rather than the creator,” *Salvation in African Tradition*, 26; The same idea is in Gehman, *African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective*, 47, and Nyirongo, *The gods of Africa or the God of the Bible*, 9.

At the level of method, on the one hand, the apparent similarities should not be allowed to determine or influence how the theologian evaluates the African ““sense of God”.” This is precisely the point of Nyirongo’s warning:

We [or one] must not first...sympathize with the African’s claims and then go to the Bible to support or validate them. The safer and Biblical approach is to first of all listen to what God has said.¹⁰⁷

The approach Nyirongo proposes here is one in which the theologian *brackets* whatever African notions of God they might have in order to begin theologizing from a view of God which, for him, is purely or exclusively Christian-biblical. The underlying assumption seems to be that to allow African notions of God into the process of theologizing has the potential to either undermine or corrupt the integrity of the theological process and the result of the process itself. In other words, any view of God arrived at from a process that mixes African and Christian views of God is likely to be corrupted or sub-Christian.

At the level of content, on the other hand, the theologian should not assume that phenomenological similarities between Christian faith and African religions are proof of theological affinity or common ground between them, or even that they necessarily refer to the same divine being. Thus for Tite Tiénou, the indigenous names, concepts, and attributes of God, which many African theologians take as evidence of affinity between Christian faith and African religions, are “superficial similarities” which do not necessarily support the weight of the theological significance attributed to them. For him “African ideas of God” may indeed, as African theologians claim, be similar to those in

¹⁰⁷ Nyirongo, *The gods of Africa or the God of the Bible*, 12.

Christianity “but that does not prove them right in the light of biblical revelation.”¹⁰⁸ For Kato, in similar fashion, it is inconceivable that African notions of God could ever approximate the Christian view of God:

With all due respect to non-Christian noble ideas of Supreme Being, the thesis that they are monotheists in the Biblical sense cannot be sustained. The only monotheism the Christian can recognize in this New Testament era is the kind described by the Apostle Paul.¹⁰⁹

What Tiénou, Kato, and Nyirongo insist upon is that the Christian and the African views of God are distinct, and that there are good biblical and theological reasons to keep them distinct. First among the reasons is the fact that what the Bible reveals about God is unique. According to Adeyemo, for instance, any attempt “to equate African beliefs with biblical revelation” is a “challenge,” not only to the “uniqueness of the Bible” but specifically, to “the doctrines of incarnation and atonement of Christ.”¹¹⁰ For Nyirongo, to equate African beliefs with biblical revelation is to “undermine the authority and sufficiency of Scripture,” and to “despise God’s plan for salvation.”¹¹¹ The other reason is the view, advanced by Nyirongo, that to equate African views of God with the Christian view is tantamount to endorsing “natural revelation” which, for him, refers to the notion that “man has an innate ability to truly know God from creation alone.”¹¹² In

¹⁰⁸ Tite Tiénou, “Biblical Foundations: An African Study.” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 7, 1 (April 1983): 99-100; “Biblical Foundations for African Theology,” *Missiology* 10, no. 4 (October 1982): 446, 447.

¹⁰⁹ Byang Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*, 92, 99-100

¹¹⁰ Adeyemo, *Salvation in African Tradition*, 13.

¹¹¹ Nyirongo, *The gods of Africa or the God of the Bible*, 15.

¹¹² Nyirongo understanding of “natural revelation” is not entirely correct. What his criticism is directed at is natural theology of liberal school of theology not natural revelation as such, *The gods of Africa or the God of the Bible*, 15.

other words, such a view attributes to African traditions knowledge of God which is available only through Christ.

Based on what has been adduced so far, two observations can be made. First, the comparatively more generous and optimistic view of the African “sense of God” which proponents of inclusivism have is, in large measure, because of the priority they place on the *reality* and *identity* of God in African religious experience, and on the cultural authenticity of African Christian experience. Second, proponents of exclusivism have a much more restrained, if pessimistic, view of the significance or value of the African “sense of God” primarily because of scriptural and doctrinal considerations relating to the foundations, and the content of religious experience. These contrasting evaluations of the African “sense of God” raise questions that require further investigation. Are the differences between them irreconcilable? Is it true, as suggested by proponents of exclusivism, that the inclusivism position equates African views of God with the Christian view of God? Are the differences between the African and Christian views of God as wide, or the connections between them as inconsequential as the proponents of exclusivism seem to suggest? Do African views of God play any role in Christian faith, experience, and theology? If they do, what exactly is that role? These and related questions are to be addressed in the next major section in which a critical appraisal of the inclusivism and exclusivism view on the African “sense of God” is undertaken.

IV. A Critical Appraisal of the Inclusivist View of the African Sense of God

It would be misleading and counterproductive to adopt an all-or-nothing or winner-takes-all approach in this critical appraisal. For clearly there is truth on both sides—on the inclusivism, and exclusivism sides—of the debate. This is indicated, if

nothing else, by the fact that protagonists on both sides concede an important basic truth—the reality of divine revelation in and through creation, and the fact that Africans have, to some degree, apprehended that revelation. The differences in their ultimate positions arise, at least in part, from scriptural and theological considerations which each side brings to bear on this basic truth. This critical appraisal will examine how well these two positions comport with the whole truth as mediated to us through scripture, theology, and the Christian tradition. We begin with the inclusivism view of the African “sense of God”.

To recap briefly, the inclusivism view of the African “sense of God” is based on three claims or assumptions: first, the *reality* of the African “sense of God”, the view that the Being who Africans perceive or sense to be God (especially the creator God) is *real*; second, the *identity* of the divine subject, the view that the divine subject in African religious traditions is the same as the divine subject in Christian faith; and, third, cultural authenticity, the view that becoming and being a Christian is fundamentally consistent with African religious and cultural integrity. Do these claims have any basis in scripture and Christian theology, or are they beyond the boundaries of Christian faith? There are two ways to examine these claims, one from the standpoint of the *reality* of the object of religious belief, God as he is in his self revelation, and the other, from the standpoint of the knowledge of the object of religious belief, God as he is apprehended by humans.

A. The African Sense of God Considered from the Standpoint of the Reality of God as the Source and Object of Religious Belief

Considered from the standpoint of the *reality* of God as the source and object of religious belief, the claims made by proponents of inclusivism presuppose three factors

which are part of the objective conditions necessary for possibility of knowledge of God—metaphysical, epistemological, and noetic-anthropological (for clarity and ease these three factors shall henceforth be referred to as *primal factors*). The metaphysical factor addresses questions regarding whether God exists, or whether he is real. The epistemological addresses questions concerning whether God, assuming that he is or exists, is knowable, that is, whether he reveals or has revealed himself. The noetic-anthropological factor addresses questions regarding whether, if God reveals himself, he reveals himself in such a way that all human beings in every culture can apprehend him. It will be argued here that the claims made by proponents of inclusivism have some support in scripture and Christian theology with respect to these three factors—metaphysical, epistemological, and noetic-anthropological.

On the metaphysical factor, it is generally recognized that scripture makes no attempt either to prove or justify the existence of God. The reality and existence of God is assumed as a matter of course.¹¹³ Indeed belief or assumptions to the contrary, like atheism or even agnosticism for example, are denied (Rom. 1:19-20) and even condemned as foolishness rooted in the corruption and blindness caused by sin (Rom. 1:18-20; Ps. 14:1; 53:1). God is the premier being from whom all life and existence derive, and without whom nothing can be (Gen. 1:1; John 1:1-3; Col. 1:16). Thus, by insisting upon the *reality* of God in African traditions, proponents of inclusivism are in effect defending what, to them, is a *necessary connection* between the “sense of God” in African traditions and the metaphysical reality that makes it possible—the reality and

¹¹³ For Aquinas, granting or conceding the reality of God is the minimum condition for meaningful discussion about God to occur, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 3 vols. (New York: Benziger, 1948; repr. 5 vols. Westminster: Christian Classics, 1981), Ia, q.1, a. 8.

existence of God himself. As far as they are concerned, the reality and existence of God is the minimum metaphysical condition that is necessary and sufficient to cause awareness of God anywhere (Mat. 11:27; John 1:18).¹¹⁴ This means that the “sense of God” in African traditions, no matter how imperfect, is sufficient proof that God is real, real to Africans in particular.¹¹⁵

On the epistemological factor, proponents of inclusivism assume, as does scripture and Christian theology, that God reveals himself.¹¹⁶ On the Christian view, God who is himself the source and foundation of the knowledge of God has in fact revealed himself, first in and through the created order (Ps. 19: 1-4; Rom. 1:19-20), and second, in and through Jesus Christ (Heb. 1:1-3). It is important to point out here that it is the former

¹¹⁴ The notion that only God reveals God is intrinsic to the Christian view of divine revelation and has been expressed and defended by major theologians in the history of the church. For Aquinas, since there is no analogy of being between God and human beings, God is known only through his effects, *Summa Theologica* I, q. 1, a. 1 and 2. Similarly for Calvin, it is indisputable that “the human mind [cannot] measure off the measureless essence of God.” God is the only “fit witness of himself, and is not known except through himself,” *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), I, iii, 21, hence forth abbreviated *Institutes*. According to Bavinck, “The distance between the Creator and the creature is much too great for humans to perceive God directly. The finite is not capable of containing the infinite (*finitum non est capax infiniti*),” *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. I, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 310-311. Thus for Bavinck, only the “Cause of all existence, and therefore itself transcending all existence; it alone could give an authoritative account of what really is,” *Reformed Dogmatics*, II, 38, 29-52. And, one does not have to buy into Barth’s ultimate rejection of general revelation to recognize that there is some truth to the theological premise upon which he based it, namely, the notion that “God reveals Himself...through Himself,” *Church Dogmatics*, 2/1, 135.

¹¹⁵ The validity of inferring the reality of God (Creator) from the human experience of the created order is something Aquinas discusses. According to him, although there is no proportion (analogy of being) between God (as an eternal and infinite Being) and creatures (as temporal and finite beings), yet since creatures are effects of God (the Creator), the fact that they (creatures) actually exist is proof that their Creator or cause exists. One cannot affirm or deny the reality of a creature without affirming or denying the reality of its Creator (cause). As Aquinas himself puts it, “since every effect depends upon its cause, if the effect exists, the cause must pre-exist. Hence the existence of God, insofar as it is not self-evident to us, can be demonstrated from those of His effects which are known to us,” *Summa Theologica*, I, q. 1, a. 1 and 2. This argument is further developed and illustrated in Aquinas’s five ways or proofs given in Article 3 of the same question.

¹¹⁶ According to Herman Bavinck, revelation is neither “incidental,” nor “arbitrary,” but in fact “an essential component of religion,” *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. I, 284, 285.

(revelation through creation) rather than the latter (revelation in Christ) which the proponents of inclusivism are arguing. Since this revelation is, as Idowu likes to put it, not “limited in scope,” and is “meant for all mankind,”¹¹⁷ it ought to be assumed of all human beings. In other words, based on what scripture and Christian theology claim and assume, there is no reason not to assume that all human beings, at some level, apprehend God’s self revelation in creation.

On the noetic-anthropological factor, proponents of inclusivism assume, as does Christianity, that human beings are created in such a way that they can apprehend divine self-revelation in and through creation. On the Christian view, human beings are created the *imago dei* (Gen. 1:26; Ps. 8). They have an inbuilt creational predisposition to know God (Rom. 1:19-20), as well as an *upward* impulse to seek, or feel-after God (Acts. 14:15-17; 17:24-28). Since all human beings are created in the *imago dei*, no human being is excluded from the possibility and responsibility of knowing God.

To conclude on this issue, if a basic knowledge of God anywhere presupposes *primal factors*—metaphysical (God), epistemological (revelation), and noetic-anthropological (humanity in *imago dei*)—as the objective conditions for the possibility of human knowledge of God anywhere, then two things follow. First, the belief in God which is prevalent in African traditions is proof that the *primal factors* truly obtain. Second, Christian faith and knowledge God must entail or participate in these *primal factors*. What needs clarification is whether or not the knowledge of God in African traditions is identical with or the same as that in Christian faith. The next section picks up on this point

¹¹⁷ Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition*, 56-57, 140; *Olódùmarè*, 30-31.

B. The African Sense of God Considered from the Standpoint of the *Knowledge of God* as the Object of Religious Belief—God

If the Christian knowledge of God participates in the *primal factors*, which are the sources of the African “sense of God”, should this be taken to mean that the knowledge and experience of God in African traditions is identical or the same as the knowledge and experience of God in Christian faith? Can a direct correlation be made between knowledge of God in African traditions and knowledge of God in Christian faith? It is our view that to make direct correlation of this kind is misleading in two ways.

First, such a correlation fails to recognize and to make a crucial distinction between the *primal factors*—metaphysical (God), epistemological (divine self-revelation), and noetic-anthropological (human beings in the *imago dei*)—as they are objectively, and as human beings apprehend and experience them. It is important to remember that *primal factors* are divinely instituted and creational— God, revelation, self (*imago dei*)—and therefore not subject to human power or will to alter or reverse.

Second, the correlation fails to take into account the impact of what can be referred to as *intervening factors* that affect, both negatively and positively, how human beings experience and apprehend *primal factors*. The chief negative *intervening factor* is the impact of the fall (Gen. 3) on the human ability to apprehend and receive divine revelation. The fall is taught in Christian doctrine and affirmed in African myths of the fall.¹¹⁸ The chief positive *intervening factor* is scripture. Scripture is also a major area of

¹¹⁸ African views of the human fall, conceived of in myths about the “withdrawal of God,” and the problem of evil in the world, conceived of as the problem of the “ambiguity of the transcendent,” are discussed in the chapter on Bediako’s Christology under the section on “The Human Predicament as Conceived of in African Traditions.” See Bediako, “Biblical Christologies,” 102; “Jesus in African Culture,” 101; F. B. Welbourn, “Some Problems of African Christianity,” *Christianity in Tropical Africa: Studies Presented and Discussed at the 7th International African Seminar, University of Ghana, April 1965*, ed.

difference between Christianity and African traditions. The experience and knowledge of God in African traditions—though based on *primal factors*—does not have the benefit of authoritative scriptures to augment it, and to mitigate the *noetic* effects of the fall upon the human.¹¹⁹ In view of this, Kibicho’s claim that there is “radical sameness and continuity” of the conception of God in African traditions and Christianity is hasty.¹²⁰ It can easily be shown that there are appreciable differences between the knowledge of God in African traditions and in Christian faith.

C. The Difference between Knowledge of God in African Traditions and in Christian Faith

The fact that Christianity and African religious traditions both assume the *primal factors*—metaphysical (God), epistemological (revelation), and anthropological (*imago dei*)—means that there is bound to be some overlap in their respective accounts and experiences of God. The possibility of overlap is important to acknowledge for two reasons. First, contrary to some critics—especially from among proponents of exclusivism and conscientious objectors—acknowledging the possibility of such overlap poses no immediate threat, either to the uniqueness of divine revelation in Christ, or to the religious and cultural integrity of the knowledge of God in African traditions. Nor is such acknowledgement theological flattery to compensate for the blanket demonization

Christian G. K. Baeta (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 182-189; Taylor, *The Primal Vision: Christian Presence Amid African Religion*, chap. 12.

¹¹⁹ See earlier discussion on the problem of the lack of ‘recognized doctrinal standards,’ and the absence of ‘formal or written sources’ that underwrite the African “sense of God”, under section II, subsections A, B, C.

¹²⁰ Kibicho, *God and Revelation in an African Context*, 171-172, and in “The Continuity of the African Conception of God into and through Christianity: A Kikuyu Study,” 388.

of African traditions by some Christian theologians in the past. In truth, acknowledging the overlap is paying due recognizance to the affinity and mutual dependence which Christianity and African traditions have upon the *primal factors* on which human apprehension of God, at all, depends.

Second, acknowledging the overlap makes it easier to recognize the kind of knowledge of God which is not available in African traditions but which divine revelation in Christ brings to light. This is true even of knowledge from the *primal factors*. For instance, although it is clear in African traditions that God is, and that he is creator, yet *who* or *what God is*, that is to say, what his nature is like, is far from clear to everyone. This is particularly the case in the face of the problem of evil, or what, in African theology, is sometimes referred to as the “ambiguity of the transcendent.” For in truth, the “ambiguity” in the African religious experience is sufficient to raise questions about the nature of God and of the transcendent; about how God is disposed toward human beings; about whether God is “at once [both] beneficent and malevolent.”¹²¹ A similar thing can be said in regard to the epistemological and anthropological factors. Despite the knowledge that God is creator and revealer, human understanding of God is not sufficient to furnish ready answers to questions regarding why, for instance, God created humanity and the world, why humans suffer and die, and why anyone should continue to hope at all.

The point we are driving at is that the message of the gospel casts all the *primal factors* and all the unanswered questions in new perspective primarily because it reveals *who God is* and how everything else assumes its right place in light of who he is. In

¹²¹ Bediako, “Biblical Christologies,” 102; “Jesus in African Culture,” 101.

particular, it reveals what kind of being God is; what kind of being he must be to have, among other things, created the world the way he did; revealed himself through what he created; created humanity in the way he did, that is, in his image; and, permitted humanity, despite their sin and evil, to continue to enjoy the benefits of his creation. Two broad theological statements can be made in regard to divine self-disclosure in Christ, and in regard to the difference it makes to existing knowledge about God in African traditions. The first is that God is absolutely transcendent, yet supremely communicable and approachable. And, the second, that God is absolutely holy, yet also loving and merciful. A brief elaboration of these statements is called for.

1. God as Transcendent, Yet Supremely Communicable and Approachable

That God, as creator, is sovereign and transcendent is recognized in the African view of God. Indeed, from earlier discussions on the postulate of multiplicity in African traditions (section II subsection B), belief in divinities arises out of a particular view of divine transcendence. It is the view that God is so far exalted above all mundane things that human beings need intermediaries like divinities and ancestors to approach him.¹²² On the Christian view, however, although God is absolutely transcendent, he is also, in himself, supremely communicable and approachable. The “high and lofty One” who dwells in a “high and holy place” and in “unapproachable light” is, at the same time, the One who comes down to those who are “contrite and lowly in spirit” (Isa. 57:15; 1 Tim.

¹²² Bolaji Idowu, *Olódùmare*, 62; Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy*, 75-78. Osadolor Imasogie “African Traditional Religions and Christian Faith,” 287-290; “Langmead Casserley’s Understanding of Christian Philosophy As a Basis for Apologetics,” 214-224.

6:15-17). In other words, God's ontic transcendence is not an insurmountable barrier to his ability to communicate with creatures whenever it pleases him to do so.¹²³

God's communicability and approachability are revealed in his ability to accommodate himself to human form and capacity. God's self-revelation, for instance, would have been incomprehensible to humans if God did not condescend to accommodate himself to the creaturely form and capacity. This is true, both of original creational revelation and, of the special revelation in Christ. In original revelation God placed the marks, *notae*, of divinity objectively upon the created order (Ps. 19: 1-2; Rom. 1:19-20). These marks function instrumentally as the cognitive foundation from which human beings infer his divine nature and power.¹²⁴ Divine self communication and approachability, which always involve divine accommodation to human capacity, were demonstrated most fully and most decisively in the incarnation (John 1:1-4, 14; Heb. 1:1-4; 2:14-18).¹²⁵

¹²³ For Bavinck, creation, revelation, and incarnation are divine actions which are rooted in the communicability of God. They betoken his love and self-communication which presupposes a Trinitarian essence, *Reformed Dogmatics*, I, 274-281.

¹²⁴ T. H. L. Parker rightly points out that the marks of divinity on the created order should not be taken casually as if they were an integral or intrinsic attribute of the created order. In his view, God "need not have left these *notae* [marks] on His work." There is suggested in Parker's remark the idea that God could have created differently. If we call to mind the Christian belief in creation *ex nihilo*, then the idea that God could have created a world that does not bear the marks of his glory may be hypothetical but not altogether implausible. This means that the marks (*notae*) of God's glory on created order carry more force and import than is typically accorded to general revelation. These marks constitute, as Parker puts it, "a deliberate self manifestation" which, one might add, is immediate, personal, living, authoritative, and urgent, "Calvin's Concept of Revelation," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 2, (1949): 33.

¹²⁵ Bavinck has rightly observed that, "Revelation therefore is always an act of grace; in it God condescends to meet his creature, a creature made in his own image. All revelation is anthropomorphic, a kind of humanization of God. It always occurs in certain forms, in specific modes. In natural revelation his divine and eternal thoughts have been deposited in creatures in a creaturely way so that they could be understood by human thought processes. And in supernatural revelation he binds himself to space, adopts human language and speech, and makes use of creaturely means (Gen. 1:28; 2:16f, 21ff; 3:8ff)," *Reformed Dogmatics*, I, 310.

2. *God as Holy and Self-Sufficient, Yet Compassionate and Merciful*

That God is absolutely holy, just, and self-sufficient is relatively clear in African traditions. However, that God is at the very same time loving, merciful, and compassionately disposed toward human beings, especially in their sin and tragic plight, is far from clear in African religious experience. It is true God's general paternal involvement in human affairs can be inferred from his essential attributes—goodness, justice, love, and from his providential care for creation. Yet, even such inference is still a far cry from a *sure knowledge* and *personal assurance* that God is merciful and compassionately disposed towards *me*. This perhaps explains the prevarication in African religious experience associated with the “ambiguity” of the transcendent which was discussed earlier (under subsection IV. C). It is precisely a *sure knowledge* of God and *personal assurance* of his mercy and compassion that the scriptures reveal, particularly in the overarching stories of creation (Gen. 1-2), the fall (Gen. 3) and redemption. As will be shown in what follows, these stories throw creation, human experience, and divine activity in the world in a new perspective.

a. What Can Be Learned about God from the Story of Creation?

In what way does scriptural revelation cast God and humanity in a perspective which is not available from the resources available in African traditions alone? If, as Christianity teaches, God is holy, all-powerful, and self-sufficient, then the creation of the world could have been for no other purpose but God's good pleasure and the benefit of

the creatures he created.¹²⁶ The act of creation, therefore, reveals something about creation and about the creator. Creation is pure gift, and the creator is the gift giver. But, what kind of gift is creation, and to what purpose is it? To answer this question it is necessary to know what kind of gift giver the creator is or what nature he is first. One way to arrive at the answer is to consider what kind being God has to be or what kind nature he has to have—besides being holy, all-powerful, self-sufficient, just, etc.—to create a realm of creatures which he obviously does not need, and in precisely the way we experience it to be. From the vantage point of this question the most comprehensive attribute that describes the nature of the kind of God who could have created a world like the one we know and experience is *love*.

There are three traits of God's nature as love which creation exhibits when examined through the lens of scripture. The first is God's love as *life-giving condescension* which is revealed in the fact that he (God) who was always utterly complete and glorious in himself (John 5:26; 17:5, 24; Acts 17:24-25) chose to bring into being, out of nothing, a creaturely realm. Moreover, he deigned to garnish it with his goodness, glory, and presence entirely for benefit of the creatures he created. The second trait is God's love as *self-giving love* which is revealed in the fact that God chose to bestow a nature analogous to his own, *imago dei*, upon one of his creatures. And, that by that act of self-giving, conferred on the human being an incomparable dignity—a dignity which put humanity on the most intimate terms any creature could ever have with

¹²⁶ It is not that God *had* to or *needed* to create the world. He chose to. According to The *Belgic Confession*, Art. 12, God “created heaven and earth and all other creatures from nothing, *when it seemed good to him*” [emphasis added].

divinity (Ps. 8).¹²⁷ The third trait is God’s love as *unselfish and prodigious generosity* which is revealed in the fact that God gave humanity a destiny and inheritance that, by far, surpasses her station; he gave humanity the destiny and inheritance into which “even angels long to look” (1Pet. 1:12)—the destiny to be or to become children of God (John 1:12-13; Eph. 1:3-6; 1John 3:1). Considering that humanity had no prior claim to or qualification to merit this honor, God is clearly unselfishly and prodigiously generous.

b. What Can Be Learned about God from the Story of Redemption?

When one considers the story of redemption, divine love is revealed in even deeper light. It begins with human fall from grace and from the pristine righteousness in which they were created (Gen. 3). God could have justly imposed the ultimate condemnation which humanity justly deserved (Rom. 3:19, 23; 6:23) and left humanity to their own devices (Gen 3:8-13).¹²⁸ Yet, rather than banish them utterly God condescends to seek out humanity, and to extend the promise of redemption (Gen. 3:15).¹²⁹ In refraining from pronouncing the ultimate sentence, God placed humanity under the protection of what Bavinck calls the “economy of divine forbearance and long-

¹²⁷ Considered from the perspective of creation and in comparison to creatures, it is impossible to overstate the grandeur of the gift of being a human being. “Man [humanity], says Calvin, “[is] the loftiest proof of divine wisdom” and also “a workshop graced with God’s unnumbered works, and at the same time, a storehouse overflowing with inestimable riches.” Such is the grandeur of being human that contemplating it humanity should simply “break forth in praises” to God, *Institutes*, I. v. 3 and 4.

¹²⁸ As the first article of *The Canons of Dort* puts it “Since all people have sinned in Adam and have come under the sentence of the curse and eternal death, God would have done no one injustice if it had been his will to leave the entire human race in sin and under the curse, and to condemn them on account of their sin.”

¹²⁹ According to Article 17 of the *Belgic Confession*, “God....seeing that man had plunged himself....into both physical and spiritual death, and made himself completely miserable, set out to find him, though man, trembling all over, was fleeing from him.”

suffering.”¹³⁰ God’s forbearance with human sin and rebellion is written on every page of human history itself (Acts 14:17; 17:30) in countless ways. Among other things, his self-witness in and through creation has continued despite human rebellion (Acts. 14:17a; 17:26-28; Rom. 1:18-20); and, God faithfully provides for human wellbeing despite human unfaithfulness and evil (Matt. 5:45; Acts 14:17b; 17:14-25).¹³¹ The goal of his forbearance is the redemption revealed in the incarnation, life, and death of the Son of God (John 3:16; Rom. 5:6-8). In Christian understanding, the love of God that is revealed in Christ has no parallel or precedent anywhere else but in the Trinitarian relations between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.¹³²

In sum, two things may be said regarding the inclusivist view of the African the “sense of God”. First, to the extent to which the African “sense of God” derives from the *primal factors*—metaphysical (God), epistemological (revelation), and noetic-anthropological (human nature as *imago dei*)—the reality of God in African traditions

¹³⁰ Bavinck, “Common grace,” trans. Raymond C. Van Leeuwen in *Calvin Theological Journal* 24, no. 1 (April 1, 1989): 41. According to Bavinck, since after the fall humanity could no longer live by the terms of the *foedus operum* (covenant of works) God, through the Noahic Covenant, establishes new terms by which fallen humanity would continue to exist. On these terms the “new mankind [humanity] also exists and lives only by the grace of God. . . . God, as it were, firmly ground the being and life of the creation in a covenant with all of nature and with every living beings. This life and being are being are no longer ‘natural.’ Rather, they are the fruit of a supernatural grace to which man [humanity] no longer has a self-evident claim (Gen. 8:21, 22, 9: 1-17).”

¹³¹ This is evidence, not only of God’s mercy towards humanity but also, of his sovereignty even over evil—a truth in which all, according to Article 13 of the *Belgic Confession*, can take comfort and repose “knowing that he [God] holds in check the devils and all our enemies.”

¹³² In other words, the kind of divine self-giving that brought creation into being is possible only if God is, as Christian doctrine teaches, Trinity. The two main traditional approaches to this doctrine have emphasized either plurality within the God ahead against modalism (Greek Fathers), or unity of the divine essence, against tritheism (Latin Fathers). The main point of the doctrine, however, is the same, namely, to show that the God revealed in scripture is not an isolated monad but, in himself, an interrelated and self-giving being, capable of love and self-communication. The Godhead is a transcendent community of three fully personal divine entities—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—who are fully united in common divine essence. The love directed to creatures is archetypally grounded in the love they bear each other. See Cornelius Plantinga, “The Threeness/Oneness Problem of the Trinity,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 23, 1 (April 1988): 37-53; Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1/1, 295-383; Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Ia. q. 27-28; St. Augustine, *De Trinitate*, Books 1-15.

cannot to be denied. The fact that Christianity assumes and participates in the *primal factors* accounts for the similarities in between the Christian and African view of God. Second, it is also clear, however, that here are real differences between the knowledge of God in Christian faith, and in African tradition, particularly at the noetic level of human apprehension and experience. The differences are caused by *intervening factors*, positive and negative. Negatively, the differences derive from the noetic effects of the fall. Positively the differences arise from the double impact of scripture. For, on the one hand, scripture reveals God's plan of redemption like nothing or no one else can. On the other, scripture casts divine activity in creation in new light like nothing or no one else can. Thus, although Christianity and African traditions participate in the same *primal factors*—God, revelation, and human nature as *imago dei*—their respective understanding of those factors, though overlapping in some respects, is nevertheless different. In short, scripture makes possible an understanding of God, creation, and human nature that is not possible in African traditions or anywhere (1Cor. 2:9-16).

V. A Critical Appraisal of the Exclusivist View of the African Sense of God

To recap briefly, the three reasons or arguments given by proponents of exclusivism against African “sense of God” that will be addressed in this section are as follows: first, that African “sense of God” derive from foundations that differ from those of Christian faith; second, the religious and spiritual content from this “sense of God” differ from that which arises out Christian faith; and, third the phenomenological similarities between African traditions and Christianity are superficial and of minor theological significance. As was indicated earlier, these claims are not without some support in scripture and Christian tradition. What this support is exactly is the subject of

the next section. The first two reasons—foundations, and religious or spiritual content—are examined together because they are closely related.

A. Different Foundations and Different Religious and Spiritual Content?

There is some truth to the argument that the knowledge of God in African traditions and in Christianity derive from different foundations. Foundations here refer to the proximate noetic basis of the knowledge of God in the respective traditions. The proximate noetic basis of the Christian knowledge of God is divine revelation in Christ (Heb. 1:1-3; John 1:1-18; 1John 1:1-3) or, in short hand, scripture. The noetic basis of the knowledge of God in African traditions is divine revelation in creation. How exactly does their respective knowledge of God differ? Is it a difference of perspective or a difference of substance? To answer these questions, we invoke a passage from Calvin's *Institutes* in which he makes a helpful distinction regarding what he calls the "twofold knowledge of God."¹³³ This is what he has to say:

Now, the knowledge of God, as I understand it, is that by which we not only conceive that there is God but also grasp what befits us....Here I do not touch upon the sort of knowledge with which men, in themselves lost and accursed, apprehend God the Redeemer in Christ the Mediator; but I speak only of the primal and simple knowledge which the very order of nature would have led us if Adam had remained upright. In this ruin of mankind no one now experiences God either as Father or as Author of salvation, or favorable in any way, until Christ the Mediator comes forward to reconcile us. Nevertheless, it is one thing to feel that God as our Maker supports us by his power, governs us by his providence, nourishes us by his goodness, and attends to us with all sorts of

¹³³ According to Calvin, the twofold knowledge is as follows: "First, as much in the fashioning of the universe as in the general teaching of Scripture the Lord shows himself to be simply the Creator. Then in the face of Christ he shows himself the Redeemer," Calvin, *Institutes*, I. ii.1.

blessings—and another thing to embrace the grace of reconciliation offered to us in Christ.¹³⁴

In this passage Calvin makes two kinds of distinctions which can be of help to this discussion—one at the level of the noetic foundations of religion or faith, and the other at the level of religious experience and content.

At the level of noetic foundations, Calvin distinguishes between knowledge of God based on the revelation of God in “the order of nature,” and knowledge of God based on the revelation of “God the Redeemer in Christ the Mediator,” or God “in the face of Christ.” The former corresponds to what is commonly called general revelation, and the latter to what is commonly called special revelation or scripture. To the extent to which the knowledge and experience of God in African traditions is based on the former, and the knowledge and experience of God in Christianity is based on the latter, their respective noetic foundations are different. Proponents of exclusivism are right to highlight this difference. They are also justified in insisting upon the uniqueness and normativeness of the scriptures as the authoritative source of the knowledge of God in Christian faith.

The distinction at the level of religious or spiritual experience and content follows directly from the one at the level of noetic foundations. The spiritual content and religious experience is determined by the noetic foundations. As far as Calvin is concerned, it is “one thing” to know and experience God as “creator,” “maker,” “governor” and so on, and quite “another thing” to know and experience God as “Father and Author of salvation,” or as Redeemer.

¹³⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, I. ii.1.

It is clear from Calvin that the experience of God afforded by the two foundations cannot be the same. In the former, revelation in creation, God is experienced as the creator who made, sustains, and governs everything; and also, as the fount of goodness, who provides for human needs and gives every blessing. In the latter, revelation through Christ or scripture, there is a new twofold knowledge and experience of God and of humanity. On the one hand, there is a new knowledge and experience of God revealed in Christ which shows his holiness, majesty, and glory, as well as his love, kindness, and tenderness mercies (John 1:14; 1John 1:1-2). On the other hand, there is also new double knowledge and experience of humanity which is revealed in Christ—a knowledge of her nobility, grandeur, and glorious destiny (Eph. 1:3-14), but also a knowledge of her misery and of the helplessness of sinful condition.

Clearly proponents of exclusivism see this twofold knowledge—of God and of humanity—made possible by divine revelation in Christ as a major area of difference between Christianity and African traditions. As far as they are concerned, the religious disposition and worship inspired by the knowledge of God and of humanity revealed in Christ is vastly different from that which the knowledge of God in African traditions can inspire.

The question that remains, however, is how the respective knowledge and experiences of God are related to each other. This is pertinent because the theoretical distinction made between the two foundations and the respective knowledge experiences does not in any way resolve the issue at the practical level. The conundrum remains: what does one do with the knowledge and religious experience of God in African traditions in the encounter with Christian faith? What role does this prior experience and knowledge

play in the experience of becoming a Christian? Is the claim by proponents of exclusivism, that phenomenological similarities between the African and Christian view of God are superficial and theologically inconsequential, ultimately a veiled attempt to either quell or dismiss these questions altogether?

B. Phenomenological Similarities between African and Christian Views of God Superficial?

The general impression one gets from this argument by proponents of exclusivism is that whatever similarities or affinities might be observed between the views of God in African traditions and in Christian faith are of minimal or inconsequential theological significance. This, however, does not appear to be a fair characterization of the reality itself. For if it is true that the same divine agent (God) is behind the two kinds of knowledge of God—from revelation in creation (in African traditions), and from revelation in Christ (in Christian faith)—then the relationship of the respective experiences and apprehensions of God, though distinct, can hardly be described as merely superficial. Nor does it seem appropriate to proceed as if the knowledge and experience of God in African traditions—and for that matter in any non-Christian religious tradition—is, thereby, theologically inconsequential. Clearly, an alternative understanding of how these two kinds of knowledge are distinct but related is called for. The place to begin is with a basic biblical and theological truth which protagonists, on both sides of the debate, agree on. It was shown earlier (at the beginning of section III) that there is agreement between the two side on the twofold nature of divine revelation—creation and in redemption, namely that there is one divine agent behind it (John 1:1-3, 14; Col. 1:15-17). Based on this basic biblical and theological affirmation three motifs

can be extrapolated to serve as guidelines or ground rules for relating the knowledge of God in African traditions and in Christian faith.

The first motif is the *unity of the divine agent* within the diverse divine activities. As mentioned already, the experience and knowledge of God in African traditions and in Christian faith are related by the fact that they are based on the activities of the same divine agent. The relationship between them is, however, not one of necessity or logical entailment, but organic. For however distinct the knowledge from the respective foundations appear to be, they are still the products of the activity of the same divine agent.

The second motif concerns the *distinction between divine operations within the diverse divine* activities. For inasmuch as the two kinds of knowledge are ultimately the products of the activities of the same divine agent, the activities themselves ought to be recognized as distinct divine operations which are directed to different ends. The divine activity of revelation in creation is part of the operation of original grace, also called common grace, *gratia communis*, whose ultimate end is the glory of God (Col. 1:15-20; Rev. 4:11). On the other hand, the divine activity of revelation in Christ is part of the operation of special grace, *gratia specialis*, whose end is the redemption of humanity (Matt. 20:28; Mk. 10:45; Luke 19:10).

The third motif concerns the *harmony among the divine operations and activities*. Insofar as the two operations, in creation and in Christ, derive from a single divine agent who is all-wise and all-knowing, a *de jure* harmony between the operations has to be assumed. This holds even where the harmony is *de facto* not self-evident to human perception or reason. And, in view of the harmony between the divine operations, the

recognition and elaboration—of the purpose, significance, and value—of the knowledge of God deriving from any one of the divine operations does not mean or entail the diminution of the other.

With these three ground rules in place, it is possible to attempt an explanation of how the two kinds of knowledge and experience of God, in African traditions, and in Christian faith, are related. That relationship can be described from three vantage points: from their respective *cause* and *ultimate ends*, from their *means*, and from their *proximate ends*. With regard to *cause* and *ultimate ends*, the knowledge and experience of God in African traditions is appropriately recognized and acknowledged as the product of the human encounter with the divine operation of the common grace in and through creation. Its proximate theological value and significance is human happiness and wellbeing, and its ultimate, the glory of God. The knowledge and experience of God in Christian faith, on the other hand, is appropriately recognized and acknowledged as the product of the human encounter with the divine operation of the special grace of God in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Its proximate theological significance and value is human redemption, and its ultimate goal and significance, the glory of God.

Another way to describe the relationship between the knowledge and experience of God in African traditions and Christian faith is to recognize unity or commonality as pertains to *cause* and *ultimate end*, but *diversity* and *distinction* as pertains to *means* and *proximate ends*. With regard to the former, there is a single divine agent who is the *cause* and the *ultimate goal* of revelation and knowledge of God in African traditions and in Christian faith. However, while the *means* of the knowledge and experience of God in African traditions is divine revelation in creation, the *means* of the knowledge and

experience of God in Christianity is faith in Christ. There is, however, still the question regarding what happens to the knowledge and experience of God in African traditions in the encounter with the knowledge and experience of God in Christ. Is the former jettisoned or replaced entirely by the latter? Or do they assume a parallel existence? The answer to this question is folded into the remarks in the concluding section.

VI. Conclusion

There are, as has been observed, legitimate claims made by proponents on both sides of the debate—inclusivism and exclusivism—regarding the value of the “sense of God” in African traditions. In general, the former emphasize and defend the reality of the knowledge and experience of God in African traditions, while the latter emphasize and defend the uniqueness of the knowledge of God in Christian faith. Three final remarks can be made regarding the knowledge of God in African tradition and in Christian faith—in regard to how they are *distinct*, how they are *related*, and what *benefit* they are to each other.

In regard to how it is *distinct*, the knowledge and experience of God in African traditions and in Christian faith can be distinguished at two levels. First, it is distinguished at level of the noetic foundations on which they are based. While the knowledge and experience of God in African traditions flows out of the human encounter with divine presence and activity in the created order, the knowledge and experience of God in Christian faith flows out of faith in Christ base on the scriptures. Second, it is distinguished level of religious content and experience. For while knowledge of God in Christian faith has the benefit of the resources of the gospels—grace, forgiveness, scripture, and the ministry of the Holy Spirit—to counteract the power of evil in the

world and the noetic effects of the fall on humanity, the knowledge and experience of God in African traditions does not.

In regard *to relation*, the knowledge and experience of God in African traditions and in Christian faith are related, not superficially or tangentially but, really and organically. Both derive from the revelatory activity of a single divine agent, albeit acting in distinct but related operations. The former derives from the operation of divine grace through creation, and the other from the operation of divine grace in Christ. The relationship between them is not that of parallel equality but of a dialectal interpenetration which can be expressed in three affirmations. First, while it is true that divine revelation in Christ is the paradigmatic revelation of God, it is also equally true that it presupposes and is in fact based divine revelation in creation. Second, whatever is genuinely good, true, and worthy (etc.) in the knowledge and experience of God in African traditions is assumed in the knowledge and experience of God in Christian faith. Third, the knowledge and experience of God in Christian faith does not merely supplement the knowledge and experience of God in African traditions, it corrects it, completes it, and gives it its full range and proper context.

In regard *to benefit*, it clear from the aforesaid that there is some mutual benefit between the knowledge of God in African traditions and in Christian faith. Christianity is enriched by the knowledge and experience of God in African traditions. This enrichment does not add to the content of Christian doctrine. Rather, it contributes to a fuller or more contextually grounded understanding of what Christianity teaches and assume about God and creation. In this regard, the knowledge and experience of God in African traditions functions, not as *proclamation* but, as *witness* to the reality and power of God's self-

revelation and activity in and through creation. For, through encounter with African traditions the understanding of what Christianity already believes about divine activity in the created order is enhanced, given tangible and even visible expression. The knowledge and experience of God in African traditions can be looked at as a laboratory specimen that demonstrates the resilient power of divine self-revelation in creation and its potential to inspire a religious response.

Finally, a question may be raised as to whether the two positions—by proponents of inclusivism and by proponents of exclusivism—on the African “sense of God” are reconcilable. That depends on whether one thinks that reconciling them is a desirable goal or not. It is clear from the discussion that, excepting for the most extreme views by a few proponents on either side, the differences between the two sides are significant but not absolute. They arise, less from the fact that the two sides subscribe to mutually exclusive premises and, more from the fact that they hold to different theological priorities regarding common premises. The comparatively more generous and optimistic view of the African “sense of God” by proponents of inclusivism is, in large measure, because of the priority they place on the *reality* and *identity* of God in African religious experience, and on the cultural authenticity of the religious experience of becoming a Christian. On the other hand, the more restrained, if pessimistic, view taken by proponents of exclusivism is primarily because of scriptural and doctrinal considerations which they deem to be essential to a true knowledge and religious experience of God.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE AFRICAN SENSE OF REALITY AND SENSE OF VOCATION

I. Introduction

The preceding chapter dealt with the first of the three elements of African religious traditions, the African “sense of God”.¹ This chapter takes up the other two elements of African religious traditions, the African “sense of reality”, and the African “sense of vocation”. The “sense of reality” refers to the worldview, ontology—what some have called mental maps of reality—which undergirds African traditions. In particular, it refers to the view that reality comprises a physical-material reality that is rooted in and dependent upon a spiritual-supernatural or transcendent realm. The “sense of vocation”, on its part, refers to the general perception in African traditions that human life is fundamentally a religious undertaking.

Although the African “sense of reality” and “sense of vocation” are distinguishable analytically, in reality they are so intertwined and interlocked that it is hard to draw a line between them. For while the African “sense of reality” is discernable only as expressed in life as a religious *vocation*, human life is a religious *vocation* precisely because it is lived as a transaction between the physical-material realm and the spiritual-transcendent realm. For this reason, therefore, it will not be necessary to argue the African “sense of reality” separately from the “sense of vocation”. Instead, the

¹ The three elements of African religious traditions include the African *sense of God*, the African *sense of reality*, and the African *sense of human vocation*

designation African religious traditions, or African religious ontology and way of life will suffice to express the African “sense of reality” and “sense of vocation”.

This chapter will show that the African religious ontology and way of life—”sense of reality” and “sense of vocation”—have real resonances with a Christian understanding of the created order, especially the place of the human being within it. These resonances can be recognized when these elements of African traditions—the “sense of reality” and “sense of vocation”, are examined through the lens of divine activity in creation and providence. The need to do this arises from the fact that the value and role of these elements for or in Christian faith is still shrouded in relative theological uncertainty. For, unlike the African “sense of God”, which has received the lion’s share of the attention, there has been a tendency to relegate the African “sense of reality” and “sense of vocation” to the periphery of theological inquiry. It will become clear in the course of this chapter that the focus on the African “sense of God”, important as it is, is not an adequate response to African traditions as whole. A Christian theological response to African religious tradition has to encompass the wider spiritual universe of African religious traditions which is comprehended in the African “sense of reality” and “sense of vocation”.

The chapter will engage the African “sense of reality” and “sense of vocation” through the eyes of one African theologian, Kwame Bediako. Some of Bediako’s theological ideas have already been touched upon in the previous chapters. His theological views, especially about African religious traditions, would appear to place him within the inclusivism camp. Until his recent passing—in 2008—Bediako was considered one of the leading contemporary African theologians. His views continue to

influence theological trends in Christian theology in Africa today. There are two considerations that make Bediako's views an ideal foil for this chapter.

The first consideration is historical. Bediako's theological output bridges the gap between the earlier generation of major African theologians—like John Mbiti, Bolaji Idowu, and Gabriel Setiloane—and the contemporary theological scene in Africa. It highlights the contrasts between the theological agenda of the earlier generation of African theologians, whose output was criticized for not being theological enough primarily because of their phenomenological orientation, and their apologetical and polemical agenda.² Bediako's agenda is, by contrast, more intentionally focused on drawing-out the theological significance of African traditions for Christian faith.

The second consideration is the fact that Bediako has advanced a critique of Christian theology in Africa which deserves to be examined in its own right. His critique is of direct relevance to this chapter because it focuses on the way Christian theology has responded to the African "sense of reality" and "sense of vocation". And, apart from the fact that it fits in well with the kind of theological analysis which this dissertation aims to achieve, it also provides an ideal entry point into the theological issues raised by the African "sense of reality" and "sense of vocation".

The chapter will have four sections, including this introductory section which is dealing with scene setting issues. The second section will present Bediako's critique of Christian theology in Africa, highlighting areas of African traditions whose theological significance and potential has, in his view, been underestimated or missed altogether. The

² The phenomenological orientation was manifested in their commitment to describe African religious beliefs and practices in Christian theological texts. The *apologetical* emphasis was rooted in their sense of obligation to explain and defend African religious traditions. The *polemical* emphasis was to condemn the agents and cause of misrepresentations of African traditions.

third outlines Bediako's proposal on how Christianity should engage African religious traditions. The fourth section undertakes a critical appraisal of Bediako's critique of African theology and his proposal for theological engagement. The chapter will conclude by highlighting the contributions and problem areas in Bediako's proposal.

II. Bediako's Critique of Christian Theology in Africa

It is clear from the preceding chapter, on the African "sense of God", that belief in God is the most basic and distinctive features of African religious traditions.³ It is therefore not surprising that belief in God has been the main focus in the Christian theological engagement of African traditions. By focusing on belief on God Christian theology has tapped into a vital part of African traditions. Yet, according to Bediako, the Christian theological engagement of African traditions overall has to be deemed ultimately partial insofar as the focus, on God, has been achieved at the cost of marginalizing the wider spiritual universe of African traditions. For him the marginalization of the wider spiritual universe of African traditions is a major blind-spot in African Christian theology mainly because it has encouraged and compounded ignorance regarding the role indigenous or prior religious factors play in the transmission and apprehension of the gospel in the African context.

The role indigenous or prior religious factors play, particularly the cross-cultural communication of the gospel, is an idea for which Bediako and other African theologians have found support and inspiration in the work of William Robertson Smith (1846-1894),

³ According to Mbit, belief in God is "the most minimal and fundamental" idea in the African traditions, *African Religions & Philosophy*, 29, 48. Also see Gwinyai H. Muzorewa, *The Origins and Development of African Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1985), 8-11.

a Scottish Professor of Hebrew and the Old Testament who taught at Cambridge. The specific claim which Smith makes, and which many African theologians have found to be particularly insightful for understanding the role African religious traditions play both in the communication and in apprehension of gospel in the African context is in the following passage:

No positive religion that has moved men has been able to start with a *tabula rasa*, and express itself as if religion were beginning for the first time; in form, if not in substance, the new system must be in contact all along the line with the older ideas and practices which it finds in possession. *A new scheme of faith can find a hearing only by appealing to religious instincts and susceptibilities that already exist in its audience*, and it cannot reach these without taking account of the traditional forms in which all religious feeling is embodied, and without speaking a language which men accustomed to these old forms can understand (emphasis added).⁴

Smith took note of those elements which the religion of Israel held in common with other Semitic religions. He surmised that there had to be a prior religious substructure to which the religion of Israel and other Semitic religions were indebted. For Smith this fact had the potential to shed light on the process of communicating the gospel in the context of religious pluralism. According to him, the new religion can only root by “taking account” of and “appealing to religious susceptibilities that already exist” in the old religion. On Smith’s view then, by marginalizing the wider spiritual universe of African traditions, Christian theology is depriving itself of a dimension of African

⁴ William Robertson Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites: First Series. The Fundamental Institutions*, ed. John Sutherland Black (London: A. & C. Black, 1907), 2. For further discussion of this theme and Smith’s influence in general see Mary Gillian Bediako, *Primal religion and the Bible: William Robertson Smith and His heritage*. Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement 246 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997); “‘All believers are Primalists Underneath’: Towards A New Appreciation of Old Testament Religion as Primal Religion. Grand Rapids: Public Lecture Sponsored by the Nagel Institute of World Christianity at Calvin College Meeter Center Lecture Hall 25 July 2007. Available at http://www.calvin.edu/nagel/resources/files/KwameBediako_2007Lecture.pdf; James Henry Owino Kombo, *The Doctrine of God in African Christian Thought: The Holy Trinity, Theological Hermeneutics and African Intellectual Culture* (Boston: Brill, 2007), 231-232.

traditions that is vital to understanding the communication and apprehension of the gospel in the African context.

For Bediako, therefore, in order to reverse the marginalization and correct the partial Christian theological response to African religious traditions, it is necessary to trace the genealogical roots and factors that led up to it in the first place. Three factors stand out: first, the methodological focus on God which has tended to marginalize the wider spiritual universe of African traditions; second, Enlightenment categories inherited from the modern Western Christian tradition have hindered a fuller appreciation of many aspects of African traditions; and third, as a consequence of these two factors, several aspects of African religious traditions have been misunderstood. How, exactly, these factors have contributed to a partial response to African religious traditions remains to be seen. These factors will now be examined in turn.

A. The Methodological Focus on God as the Cause of the Marginalization of the Wider Spiritual Universe of African Traditions

It was shown in the previous chapter that the “sense of God” or belief in God in African traditions has been the dominant topic in African Christian theology. Among proponents of inclusivism the focus on God has been positive, emphasizing the *identity* of the divine subject in African religious traditions and Christian faith, and the *originality* of African apprehension of that divine subject.⁵ Among proponents of exclusivism, on the

⁵ Bolaji Idowu, *Olódùmarè: God in Yoruba Belief* (London: Longmans, 1962), 202; “Introduction,” and “God,” in *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs*, ed. Kwesi Dickson and Paul Ellingworth (London: Lutterworth Press, 1969), 9-16, 17-29; *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books), 1973; John S. Mbiti, “Christianity and East African Culture and Religion,” in *Dini na Mila: Revealed Religion and Traditional Culture* 3, no. 1 (1965): 1-6; *African Religions & Philosophy*, (New York: Praeger 1969), chapters 4 and 5; *Concepts of God in Africa* (London, S.P.C.K., 1970); “African Indigenous Culture in Relation to Evangelism and Church Development,” in *The Gospel and Frontier*

other hand, the focus has been either denial or downplaying of the connections between the African and the Christian concept of God.⁶ On the whole, however, many consider the focus on God to have made a real contribution, especially to African Christian self understanding. According to some, it has shown that African knowledge of God was not “illusory” but truly “genuine.”⁷ For others, it has achieved the “reconceptualization” of the apprehension of God, showing that the “God of the African pre-Christian tradition” is none other than the “God of Christian faith.”⁸ For Bediako in particular, it has helped theologians to draw African religious experience into “a coherent and meaningful pattern,” showing that “the God of the African religious past” is, after all, the “God of Israel whom the Christians worship.”⁹

peoples: A Report of a Consultation, December 1972, ed. R Pierce Beaver (South Pasadena, Calif: William Carey Library, 1973), 75-95; Gabriel M. Setiloane, *The image of God among the Sotho-Tswana* (Rotterdam: A. A. Balkema, 1976); “How the Traditional Worldview Persists in the Christianity of the Sotho-Tswana,” in *Christianity in Independent Africa*, ed. Edward Fashole-Luké et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 402-412; Desmond Tutu, “Wither African Theology?” in *Christianity in Independent Africa*, 364-369; Samuel Kibicho, “The Continuity of the African Conception of God into and through Christianity: A Kikuyu Study,” in *Christianity in Independent Africa*, 370-388; “The Kikuyu Conception of God, Its Continuity into the Christian Era and the Question It Raises for the Christian Idea of Revelation” (Ph.D. dissertation, Vanderbilt University, 1972); *God and Revelation in an African Context* (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2006), 171-172.

⁶ Byang Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa* (Kisumu, Kenya: Evangel Publishing House, 1975); *Biblical Christianity in Africa: A Collection of Papers and Addresses* (Achimoto, Ghana: Africa Christian Press, 1985); Tokunboh Adeyemo, *Salvation in African Tradition* (Nairobi: Evangel Publishing House, 1979); Lenard Nyirongo, *The gods of Africa or the God of the Bible: The Snares of African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective*, Scientific Contributions of the Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education. Series F2: Brochures of the Institute for Reformational Studies, no. 70 (Potchefstroom, South Africa: Institute for Reformational Studies, 1997).

⁷ Bishop Desmond Tutu, “Wither African Theology?” in *Christianity in Independent Africa*, 366.

⁸ James Henry Owino Kombo, “Trinity in Africa,” *Journal of Reformed Theology* 3 (2009): 133. Also see his *The Doctrine of God in African Christian Thought: The Holy Trinity, Theological Hermeneutics and African Intellectual Culture* (Boston: Brill, 2007), chapters 8 and 9.

⁹ Kwame Bediako, “Christian Religion and the African Worldview: Will the Ancestors Survive?” in *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of Non-Western Religion* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995), 213.

Yet, according to Bediako, this focus on God in African theological debate reveals a deeply rooted methodological predisposition which is at cross-purposes with the desire to achieve a fully-orbed understanding of African religious traditions. The debate, as far as he is concerned, has been more interested to discuss belief in God through a theological grid that conforms to what he calls “the received Western account of God in terms of monotheism,”¹⁰ but not interested to understand belief in God in its African context and experience. Such an approach, in his view, cannot hope to capture “the witness of the Living God in African religious traditions.”¹¹ In a key passage underscoring this point, this is what Bediako has to say:

African theology, by establishing its link with its African world in terms of the One Supreme, Ultimate God of Africa, has answered only part of the total universe of African primal religions.... Thus, whilst the affirmation of continuity has been made on the properly religious grounds of the ‘unity’ of God and is supported by the evidence of African religious thought, African theology has failed to wrestle adequately with the ‘multiplicity’ of the Transcendent.¹²

Clearly, the focus on God in the African theology is not, in itself, the problem. There is, after all, every justification to focus on God given, on the one hand, the preponderance of belief in God in African traditions and, on the other and the “centrality and uniqueness of God” in Christian theology.¹³ The problem, as far as Bediako is concerned, is that because the approach to African traditions has been motivated primarily by the desire or quest to prove (or disprove) the monotheistic credentials—here understood as *right belief*

¹⁰ Bediako, “The Primal Imagination and the Opportunity for A New Theological Idiom,” 99.

¹¹ Bediako, “Christian Tradition and the African God Revisited,” 80.

¹² Bediako, “The Primal Imagination and the Opportunity for a New Theological Idiom,” in *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of Non-Western Religion*, 99.

¹³ Bediako, “The Primal Imagination and the Opportunity for a New Theological Idiom,” 97.

in God—of belief in God in Africa, there has been little or no theological incentive to engage the dimension of multiplicity seriously. And where the attempt has been made, it has been less than adequate at best, and lacking in vigor and enthusiasm in the main. This has created two kinds of problems.

First, while the concern for *right belief in God* is likely to take note and make use of the evidences of divine presence that point to the unity of the creator God, it is also just as likely to miss, discount, or even dismiss other evidences, especially those that point to multiplicity. The result is a theology that accounts for belief in God in African traditions but leaves “the wider spirit world of African primal religions—divinities, ancestors, natural forces—unaccounted for.”¹⁴ In other words, one ends up in situation where belief in God is clarified but not in a way that relates meaningfully to the network of other religious beliefs and assumptions in African traditions.

Second, the selective focus on belief in God raises the question whether such a theological approach can give correct insight into the nature of African religious traditions. This is precisely the point Bediako is pondering when he says:

The question still remains as to whether the conception of God in the African religious heritage can be abstracted from other elements and spiritual realities that constituted the ‘old’ African world, and whether in so doing we are left with adequate resources from our heritage to ‘fashion new of speaking to and about God...consistent with our new faith.’¹⁵

For him, therefore, an approach that jettisons the wider spiritual world of African traditions cannot lead to a proper appreciation of “the true nature of the African

¹⁴ Bediako, “The Primal Imagination and the Opportunity for a New Theological Idiom,” 97.

¹⁵ Bediako, “Christian Tradition and the African God Revisited: A Process in the Exploration of a Theological Idiom,” in *Witnessing to the Living God in Contemporary Africa*, ed. D. Gitari and P. Benson (Nairobi: Uzima Press, 1986),” 80.

apprehension of spiritual realities.”¹⁶ According to him, such an approach is tantamount to “‘theologizing’ God out of the African world.”¹⁷ It is “an abstraction of transcendence” that undermines the “cosmic oneness” of the African religious ontology.¹⁸ What Bediako means to suggest here is that when belief in God is ‘abstracted’ from the network of other beliefs and assumptions within which it occurs the entire network of beliefs is deprived of its fundamental meaning. Such an approach, in his view, lacks the “necessary and adequate means” for engaging in a genuinely “African theological discourse about God in Christian terms” for the simple reason that it is not attuned to providing “answer[s] to the needs of our African world.”¹⁹

Ironically, Bediako’s critique in this respect resonates, albeit in the opposite direction, with that of Okot p’Bitek, a non-Christian African critic of African Christianity. Bitek questions the identification of “African deities” with the “Christian God,” something which, in his view, African theologians are ill-advisedly pursuing.²⁰ He understands that these theologians mean well by, among other things, attempting to recover the truth and dignity of African religious beliefs. In his view, however, their good intentions achieved the opposite. This is what Bitek has to say in this regard:

¹⁶ Bediako, “Christian Tradition and the African God Revisited: A Process in the Exploration of a Theological Idiom,” 84, and 80.

¹⁷ Bediako, “Christian Tradition and the African God Revisited: A Process in the Exploration of a Theological Idiom,” 83.

¹⁸ Bediako, “Christian Tradition and the African God Revisited: A Process in the Exploration of a Theological Idiom,” 82.

¹⁹ Bediako, “Christian Tradition and the African God Revisited,” 80.

²⁰ Okot p’Bitek, “Is Jok God?” In *Dini na Mila: Revealed Religion and Traditional Culture* 3, no. 2/3 (1965): 1-16; *African Religions in Western Scholarship* (Kampala: East African Literature Bureau, 1970), 7.

But in the gallant defence of Africa, these scholars helped to Hellenize African pagan deities; thus detribalizing them and making them as alien as the Christian God itself. The pagan deities of the books, clothed with the attributes of the Christian God are, in the main, creations of the students of African religious ideas, and are beyond to recognition ordinary Africans in the countryside.²¹

For Bitek, attempts to Christianize African deities leads to a fundamental misunderstanding of the African view of God primarily because the Christian view of God is a Greek or “hellenised” view of God which is, by that very fact, alien.²²

B. Enlightenment Categories a Hindrance to a Proper Grasp of African Traditions

The marginalization of the spiritual world of African traditions is exacerbated by the influence of Enlightenment categories on African theology. According to Bediako, Enlightenment influences, inherited through missionary connections with the modern Western Christian theological tradition,²³ constitute another factor that has affected the theological response to African religious traditions.²⁴ In particular they have introduced

²¹ Okot p'Bitek, “Is Jok God?” 7.

²² According to Bitek, “When Christianity embraced Greek philosophy...the Christian faith became hellenised...Hellenisation introduced into Christianity the ideals of immutability, stability, and impassibility as the central perfections of God,” see in “Is Jok God?,” 6, 7.

²³ Behind this view is an assumption expressed by Bediako’s mentor, Andrew Walls, to the effect that modern Western theological tradition is a “heavily indigenized, highly contextualized theology” engaged in an ongoing process “of making peace between Christianity and the European Enlightenment, of translating Christian affirmations into Enlightenment categories.” See Walls, “Of Ivory Towers & Ashrams: Some Reflections on Theological Scholarship Africa,” in *Journal of African Christian Thought* Vol.3, no.1 (June 2000): 1.

²⁴ For Bediako the “suitability and adequacy” of theological ideas that have evolved in the modern Western theological tradition for theology in the African context cannot be assumed, “Christianity as the Religion of the Poor of the Earth: ‘The Coming of the Third Church,’” *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of Non-Western Religion*, 133.

what Bediako considers “destructive dichotomies in epistemology.”²⁵ What Bediako has in mind here is the kind of binary mentality—which for him is typical of the more secularized cultural contexts—that tends to draw sharp, and sometimes mutually exclusive dichotomies between the natural and the supernatural, the secular and sacred, reason and revelation, self and world, and between the physical and the spiritual. According to Bediako, this Enlightenment (binary) mentality undermines the ability to appreciate religious phenomena. Among other things, it “drains” religion of its “vital power by shunting its affirmations into the siding of mere opinion;” it leads to the tendency to “divorce the Christian gospel” from “human religious quests and questions;” and, it obscures the fact that the basic questions of human existence are “essentially religious.”²⁶ What this means for Bediako is that the influence of Enlightenment categories has produced a theology that is fundamentally uncomfortable with religious experience and spiritual realities, and which is by that very fact ill-equipped to engage African traditions at their deepest level.²⁷

Enlightenment categories together with the methodological focus on God have led to misunderstanding or misreading of key aspects of African religious traditions.

²⁵ Bediako, “The Primal Imagination and the Opportunity for a New Theological Idiom,” 104.

²⁶ Bediako, “The Primal Imagination and the Opportunity for a New Theological Idiom,” 104-105.

²⁷ For Bediako, Christian theology in Africa need not have followed many of the patterns in modern Western theological tradition since these patterns do not “enshrine universal norms” in the first place, “Understanding African Theology in the Twentieth Century,” *Themelios* 20, 1 (1994):17.

C. Misreading of African Religious Traditions

According to Bediako, there has been a “misreading of the spiritual realities of the African primal world,” in large measure, because of the methodological focus on God and the influence of Enlightenment assumptions.²⁸ The misreading manifests in two important areas of African religious conception and experience: the multiplicity or plurality of the transcendent, and the anthropocentric nature of religion. For Bediako, identifying areas where African traditions have been misunderstood or misread is important because they provide the agenda for fruitful engagement between Christian faith and African traditions. The two areas of African religious experience which, in Bediako,s view, are routinely misunderstood and misrepresented in Christian theology multiplicity and anthropocentricity.

1. Apprehension of the Transcendent as Multiplicity in African Religious Traditions

The ‘multiplicity or plurality of the transcendent’ refers to the ways in which the realm of the transcendent is understood in African religious traditions. For in African traditions the transcendent realm comprises not only God, but also a host of spiritual powers and beings—divinities, spirits, and ancestors—who participate in divine activity in the world. The fact that divine activity is believed to be mediated through various phenomena and spiritual beings creates the sense or perception that divine power and presence is *multiplied* or *distributed* throughout the world. Since, as was shown earlier, the African debate has been focused on the unity, or on the “centrality and uniqueness of

²⁸ Bediako, “The Primal Imagination and the Opportunity for a New Theological Idiom,” 98-99.

God,” there has been little incentive to engage and to understand “multiplicity” in African religious experience.²⁹ Instead, the responses to multiplicity in African religious experience have been of two kinds. On the one hand, there are those who see multiplicity as either essentially or mostly negative, treating it as idolatry³⁰ similar to the polytheism of the Greco-Roman culture.³¹ On the other hand, there are others who interpret the multiplicity more positively through the lens of “a presumed African monotheism.”³² Among them are those who take it to be ‘refractions’ of a “Diffused Monotheism.”³³ Others take have understood it as a manifestation of what they call “bureaucratic monotheism.”³⁴

According to Bediako, those who construe the multiplicity negatively, either as idolatry or polytheism fail to allow for the possibility that multiplicity might work in favor of the Christian conception of divine presence and activity in the world. Thus, according to him, the postulate of multiplicity might show how the Oneness or Unity of God is not a barrier to conceiving God as being “in and behind [other] objects and

²⁹ Bediako, “The Primal Imagination and the Opportunity for a New Theological Idiom,” 97, 99; “Christian Religions and the African World-view: Will Ancestors Survive?” 215.

³⁰ Byang Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*, 17, 103, 113, *Biblical Christianity in Africa: A Collection of Papers and Addresses*; Tokunboh Adeyemo, *Salvation in African Tradition*, 14, 26, 36, 38; Lenard Nyirongo, *The gods of Africa or the God of the Bible: The Snares of African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective*, 3, 9, 37.

³¹ Geoffrey Parrinder, *West African Religion* (London: Epworth Press, 1961), 11; *Religion in an African City* (London: Oxford University Press, 1953), 11.

³² Bediako, “The Primal Imagination and the Opportunity for a New Theological Idiom,” 98.

³³ In his *Olódùmare: God in Yoruba Belief* Idowu defines “Diffused Monotheism” as a kind of monotheism “attenuated through the many divinities whose cults form the objective phenomena of the religion,” p. 204. Divinities are believed to have been “engendered” by or ‘emanate’ from God, and are “employed” by God, “ministers of *Olódùmare*” in earthly matters, p. 62.

³⁴ Osadolor Imasogie “African Traditional Religions and Christian Faith,” *Review & Expositor* 70, no.3 (Summer 1973), 287-290; “Langmead Casserley’s Understanding of Christian Philosophy As a Basis for Apologetics” (Th.D. thesis, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1972), 214-224.

phenomena.”³⁵ At the same time, those who attempt to sublimate the postulate of multiplicity by interpreting it in terms of a veiled or underlying monotheism, in his view, fail to take seriously the fact that religious belief and practice in African traditions “addresses” not only God but “other ‘spiritual realities’” as well.³⁶ They do not take into account the fact that in African traditions reality is conceived of as a “universe of distributed power,” or as a world of “many centres.”³⁷ So, in order to give a faithful account of the spiritual universe of African traditions, there is the need to strike a balance between unity and multiplicity. The multiplicity should not be downplayed in order to affirm an underlying monotheism. At the same time, the reality and unity of God should not be discounted because of the multiplicity. For Bediako such a balance is one in which “the unbroken circle of the African universe of spirits must include God.”³⁸

2. *The Anthropocentric Nature of Religion in African Traditions*

Anthropocentrism is another misunderstood aspect of African traditions. Critics claim that African traditions are overly anthropocentric and therefore not sufficiently theological.³⁹ It is argued that religious belief and practice in African traditions is more

³⁵ Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy*, 56-57.

³⁶ Bediako, “Christian Tradition and the African God Revisited: A Process in the Exploration of a Theological Idiom,” 81.

³⁷ Bediako, “Christian Religion and the African World-view: Will Ancestors Survive?” 217; “The Primal Imagination and the Opportunity for a New Theological Idiom,” 99. For a discussion on the African conception of the transcendent as the universe or world of distributed power see also, Malcolm J. McVeigh, *God in Africa: Conceptions of God in African Traditional Religion and Christianity* (Cape Cod, Mass.: Claude Stark, 1974), chap. 3.

³⁸ Bediako, “Christian Tradition and the African God Revisited: A Process in the Exploration of a Theological Idiom,” 82.

³⁹ The view is that African traditions conceive of salvation in terms of “redemption from physical dilemmas,” Mbiti, “ὁ σωτηρη ημῶν as an African Experience,” in *Christ and Spirit in the New Testament*,

concerned about temporal human needs and survival than it is with holiness and the worship of God.⁴⁰ According to Bediako, these criticisms betray an attenuated understanding of religion in general, and religion as conceived of in African traditions. According to Bediako, “at the heart of the universe and of religion is a divine-human relationship for the fulfillment of man’s divine destiny.”⁴¹ What this means for him is that in African conception there is not just ‘one’ but, in fact, “two vital centres of religion: God and man.”⁴² An emphasis on the one, for instance the human, does not necessarily “entail the rejection of God.”⁴³ The point Bediako is trying to underscore is that not all anthropocentrisms need to be conceived of as contrary to or in competition with theocentrism.

III. Bediako’s Proposal on Engaging African Traditions Theologically

With Bediako’s critique of Christian theology in Africa now complete, we move to his proposal for how Christianity should engage African traditions. We begin with the

Studies in honor of Charles Francis Digby Moule, edit. Barnabas Lindars and Stephen S. Smalley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973): 404-412, 408. The theme regarding African apprehension of Christ is something Mbiti discusses repeatedly. See “Some African Concepts of Christology,” in *Christ and the Younger Churches*, ed. with an introduction by Georg F. Vicedom (London: S.P.C.K., 1972), 51-62; “God, Sin, and Salvation in African Religion,” *Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* 16, no. 1-2 (Fall-Spring 1988-1989): 59-68.

⁴⁰ Hence the contrasts often drawn between African traditions and Christian faith, in which the former is depicted as religion based on “man’s desires” which “exploits rather than venerates” God, while the latter is regarded as religion based on the “will of deity,” Adeyemo, *Salvation in African Tradition*, 36, 47; the former as the worship of “non-human spirits and ancestors,” the latter as worship of God, Nyirongo, *The gods of Africa or the God of the Bible: The Snares of African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective*, 4; the former as “utilitarian” religion, and the latter as the “spiritual [or] mystical” religion, Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 67.

⁴¹ Bediako, “The Primal Imagination and the Opportunity for a New Theological Idiom,” 101.

⁴² Bediako, “The Primal Imagination and the Opportunity for a New Theological Idiom,” 100.

⁴³ Bediako, “The Primal Imagination and the Opportunity for a New Theological Idiom,” 100-101.

observation that implied in Bediako's critique of Christian theology in Africa—namely, its inadequate response to African religious traditions—is his belief that there is an alternative, even better, way to engage African religious traditions theologically. What does this alternative or better way involve? Bediako's answer is suggested in this statement:

What is needed is an approach which gives a more adequate account of God's involvement in the African world of religious experience and yet which allows also room for the statement of the fuller divine self-disclosure and involvement which come in and through Jesus Christ.⁴⁴

It clear from this quotation that what Bediako has in mind is a theological framework that has the capacity to accommodate the wider spiritual universe of African traditions. One in which, not only belief in God but, other religious beliefs and assumptions can be, if not necessarily believed and accepted, recognized for what they are and for the role they play in the religious economy of its practitioners. At the same time, it should be a framework that leaves open the possibility or hope of fuller elaboration of the goal of religious belief which revelation in Christ makes possible. What kind of framework is this? Where does one begin? What are its outlines?

Bediako's answer to these questions is suggested in the following passage:

Working from the perception of our creation as the original revelation to, and covenant with, us, we, from African primal traditions, are given a biblical basis for theologizing within the framework of the high doctrine of God as Creator and Sustainer, which is deeply rooted in our heritage.⁴⁵

For Bediako, the framework for engaging African traditions has to be broadly theological—God's activity in creation and providence—rather than narrowly

⁴⁴ Bediako, "Christian Tradition and the African God Revisited: A Process in the Exploration of a Theological Idiom," 84.

⁴⁵ Bediako, "Biblical Christologies in the Context of African Traditional Religions," 102; "Jesus in African Culture: A Ghanaian Perspective," 101.

Christocentric. The advantage of the broad theological framework is that it allows one to recognize areas of convergence between Christian faith and African traditions. There are three areas of convergence which Bediako discusses: religious-metaphysical assumptions, religion as a human response to the transcendent and, religious truth. After outlining the three areas of convergence, this section will conclude with a subsection on Bediako's view of African religious traditions as a resource for Christian faith.

A. Convergence in the Area of Religious-Metaphysical Assumptions

For Bediako, besides belief in God, there is a wide range of religious-metaphysical assumptions where Christian faith and African traditions converge. The convergence is discernable particularly in the six major features or characteristics—referred to in this dissertation as *sensibilities*—of African traditions.⁴⁶ Bediako adopts the six features identified by Harold Turner—in his study of primal traditions of the world (including those in Africa)—and adapts them to his own analysis of African traditions. Turner's six features of primal religious traditions include: (i) "Kinship with Nature" (ii) "Human Weakness" (iii) "Man is not Alone" (iv) humanity has "Relations with Transcendent Power" (v) "Man's Afterlife," and (vi) "The Physical is Sacramental of the Spiritual."⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Bediako, "The Primal Imagination and the Opportunity for a New Theological Idiom," 93-96.

⁴⁷ Harold Turner, "The Primal Religions of the World and their Study," *Australian Essays in World Religions*, ed. Victor Hayes (Bedford Park: Australian Association for World Religions, 1977), 29-33. The acceptance and use of Turner's six features by many African theologians would seem to suggest that these features are a fairly accurate representation of the fundamental religious motifs of African religions. Andrew Walls, "Primal Religious Traditions Today," in *Religion in Today's World: The Religious Situation of the World From 1945 to Present Day*, ed. Frank Whaling (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1987), 250-78; Philippa Baylis, *An Introduction to Primal Religions* (Edinburgh: Traditional Cosmology Society, 1988), 1-3; Gillian Bediako, "Primal Religions and Christian Faith: Antagonists or Soul Mates?" *Journal of African Christian Thought* 3, no.1 (June 2000): 12-16.

Bediako's paraphrase of Turner's six features is as follows: (i) a "sense of kinship with nature," (ii) a "deep sense that man is finite, weak and impure or sinful, and in need of a power not his own," (iii) a "conviction that man is not alone in the universe," rather than humanity is part of "a spiritual world of powers or beings more powerful and ultimate than himself," (iv) a "belief that man can enter into relationship with the benevolent spirit-world and so share in its powers and blessings and receive protection," (v) an "acute sense of the reality of the afterlife," and (vi) a "conviction that man lives in a sacramental universe where there is no sharp dichotomy between the physical and the spiritual."⁴⁸ According to Bediako these six *sensibilities* represent areas of affinity or convergence between African religious traditions and Christian faith. This convergence can be examined under two broadly representative motifs, one highlighting the nature of reality, and the other, the nature of the religious economy

1. The Motif Concerning the Nature of Reality

The convergence here is that, in both Christianity and African traditions, reality is conceived of as comprising a physical-material realm, and a spiritual-supernatural or transcendent realm. In this conception of reality, the physical-material realm is organically rooted in and dependent upon the spiritual-transcendent realm. Indeed, according to Bediako, in African traditions "the physical realm is held to be patterned on the model of the spiritual world beyond."⁴⁹ Even physical entities like animals and plants are thought of as having "their own spiritual existence and place in the universe as

⁴⁸ Bediako, "The Primal Imagination and the Opportunity for a New Theological Idiom," 93-96.

⁴⁹ Bediako, "The Primal Imagination and the Opportunity for a New Theological Idiom," 94.

interdependent parts of the whole.”⁵⁰ The various entities, creatures, and beings, are part of a “cosmic oneness” in which their relative status and their relationship to each other is, according to Bediako, construed, not primarily in terms of a “hierarchy of being,” but in terms of “a hierarchy of power.”⁵¹ In other words, the relations between the various beings and entities are conceived of, not in terms of one being higher than or lower than the other but, in terms of their participation in the life force by which all things are animated. This highlights two things about the nature of reality: first, reality is fundamentally spiritual; and second, the physical-material status of things does not belie the spiritual-transcendent source in which they are necessarily grounded.

2. The Motif Concerning the Nature of the Religious Economy

The convergence in religious economy has at least three components. The first is the consciousness or awareness that human beings are not “alone in a universe;” that they are part of a community of other beings, some of whom are more “ultimate” than human beings—among them, ancestors, divinities, and God himself who is absolutely ultimate. The second is the perception that human beings are part of a “religious structure” that includes God.⁵² This religious structure has several layers, among them: a sense of ‘kinship’ between humanity and the physical world;⁵³ a sense that physical-material

⁵⁰ Bediako, “The Primal Imagination and the Opportunity for a New Theological Idiom,” 93.

⁵¹ Bediako, “Christian Tradition and the African God Revisited: A Process in the Exploration of a Theological Idiom,” 82.

⁵² For this reason Bediako can say, “Most African religions do have a transcendent God, but a transcendent God is also part of the religious structure.” See his “The Primal Imagination and the Opportunity for a New Theological Idiom,” 100.

⁵³ Elaborating on the characteristic traits of primal traditions, Mary Gillian Bediako argues that ‘kinship with nature’ means, among other things, that human beings “are as children of mother Earth,

reality is sacramental in the sense that it has the potential to be the vehicle of spiritual meaning and power;⁵⁴ and, a sense that communion with other beings in the universe is possible, which also suggests that the frontier between the physical-material realm and the spiritual-transcendent realm allows for traffic in both directions.⁵⁵ The third component is the understanding that spirituality and religiosity are, as Bediako puts it, “decidedly *this-worldly*.”⁵⁶ Bediako uses the expression “*this-worldly*” deliberately to evoke contrast with the common perception that spirituality and religion are generally *other-worldly*. The “*this-worldliness*” which Bediako has in mind, however, is the kind which “encompasses God and man.”⁵⁷ This is because, according to him, the spiritual or transcendent realm in African traditions is conceived of, not as “separate from the realm of regular human existence,” but as something in which “human existence participates in the constant interplay of the divine-human encounter.”⁵⁸

brothers with plants and animals.” And, the sacramental nature of the physical means that there is “no sharp dichotomy between the physical and the spiritual, [and that] the physical world is...patterned on the spiritual [and that] Human life is a microcosm of the macrocosm,” in “Primal Religions and Christian Faith: Antagonists or Soul Mates?” in *Journal of African Christian Thought* Vol. 3 (June 2000): 14.

⁵⁴ In this regard Bediako clearly assumes and builds upon an insight originally articulated by Mbiti namely that “for African people” physical, material reality “is not an empty impersonal object or phenomenon.” Rather, the “visible and concrete phenomena and objects of nature” manifest and symbolize invisible and spiritual reality. According to him, the “invisible world presses hard upon the visible” such that the “one speaks of the other.” Precisely for this reason, when African people “look at, hear or feel the visible and tangible world” they also perceive the “invisible universe” beyond, *African Religions & Philosophy*, 56-57.

⁵⁵ Bediako, “The Primal Imagination and the Opportunity for a New Theological Idiom,” 94. This idea which, according to Andrew Walls, is intrinsic to the African worldview, assumes that the “frontier” between the physical and spiritual worlds is “crowded with traffic in both directions,” in “Of Ivory Towers & Ashrams: Some Reflections on Theological Scholarship Africa,” *Journal of African Christian Thought* 3, no.1 (June 2000): 2.

⁵⁶ Bediako, “The Primal Imagination and the Opportunity for a New Theological Idiom,” 101.

⁵⁷ Bediako, “The Primal Imagination and the Opportunity for a New Theological Idiom,” 101.

⁵⁸ Bediako, “The Primal Imagination and the Opportunity for a New Theological Idiom,” 101.

Now that we have dealt with convergence in the area of religious and metaphysical assumptions we turn to convergence in area of the understanding of religion as a human response to the transcendent.

B. Convergences in the Understanding of Religion as a Human Response to the Transcendent

According to Bediako, both religious and metaphysical assumptions arise from the human encounter with reality, that is, with what God created. The fact that all reality presupposes divine activity in creation for him means that human existence involves an encounter with what “the Holy Spirit has set before their eyes.”⁵⁹ This leads Bediako to conclude that all human religious activity may be looked at as a “tradition of response to the reality and disclosure of the Transcendent.”⁶⁰ This, for him, is the most basic understanding or view of religion. This view highlights two features which are the hallmark of African religious consciousness: on the one hand, the “primal apprehension [that] the divine” pervades every “part of human existence;”⁶¹ and, on the other, the sense that human life involves “‘vital participation’...in a common life and in its resources and powers.”⁶² It is in this sense that human life is fundamentally religious. Yet, it is this very

⁵⁹ Bediako, “How is Jesus Christ Lord?: Aspects of an Evangelical Christian Apologetics in the Context of African Religious Pluralism,” 41. This particular phrase is part of a quotation from John V. Taylor, *The Go-Between God: The Holy Spirit and Christian Mission*, 182.

⁶⁰ Bediako, “How is Jesus Christ Lord? Aspects of an Evangelical Christian Apologetics in the Context of African Religious Pluralism,” in *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa: History and Experience*, with introduction by Hans Visser and Gillian Bediako (New York: Orbis Books 2004), 41.

⁶¹ Bediako, “Christian Tradition and the African God Revisited: A Process in the Exploration of a Theological Idiom,” 85.

⁶² Bediako, “The Primal Imagination and the Opportunity for a New Theological Idiom,” 103. According to Gerrit Brand the notion of vital participation, vital union, or *union vitale* or *force vitale* is “the most basic ontological concept of the African worldview....widely recognized [to indicate that] African life

notion that human life is fundamentally religious that poses what was referred to earlier as the problem of religion in general. How does Christianity, as a tradition of response to the transcendent, relate to African religious tradition understood as another tradition of response to transcendent? Let us take a closer look at Bediako himself poses the problem and furnishes the answer.

1. *The Problem of Religion in General and Christianity as a Religion*

Bediako poses the question of the problem of religion in general in two key passages. In the first, the question is:

Is the experience of transcendence limited only to the knowledge of the love of the Father mediated through the redemptive work of the Son and actualized through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit?⁶³

In the second, the question, no less pointedly, is:

Does our affirmation of the unique status of our Lord Jesus Christ have to require...discrediting the religious values of other faiths as ‘traditions of response to the reality of the Transcendent’?⁶⁴

There are four strands of questions, within Bediako’s overall statement of problem of religion, that need to be distinguished. The first strand of question concerns

and culture is imbued with a reverence for life,” in “Salvation in African Christian Theology,” *Exchange* 28, 3 (July 1999), 220. ‘Vital participation’ was first used as concept that describe the central motif in African religious traditions by Father Placide Tempels, a Belgian Catholic missionary in the Congo in his *La philosophie bantoue* translated *Bantu Philosophy* (Paris: Presence africaine, 1959). It has subsequently been adopted as a theological-philosophical category by African theologians from both Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions. Its better known proponents include, Alex Kagame, “La Place de l’homme et de Dieu dans la Religion des Bantu,” in *Cahiers des religions africaines* 2, 4 (juillet 1968): 213-222; Gwa Cikala Mulago. *La religion traditionnelle des Bantu et leur vision du monde*. Bibliothèque du Centre d’études des religions africaines, 5. Kinshasa: Faculté de théologie catholique, 1980; “Vital Participation: The Cohesive Principle of the Bantu Community,” in *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs*, ed. Kwesi Dickson and Paul Ellingworth, 137 – 158 (London: Lutterworth Press, 1969), Charles Nyamiti, *African Tradition and the Christian God* (Eldoret, Kenya: Gaba Publications, 1975).

⁶³ Bediako, “The Primal Imagination and the Opportunity for a New Theological Idiom,” 103.

⁶⁴ Bediako, “How is Jesus Christ Lord? Aspects of an Evangelical Christian Apologetics in the Context of African Religious Pluralism,” 44.

the possibility of religion in general. Simply put, the question is: Is *genuine* religious activity and experience possible outside of Christian revelation? *Genuine* refers to religious activity that is not counterfeit, one which arises out human encounter with divine presence in the world.

The second strand concerns the relationship between the beliefs and values in other religious traditions and the *truth claims* of Christian faith. Are the truths of Christian faiths *mutually exclusive* with the beliefs and values in other religious traditions?

The third, concerns whether Christian faith has *theological scope and depth* that is capable of a charitable reading of the beliefs and values in other religious traditions. The question is: Is there a basis within the Christian faith to recognize, understand, and even affirm the beliefs and values in other religious traditions without compromising the fundamental truths of Christian faith?

The fourth and final strand concerns *the nature of non-Christian religious traditions*. The question here is: Is there indeed *only one possible kind* of non-Christian religious tradition, one that is *intrinsically* and *necessarily* incompatible with Christian faith? That is to say, are all non-Christian religious traditions equally and in every respect incompatible with Christian faith?

Now that the four strands of questions, to the overall problem of religion in general, have been outlined we can now move on to Bediako's answer.

2. *The Problem of Religion in General and Christianity as Religion Answered*

The rhetorical manner in which Bediako raises the question suggests that he suspects a close connection between religion in general and the Christian religion. For him this connection is signaled in the relationship between creation and redemption, what

he refers to as the “echo” between the “the early verses of Genesis” and “early verses of the John’s Gospel.”⁶⁵ Working on this assumption Bediako crafts his answer in the following way:

We are meant to appreciate the close association between our creation and our redemption, both effected in and through Jesus Christ (Col. 1:15). Working from the perception of our creation as the original revelation to, and covenant with, us, we, from African primal tradition, are given a biblical basis for theologizing within the framework of the high doctrine of God as Creator and Sustainer, which is deeply rooted in our heritage.⁶⁶

Although Bediako does not quote the verses directly, it is quite clear from the context that the “echo” he has in mind is between the activity of the Word and the Spirit as creator, Light or illuminator, and as Life giver, both in creation (Gen. 1:1-4) and in redemption (John 1:1-4). The crucial truth implied in this “echo” is the identity of the prime agent in the activities of creation and redemption. The fact that he prime agent in creation and redemption is the same provides the key to finding answers to the problem of Christianity and religion in general. How exactly does Bediako see the answers unfolding for the problems outlined in the four strands?

On the first question regarding the possibility of religion, it is clear that for Bediako genuine religion religious activity outside of Christian revelation is not only possible but to be expected. This possibility is premised on the reality of God’s revelatory activity through creation and the human response to it expressed in what we have referred to as traditions of response to the transcend. This does not mean that every human

⁶⁵ Bediako, “Biblical Christologies in the Context of African Traditional Religions,” in *Sharing Jesus in the Two-Thirds World*, ed. Vinay Samuel and C. Sugden (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 102; “Jesus in African Culture: A Ghanaian Perspective,” in *Emerging Voices in Global Christian Theology*, ed. William A. Dyrness (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 101.

⁶⁶ Bediako, “Biblical Christologies in the Context of African Traditional Religions,” 102; “Jesus in African Culture: A Ghanaian Perspective,” 101.

response to the transcendent is equally valid. What it means, however, is that the objective conditions to warrant a human response to transcendent exist; and that the human response to the transcendent is warranted, even when it is misdirected, less than adequate, or even distorted.

On the second question, Bediako seems to take it that not all the beliefs and values found in other traditions of response to the transcendent are *antithetical* or *mutually exclusive* with the truth claims of Christian faith. The possibility of this is premised on the identity of the agent behind the revelatory activity from which Christianity and the other genuine each derive. For Bediako, the agent or ultimate cause of whatever is good, worthy, and true in other traditions of response to the transcendent has to be the same agent and author of Christianity. For this reason, the affirmation of the truths of Christian faith does not necessarily entail a blanket negation of all the beliefs and values in other religious traditions.

On the third question Bediako is of the view that Christianity has the theological scope and depth to provide a charitable reading of the other religious traditions. This theological scope and depth also grounded on the identity of the author of the revelatory activity which has instigated Christianity and other *genuine* traditions of response to the transcendent. For Bediako, the fact that the prime agent of the revelatory activity in creation, which has instigated other traditions of response to the transcendent in Africa, is the same prime agent in redemptive revelation that has instigated Christianity is itself the basis of a charitable reading of other religious traditions by Christian faith. Among other things, it means that people in non-Christian religious traditions—like those in Africa—can read the Gospel as “our [their own] story” because in it they recognize the activity of

the *Logos asarkos* (the Word without flesh) whom they know of through his activity in creation, but who has now appeared as the *Logos ensarkos* (the Word incarnate). This is how Bediako puts this view:

Our [Their] Lord [the *Logos asarkos* now as the *Logos ensarkos*] has been, from the beginning, the Word of God for us [them] as for all men everywhere. He has been the source of our [their] life, and illuminator of our [their] path, though, like all men everywhere, we [they] also failed to apprehend him aright.⁶⁷

On the fourth question, it is clear that for Bediako there is more than one non-Christian religious tradition. This follows from the earlier affirmation of the possibility of a genuine tradition of response to transcendent outside of Christian faith, and the fact not all the beliefs and values in such a religious tradition are necessarily incompatible with Christian. For while it is to be expected that there are non-Christian religious tradition which are patently incompatible with Christian faith, it is also true that there are some aspects of non-Christian religious traditions which can be considered to be, in principle, compatible with Christian faith.

This discussion on religion as a human response to the transcendent as an area of convergence between Christian faith and African traditions brings us to another area of convergence—convergence in the area of religious truth.

C. Convergence in the Understanding of Religious Truth

For Bediako, the convergence between Christianity and African traditions in the area of religious truth is to be found somewhere within the parameters of the “doctrine of

⁶⁷ Bediako, “Biblical Christologies in the Context of African Traditional Religions,” 101; “Jesus in African Culture: A Ghanaian Perspective,” 100.

God as Creator and Sustainer.”⁶⁸ In principle, this means the convergence is specifically in regard to those truths in non-Christian traditions that retain something of their connection with the original divine activity in creation and providence. In reality, however, Bediako recognizes that some criteria of religious truth are needed because it is not always possible to tell what the fundamental truth claims of a religious tradition are merely from the religious experience and manifestation. The criteria Bediako envisages arise from his view of religion as a human response to the reality of the transcendent. These criteria, according to him, allow one to “affirm...the ultimacy of Jesus Christ, whilst [while at the same time] accepting the integrity of other faiths.”⁶⁹ The key passage in which these criteria are suggested is as follows:

Looked at as ‘a tradition of response’ to the reality and disclosure of the Transcendent, *every religion can be probed*, therefore, not so much for the *measure of truth it contains*, as for the *truth of the human response to the divine action* within that tradition⁷⁰ (emphasis added).

In the passage just quoted, Bediako proposes two ways of evaluating religion: the one way “probes” religion for “the *measure of truth* it contains,” and the other for “the *truth of the human response to the divine action*.” Although Bediako does not elaborate on what he means by these expressions—“*the measure of truth*” and “*the truth of human response*”—the context suggests that he has in mind a two-tier criteria of religious truth. The former, “the *measure of truth*,” point to *formal* criteria of religious truth, which tend to be narrower and more restricted. The latter, “the *truth of the human response*,” point to

⁶⁸ Bediako, “Biblical Christologies in the Context of African Traditional Religions,” 102; “Jesus in African Culture: A Ghanaian Perspective,” 101.

⁶⁹ Bediako, “How Is Jesus Christ Lord? Aspects of an Evangelical Christian Apologetics in the Context of African Religious Pluralism,” 44.

⁷⁰ Bediako, “How Is Jesus Christ Lord? Aspects of an Evangelical Christian Apologetics in the Context of African Religious Pluralism,” 41.

practical criteria of religious truth, which tend to be broader and more inclusive. That this is indeed a correct construal of Bediako's thought is indicated by the question which he raised earlier—concerning the possibility of religion. In that question Bediako posits two kinds of religion or, to put it his own words, two kinds of “experience[s] of transcendence”—one based on “the redemptive work of the Son and actualized through the indwelling of the spirit,”⁷¹ and the other recognized as the experience of transcendence “within the framework of the high doctrine of God as Creator and Sustainer.”⁷²

It is clear from the above that the *formal* criteria, the *measure of the truth*, assume or presuppose Christological truth claims—incarnation, atonement, resurrection, and Trinity. For it is only on the basis of such truths that exclusive or absolute claims can be made in regard to religious matters. The *practical* criteria, the *truth of human response*, on the other hand, are based on general theological affirmations especially the doctrine of God as Creator and Sustainer. *Practical* criteria on their part enable distinctions to be made at the level of religious manifestation and experience.

These two sets of criteria, *formal* and *practical*, form the basis of Bediako's evaluation of non-Christian religious traditions. On the *practical* side, there is a universal primal call to religion based on the reality of “creation as the original revelation.”⁷³ In his view, “it was in the creation of the universe and especially of man, that God first revealed

⁷¹ Bediako, “The Primal Imagination and the Opportunity for a New Theological Idiom,” 103.

⁷² Bediako, “Biblical Christologies in the Context of African Traditional Religions,” 102; “Jesus in African Culture: A Ghanaian Perspective,” 101.

⁷³ Bediako, “Biblical Christologies in the Context of African Traditional Religions,” 102; “Jesus in African Culture: A Ghanaian Perspective,” 101.

his Kingship to our ancestors, and called them and us freely to obey him.”⁷⁴ On the *formal side*, the universality of the primal call to religion does not mean that any or every human religious response is *ipso facto* a true representation of the divine activity that instigates it. According to Bediako, the primal or original call to religion has within itself a normative principle that is rooted in God himself. This normative principle is discernable in the human response to the primal call to religion. Thus for him, the “human response to the call of God....displays within it[self] the tension between *conservatism* and *development*.”⁷⁵ By “*conservatism*,” Bediako means the religious response to God whose trajectory is either consistent with or “point[s] *towards* Christ.” By “*development*,” on the other hand, he means the religious response to God whose trajectory deviates from or points “*away* from Christ.”⁷⁶ The question, of course, is: what should these criteria of religious truth mean for a Christian understanding of African religious traditions?

In Bediako’s view, the distinction between what, here we are calling, *formal* and *practical* criteria of religious truth has two important implications. First, it provides a conceptual framework that can enable one to recognize that there is within African traditions not *only one* type but, as Andrew Walls puts it, “more than one type of non-

⁷⁴ Bediako, “Biblical Christologies in the Context of African Traditional Religions,” 102; “Jesus in African Culture: A Ghanaian Perspective,” 101.

⁷⁵ Bediako, “How Is Jesus Christ Lord? Aspects of an Evangelical Christian Apologetics in the Context of African Religious Pluralism,” 41 [italics added for emphasis]. Bediako adopts the conservative/development contrast from John V Taylor. The difference is that while Taylor uses the contrast in a more historical-phenomenological sense, Bediako invests the contrast with more theological meaning denoting adherence to or departure from original religious impulse. See J V. Taylor, *The Go-Between God: The Holy Spirit and Christian Mission*, 183.

⁷⁶ Bediako, “How is Jesus Christ Lord? Aspects of an Evangelical Christian Apologetics in the Context of African Religious Pluralism,” 41 (italics are in the original).

Christian tradition”⁷⁷: a “*conservative*” religious tradition or trajectory that is generally “compatible with the gospel,” and another religious trajectory that lists away from Christ and, perhaps, leans towards what Walls describes as “palpably devilish.”⁷⁸ Second, the distinction also functions as a tool that can help one to identify the aspects of African traditions that can be of value to Christian faith.

D. Bediako’s View of African Traditions as a Resource for Christian Faith

As far as Bediako is concerned, the areas of convergence—religious and metaphysical assumptions, the understanding of religion a human response to the transcendent, and in the understanding of religious truth—point to an underlying affinity between genuine traditions of response to the transcendent which, if correctly understood and harnessed, can redound to the benefit of Christian faith. There are four areas in which African religious traditions can have a beneficial impact on Christianity: frame of reference for Christian theological reflection, the religious apprehension of divine presence in the world, the process of propagating the gospel, and understanding the process of conversion.

⁷⁷ Andrew Walls, “The First Chapter of the Epistle to the Romans and the Modern Missionary Movement,” in *Apostolic History and the Gospel: Biblical and Historical Essays Presented to F. F. Bruce on his 60th Birthday*, ed. W. Ward Gasque and Ralph P. Martin (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1970), 348.

⁷⁸ Andrew Walls, “The First Chapter of the Epistle to the Romans and the Modern Missionary Movement,” 348.

1. African Traditions Offer an Alternative Frame of Reference for Intellectual Discourse about Theological and Religious Issues

For Bediako, the most basic contribution which African traditions make to Christian faith is in their pervasive religiosity—worldview and all. Africa’s religiosity is a welcome asset particularly in the area of intellectual discourse and theological reflection. According to him:

Because primal world-views are fundamentally religious, the primal imagination restores to theology the crucial dimension of living religiously for which the theologian needs make no apology. The primal imagination may help us restore the ancient unity of theology and spirituality.⁷⁹

What Bediako means to underscore is that the encounter of the gospel with African traditions has created space for a new kind of intellectual discourse about religious and theological matters. For, in contrast to the modern Western context which, in his view, offers a “secularized environment [in which] specifically religious categories are no longer decisive,”⁸⁰ African traditions offer a theater of interaction in which religious criteria and assumptions need not be defended or proven before they can accepted, *bona fide*, as legitimate and, perhaps, even decisive components of theological and intellectual discourse. More specifically, for Bediako, the encounter of Christianity with African religious traditions has revealed an alternative way to come to terms with the legacy of the Enlightenment. Foremost, it shows that Christian theology is under no obligation, either to “repudiate” legitimate benefits of the Enlightenment, or “to make....peace” with

⁷⁹ Bediako, “The Primal Imagination and the Opportunity for a New Theological Idiom,” 105; “The Emergence of World Christianity and the Remaking of Theology” (Grand Rapids: Public Lecture Sponsored by the Nagel Institute of World Christianity at Calvin College Meeter Center Lecture Hall, 19 July 2007. Available at the website http://www.calvin.edu/nagel/resources/files/KwameBediako_2007Lecture.pdf), 9, 11-12.

⁸⁰ Bediako, “Africa and Christianity on the Threshold of the Third Millennium: The Religious Dimension,” in *African Affairs* 99, (2000): 316.

all its aspects—especially those aspects that undermine religious assumptions.⁸¹ Among other things, Christianity need not accept “secularity...as a necessary accompaniment of modernity;” and above all, it need not surrender the religious vision of life and be forced to define itself over against secularism, or frame its agenda and refine its categories of discourse as if the secular were the normative state of affairs.⁸²

2. *Religious Apprehension of Divine Presence*

Another aspect of African traditions which has value for Christian faith is what is referred to as the ‘postulate of the multiplicity’ of the transcendent. Bediako is aware of the criticism leveled against the postulate of the multiplicity of the transcendent, and the dangers it might pose for Christian faith.⁸³ Nevertheless he holds that the postulate of the multiplicity of the transcendent may be of value, not in terms of doctrinal content but in terms of religious experience. According to him, the postulate of the multiplicity of the transcendent “mirrors” the African apprehension that divine presence in the world is

⁸¹ Bediako, “A Half a Century of African Christian Thought: Pointers to Theology and Theological Education in the New Century,” *Journal of African Christian Thought* 3, no.1 (June 2000): 8.

⁸² Bediako, “A Half a Century of African Christian Thought: Pointers to Theology and Theological Education in the New Century,” 7-8.

⁸³ On the one extreme are those who dismiss it as irremediably idolatrous, Byang Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*, 17, 103, 113, *Biblical Christianity in Africa: A Collection of Papers and Addresses*; Tokunboh Adeyemo, *Salvation in African Tradition*, 14, 26, 36, 38; Lenard Nyirongo, *The gods of Africa or the God of the Bible: The Snares of African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective*, 3, 9, 37. Bediako’s own criticism is more nuanced, suggesting that the tendency to “postulate” “the multiplicity” or “plurality of the transcendent” may be a “fundamental misconception” based on the “fragmentary and partial” apprehension of the “witness of the Living God” in African traditions. Accordingly, the postulate of multiplicity of the transcendent may “ultimately weaken the human grasp of the unity of all things in the Supreme God.” See “Christian Tradition and the African God Revisited: A Process in the Exploration of a Theological Idiom,” 85, 87-88.

“pervasive, many-faceted and ubiquitous.”⁸⁴ For Bediako, this illustrates the African religious sensibility that “no part of human existence is conceived as bereft of the presence or involvement of the divine.”⁸⁵ In his view, a religious sensibility that gives expression to the “recognition, in daily life, of the ubiquitous spiritual forces working in the universe”⁸⁶ echoes the biblical understanding of God as a living, active, and effective presence in creation. The multiplicity of the transcendent, therefore, contains valid religious insights that Christianity can correct, refine, and build upon for the ultimate goal of deepening the experience and apprehension of the Lordship of Christ in the African context.

3. The Process of the Transmission of the Gospel

For Bediako, another area where some aspects of African religious traditions have the potential to benefit Christianity is in mission and the transmission of the gospel. In particular, since the transmission of the gospel involves crossing into other cultures, indigenous factors within the receptor cultures necessarily play a role, consciously or unconsciously, in that process. This is how he puts his case:

The credentials of the gospel are established not only in terms of the religious and spiritual universe in which Christians habitually operate, but also and indeed especially, in terms of the religious and spiritual worlds which persons of other faiths inhabit.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Bediako, “Christian Tradition and the African God Revisited: A Process in the Exploration of a Theological Idiom,” 85.

⁸⁵ Bediako, “Christian Tradition and the African God Revisited: A Process in the Exploration of a Theological Idiom,” 85.

⁸⁶ Bediako, “Christian Religion and the African World-view: Will Ancestors Survive?” 211-212.

⁸⁷ Bediako, “How Is Jesus Christ Lord? Aspects of an Evangelical Christian Apologetics in the Context of African Religious Pluralism,” 37.

What Bediako is suggesting here is that the proclamation of the gospel cannot bypass the intellectual factors which are resident in African traditions. Therefore, without, in any way, diminishing the inherent power of the gospel to commend itself to those who believe (Rom. 1:16), it is nevertheless necessary to take into account various factors— theological, religious, and philosophical—in the world of African religious traditions. This African ‘world,’ after all, is, according to Bediako, the “immediate universe of spiritual meaning” within which the “true meaning” of the gospel is “meant to become apparent and validated.”⁸⁸ Taking it into account is necessary because, for him, the process of apprehending the gospel depends upon what William Roberson Smith described as “the religious instincts and susceptibilities that already exist”⁸⁹ in particular religious—in this case African—tradition.⁹⁰ Beyond this, presenting the gospel via African ‘religious instincts and susceptibilities’ is, for Bediako, one way of showing that “Christ is able to inhabit those [African primal] worlds as Lord.”⁹¹

4. *The Process of Conversion*

The Christian understanding of the process of conversion is, for Bediako, another area which can be enriched by the encounter between Christianity and African traditions. Two factors lead Bediako to this claim. The first is his conviction regarding the identity

⁸⁸ Bediako, “How Is Jesus Christ Lord? Aspects of an Evangelical Christian Apologetics in the Context of African Religious Pluralism,” 37.

⁸⁹ William Robertson Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites: First Series. The Fundamental Institutions*, 2.

⁹⁰ Bediako, “Christian Religion and the African World-view: Will Ancestors Survive?” 223-224.

⁹¹ Bediako, “How Is Jesus Christ Lord? Aspects of an Evangelical Christian Apologetics in the Context of African Religious Pluralism,” 40.

and unity of the divine subject in African traditions, and in Christian faith—the idea that “the God of the African religious past” is, in fact, the “God of Israel whom the Christians worship.”⁹² The other is his conviction that God’s work in Christ has, in some shape or form, been “truly anticipated and prefigured” in African religious experience.⁹³ As far as he is concerned, these factors have a bearing on how one understands conversion and Christian experience in the African context. At the very least they rule out the idea that conversion involves a total negation of the African’s past. Pressing this point by way of a rhetorical question, this is what Bediako says about this issue:

Is it the case that in African conversion, it is as much a question of what the convert sheds from the primal spiritual universe, as what is taken on board to repair the torn fabric of the primal harmony?⁹⁴

Bediako anticipates an answer in the affirmative. Conversion is not merely the substitution of *what is already there* in African traditions for new content supplied by Christian faith. To the contrary, conversion, in his view, involves a “turning towards Christ of everything that is *already there*”⁹⁵ in African traditions [emphasis added]. In

⁹² Bediako, “Christian Religion and the African Worldview: Will the Ancestors Survive,” 213.

⁹³ Bediako, “Christian Religion and the African Worldview: Will the Ancestors Survive,” 224-225. For Lamin Sanneh, the fact that the God revealed in Jesus Christ has been apprehended via the agency of indigenous African names and concepts of God shows that God had “preceded,” both the missionary and the gospel itself, ensuring that the “central categories of Christian theology” were “adequately anticipated” in the indigenous African cultures and languages, *The Horizontal and the Vertical in Mission: An African perspective*, *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 7, no. 4 (October 1983): 165-171.

⁹⁴ Bediako, “Christian Religion and the African World-view: Will Ancestors Survive?” 214.

⁹⁵ Bediako, “Towards a New Understanding of Christian History in the Post-missionary Era,” in *Christianity in Africa; The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion*, 165. The ideas of conversion as a “turning toward Christ what is already there” is one Bediako adopts from Andrew Walls. Walls contrasts conversion as turning or “change of direction” with the “proselyte model” of conversion as changing or “substituting something new for something old.” While the latter involves repudiating “one set of beliefs and customs” in order to “take up those of another people,” the former involves “redirection of what is already there, turning it in the direction of Christ.” See his “Old Athens and New Jerusalem: Some Signposts for Christian Scholarship in the Early History of Mission Studies,” *International Bulletin of Missionary*

this case it means a turning towards Christ all those things in African religious traditions that bear the imprint of origin in divine activity in creation and providence.

IV. Evaluation of Bediako's Critique and Proposal

In this fourth section Bediako's views will be evaluated beginning with his critique of African theology, then his proposal regarding theological engagement of African tradition, and finally his views on the value of African religious traditions for Christian faith.

Bediako levels three main criticisms against Christian theology in Africa which can be recapped briefly as follows. First, that the theological debate has focused mostly, or almost exclusively, on belief in God with the effect that the wider spiritual universe of African religious traditions has been marginalized from the field of direct theological engagement. Second, that the influence of Enlightenment assumptions, inherited from the Western theological tradition, has hindered a true appreciation of the value of African religious traditions. Third, that as a result—of the marginalization, and of Enlightenment influences—key aspects of African traditions have been misunderstood. These criticisms raise questions that demand answers, such as: To what extent are these criticisms valid or justified? And, how well has Bediako identified the problem? Should it, for instance, be assumed that the focus on God is, in itself, detrimental to a proper understanding of African religious traditions? To what extent is it true that Enlightenment influences have contributed to the misunderstanding African traditions have suffered? These criticisms will now be examined beginning with the first.

Research 21, no. 4 (October 1, 1997): 148; "Converts or Proselytes? The Crisis over Conversion in the Early Church," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 28, no. 1 (January 2004): 2-6.

A. The Focus on God and the Marginalization of the Spiritual Universe of African Traditions Examined

Bediako's criticism has some basis in fact. From the discussion in the previous section (section II. A), it is clear that belief in God is easily the most conversed topic in the debate in African theology. However, it is possible to show, both from the standpoint of African traditions and of scripture and theology, that the focus on God is, if not wholly justified, perfectly understandable. And, if so then the apparent marginalization of the wider spiritual universe of African traditions has to be accounted for a little differently.

Considered from the standpoint of African traditions, there are at least two reasons why the focus on belief in God in African Christian theology is justified. First, since belief in God is one of the most pervasive aspects of African traditions—according to Mbiti, “the most minimal and fundamental” idea in the African conception of reality—⁹⁶ it can hardly be surprising that it (belief in God) has become a major preoccupation in African Christian theology. Second, given that belief in God is, by the account of African theologians, one of the most indigenous religious instincts⁹⁷—in virtue of which it is argued that belief in God in African traditions is original, not imposed from without or

⁹⁶ “God,” says Mbiti, “is no stranger to African peoples, and in traditional life there are no atheists. . . . everybody knows of God’s existence almost by instinct,” *African Religions & Philosophy*, 29, 48. Also see Gwinyai H. Muzorewa, *The Origins and Development of African Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1985), 8-11.

⁹⁷ According to Enyi Ben Udoh, for instance, belief in God is very much “like an extended family system” in sense that it is the kind of belief “everybody is born and buried in,” *Guest Christology: An Interpretative View of the Christological Problem in Africa* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1988), 76.

learned from others,⁹⁸ it is perfectly understandable that it has become a major locus of theological engagement between Christianity and African traditions.

Considered from the standpoint of scripture and theology there are also at least three reasons why the focus on God in African theology is appropriate. First, belief in God has warrant as a point of departure because scripture assumes it as matter of course. In scripture, both divine self-revelation in and through creation, and the human ability to apprehend it are assumed (Ps. 19:1-4; Acts 14: 15-18; 17:23-28; Rom. 1:19-20).⁹⁹ The fact or possibility of inaccurate or distorted construals of God is a second order consideration that does not undermine the reality of divine revelation and the fact of human religious predisposition.¹⁰⁰ Second, the locus on God is one of the first topics in a theological system preceded, at least in most Reformed systems, only by prolegomena and scripture. Indeed, even scripture is treated first, not because it is *essentially* prior but because it is the *cognitively* prior and hence the *noetic* foundation of knowledge of God.¹⁰¹ Either way, the focus on God in African theology is not theologically

⁹⁸ Bolaji Idowu, *Olódùmarè: God in Yoruba Belief*, 202; “Introduction,” and “God,” in *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs*, 9-16, 17-29; *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1973); John S. Mbiti, “Christianity and East African Culture and Religion,” 1-6; *African Religions & Philosophy*, chapters 4 and 5; *Concepts of God in Africa*, ; “African Indigenous Culture in Relation to Evangelism and Church Development,” 75-95; Gabriel M. Setiloane, *The image of God among the Sotho-Tswana*; “How the Traditional Worldview Persists in the Christianity of the Sotho-Tswana,” 402-412; Desmond Tutu, “Wither African Theology?” 364-369; Samuel Kibicho, “The Continuity of the African Conception of God into and through Christianity: A Kikuyu Study,” in *Christianity in Independent Africa*, 370-388; *God and Revelation in an African Context*, 171-172.

⁹⁹ Belief in God as Aquinas pointed out is the minimum requirement for any theological discussion about God, *Summa Theologica* trans. by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Westminster: Christian Classics, 1981), Ia, q. 1, a. 8.

¹⁰⁰ See Calvin’s discussion divine revelation and idolatrous human apprehension in *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960) I, iii. 1 & 2.

¹⁰¹ Regarding the relationship of essential and noetic foundations in Reformed dogmatic system, Richard Muller has this to say: “The noetic or cognitive foundation [scripture] depends for its existence

inappropriate. Third, God is the goal and subject matter of theology. Thus, although it is important to take into account other religious manifestations and beliefs in African traditions, God and belief in him remain, to use Eric J. Lott's expression, the "visionary center" or "integrating Focus"¹⁰² of theological inquiry. All other aspects of religion have their right place only in relation to who or what God is.¹⁰³ The focus on belief in God, in its own right, is therefore theologically justified.

It would be inconsistent with Bediako's intent and body of work if his criticisms regarding the marginalization of spiritual universe of African traditions were understood to mean that the focus on belief in God is, in itself, detrimental to a proper understanding of African religious traditions. All this points to the need for find an alternative way to account for the marginalization of the wider spiritual universe of African traditions. In this case, it would appear that what Bediako means to criticize is not the focus on God, as such, but the way it is done. The problem seems to be that the view of God and of the world that is used in the approach to African traditions may be too narrowly conceived or focused with the result that it excludes many aspects of spiritual universe of African

upon the existence and activity of the ontic or essential foundation [God]: there could be no Word of God without God. But the essential foundation could not be known if it were not for the cognitive foundation: there could be no knowledge of God without God's self-revelation. Either order has its justification." According to him Reformed dogmatic systems "almost invariably adopted the noetic or epistemological pattern and moved from Scripture, the *principium cognoscendi* to God, the *principium essendi*," *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520-1725*. vol. 2, *Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 156-157. Henceforth references to these works to be abbreviated *PRRD*, volume and page.

¹⁰² Eric J. Lott, "On Being Religiously Theological and Theologically Religious," *Bangalore Theological Forum* 20, 1-2 (January-June 1988), 72.

¹⁰³ According to Aquinas, although created things are related to God, God himself remains the "subject-matter" of theology, *Summa Theologica*, Ia, q. 1, a. 7. This being the case, "Sacred doctrine," says Aquinas, "does not treat of God and creatures equally, but of God primarily, and of creatures only so far as they are referable to God as their beginning," *Summa Theologica*, Ia, q. 1, a. 3. God is the "First truth," and therefore the formal object of faith, *Summa Theologica*, 2b, q. 1, a. 1.

religious traditions. If this is true, then the marginalization of the wider spiritual universe of African traditions may be more inadvertent than deliberate.

B. Narrowly Conceived View of God and Creation as the Source of the Marginalization of the Spiritual Universe of African Traditions

That the marginalization of the wider spiritual universe of African traditions may indeed be the result of a narrowly conceived belief in God is suggested in Bediako's own criticism. According to him, Christian theology has "answered only part" of African traditions because its engagement of it is based on "the received Western account of God in terms of monotheism."¹⁰⁴ In other words, Christian theology has engaged African traditions mostly from the standpoint of *right belief in God*, that is, belief in God that is exclusively or narrowly Christocentric.¹⁰⁵ Although such a view of God is right and justified in itself, the approach it offers is not the kind which is primed or equipped to appreciate other theisms, or other beliefs like those relating to the wider spiritual universe of African traditions. From the standpoint of *right belief in God*, the spiritual universe of African traditions might appear, to the theologian, to be nothing but a collection of unnecessary accretions that should be excised to leave room for the only thing that matters, that is, *right belief in God*.

If the marginalization of the wider spiritual universe of African traditions is the inadvertent result of a view of God and creation that is narrowly Christocentric, would a more broadly defined view of God and creation result in a different outcome? Bediako's

¹⁰⁴ Bediako, "The Primal Imagination and the Opportunity for A New Theological Idiom," 99.

¹⁰⁵ The Christocentrism, relative to belief in God, which is meant here, is the kind Howard Marshall has described as "Christological monotheism." See his "A Survey of New Testament Christology for Theologians," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 45, no. 1 (March 1, 2010): 7-41.

proposal suggests that he assumed so. This brings us to Bediako's case against the Enlightenment.

C. The Case Against Enlightenment Influences

Bediako's case against the influence of Enlightenment assumptions on Christian theology in Africa needs to be understood in the context and spirit in which it is made. It is not intended to prove that Enlightenment influences are the main cause of the problems in African Christian theology highlighted by his critique. Rather, it is a largely inferential argument that seeks to diagnose the source of what appears to be a functional and systemic reluctance or inability in Christian theology to address the spiritual universe of African traditions with the respect and integrity expected of any Christian theological endeavor.

Bediako identifies the source of this systemic reluctance by simple elimination from a list of the most likely culprits. It is unlikely, for instance, that African traditions themselves are the source of the reluctance to engage the spiritual universe of African traditions. Nor is it, as far as he is concerned, likely to be Christianity itself, given the underlying affinities it has with African traditions. The remaining culprit has to be the Enlightenment influences via the Western theological tradition—a tradition which, according to Bediako, has been “moulded by a [Enlightenment] world-view from which the living forces of the primal imagination seem to have been expelled.”¹⁰⁶

Bediako's calling out of Enlightenment influences as the likely culprit is not without some foundation in fact. The cardinal traits of the Enlightenment mindset, as is

¹⁰⁶ Bediako, “The Primal Imagination and the Opportunity for a New Theological Idiom,” 96.

well known, include the autonomy of the individual, a high regard for reason and science, and preference for knowledge claims based on rational-empirical methods of investigation. The counterfoil to this mindset is a disdain for knowledge claims based on faith, and a studied prejudice against religion.¹⁰⁷ The impact of this mindset is discernable in the rise of historical biblical criticism in Western theological tradition.¹⁰⁸ For Bediako, all these factors paint a picture that helps to account, at least partly, for the systemic and, even perhaps, psychological inertia within African Christian theology to address the wider spiritual universe of African traditions.

As a whole, however, Bediako's argument needs to be nuanced in such a way as to avoid two potentially misleading impressions—on the one hand, the impression that all theology in the Western Christian tradition is captive to the worst aspects of the Enlightenment; on the other, the impression that the Enlightenment was all bad. Two comments may be made in this regard. First, in all truth there have always been, within the modern Western Christian tradition, theological trajectories that have resisted the

¹⁰⁷ The characteristic traits of the Enlightenment intellectual outlook have a long history. The foundationalist privileging of reason is usually associated with ideas of John Locke (1632-1704); the skepticism regarding the possibility of human knowledge is normally traced back to David Hume (1711-1776); and, the autonomy of the individual, and the idea that religion conforms to boundaries imposed by reason and human experience, are associated with Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). For helpful discussion on the influence of Enlightenment assumptions on modern views and attitudes towards religious beliefs, see Alvin Plantinga *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Nicholas Wolterstorff, "The Migration of Theistic Arguments: From Natural Theology to Evidentialist Apologetics," in *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment: New Essays in the Philosophy of Religion*, eds. Audi, Robert, and William J. Wainwright (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 38-81.

¹⁰⁸ For helpful discussion on how modern (Enlightenment) assumptions have influenced academic study of the scripture and theology, see Cornelius Plantinga, "Two (or More) Kinds of Scripture Scholarship," in *Modern Theology* 14, no. 2 (April 1, 1998): 243-278; "Methodological Naturalism," in *Facets of Faith and Science, V.1: Historiography and Modes of Interaction*, ed. Jitse M. Van Der Meer (Lanham, Md: University Press of America, 1996), 177-221. For a similar discussion in relation to Christian scholarship in general, see Patrick McDonald and Nivaldo J. Tro, "In Defense of Methodological Naturalism," *Christian Scholar's Review* 38, no. 2 (December 1, 2009): 201-229.

Enlightenment.¹⁰⁹ These trajectories have also provided some of the most trenchant critiques of the Enlightenment in relation, both, to what is specifically contrary to Christ faith and, to what is inimical to humanity in general.¹¹⁰ It is also quite evident that many aspects of Enlightenment have benefitted humanity considerably—especially those involving right use of reason, the development of methods of intellectual inquiry and scientific investigation that have advanced human knowledge and technology.

Now that the evaluation of Bediako’s critique of Christian theology in Africa is complete, we turn our attention to his proposal for engaging African traditions.

D. Bediako’s Proposal Evaluated

There are four main points in Bediako’s proposal that need to be examined a little more closely. The first is his methodological strategy for engaging African traditions. The second and third concern the claims he makes regarding the areas of convergence between Christianity and African traditions. And, the fourth concerns his claims regarding African traditions as a resource for Christian faith. The four points will now be examined beginning with his methodology.

¹⁰⁹ Apart from group of theologians associated with what is referred to as Reformed Epistemology—Alvin Plantinga, Nicholas Wolterstorff, and others—another group of Christian philosophers and theologians who offer a trenchant critique of the Enlightenment is the one associated with movement called Radical Orthodoxy. See *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, ed. John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward (London/New York: Routledge, 1999); Graham Ward, *Cities of God* (London: Routledge, 2000); James K. A. Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-Secular Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004).

¹¹⁰ Two fairly recent publications that offer a critique of the Enlightenment while and at the same time highlighting the Enlightenment’s contribution to elaborating the intellectual and moral virtues—like equality, authenticity, tolerance and compassion—that underwrite modern liberal society are Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007) and Bruce Kinsey Ward’s *Redeeming The Enlightenment: Christianity And the Liberal Virtues* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2010).

1. Bediako's Methodology for Engaging African Traditions

In his approach to African traditions Bediako puts the *practical* or broadly theological criteria (drawn from creation and providence) in the foreground and, the *formal* or specifically Christological (*right belief in God*) in the background. The question can be raised whether this approach involves an inappropriate subordination of the Christological to the merely or generally theological? Does it undermine the uniqueness and finality of God's revelation in Christ? Clearly Bediako does not think so. He is trying to balance two things which are essential to his strategy. On the one hand, he wants to be faithful to the Christian doctrinal imperative towards *right belief in God*. On the other, he wants to retain the ability to answer the urgent questions which the spiritual universe of African traditions poses for Christianity, like for instance: is the "densely populated"¹¹¹ spiritual universe of African traditions unrelated to divine activity and presence in the world? What kind of framework allows one to see the spiritual universe of African traditions in relation to divine activity in creation and providence?

For Bediako, "theologizing" from the standpoint of "creation as the original revelation" and the "doctrine of God as Creator and Sustainer"¹¹² affords one the broadest and most inclusive theological vista possible, a vista from which nothing in human experience is antecedently excluded. Within this broad theological vista, questions regarding the wider spiritual universe of African traditions can be raised without fear or timidity because of the recognition that all reality and human experience lies within the

¹¹¹ Humphrey Mwangi Waweru, "African Worship: A Means for Christian Mission and Scholarship," *Svensk Missionstidskrift* 95, 2 (2007): 172.

¹¹² Bediako "Biblical Christologies in the Context of African Traditional Religions," 102; "Jesus in African Culture: A Ghanaian Perspective," 101.

“Kingship” of God as “Creator and Sustainer.”¹¹³ And yet, for Bediako, one should not assume that this broad theological vista excludes Christ. For, according him, a real opportunity or invitation exists, within the broad theological vista, for Africans to “read and accept the Good News as *our* [or their] story” so long as one recognizes the identity of Christ as “Word of God,” who is one with God and, has been the “source of life,” and the “illuminator” within the religious itinerary of African traditions.¹¹⁴

2. *Convergence in the Area of Religious and Metaphysical Assumptions*

Bediako assumes a certain amount of convergence between Christianity and African traditions, especially in some areas of their respective religious-metaphysical assumptions concerning the nature of reality, humanity, the human vocation. Here too the question can be raised whether the assumption of convergence, between Christianity and African traditions, may not be suspect itself? Is Bediako suggesting that what people in African traditions believe about the world is the same as what Christian doctrine teaches about it? Is the convergence claim, perhaps, potentially syncretistic? That is to say, does it mix religious ideas that are fundamentally incompatible? Two observations may be made in this regard.

On the other hand, one cannot deny that some of the religious-metaphysical assumptions in African traditions are compatible with the general tenor of Christian teaching. The African view, for example, that reality is comprised of a physical-material

¹¹³ Bediako “Biblical Christologies in the Context of African Traditional Religions,” 102; “Jesus in African Culture: A Ghanaian Perspective,” 101.

¹¹⁴ Bediako “Biblical Christologies in the Context of African Traditional Religions,” 101; “Jesus in African Culture: A Ghanaian Perspective,” 100.

realm, and an invisible-spiritual realm¹¹⁵ lines up well with Christian teaching on creation *ex nihilo*—the view that the created order was made, not out of pre-existing material, but out of nothing (Heb. 11:3). Also, the African religious assumption that the physical realm is ‘sacramental of the spiritual’ has corollaries in world of scripture where it is assumed that the physical world is capable of being a vehicle or visible sign of the reality of the invisible God (Ps. 19: 1-4; Rom. 1:20). The African assumption that human life is fundamentally religious, and that religion is a human response to the transcendent, echoes basic biblical-theological motifs, among them, that humanity was created in the *imago dei* to worship and serve God.¹¹⁶ Religion then, is valid expression of the human acknowledgment of dependence upon God, and of the need to worship him (Rev. 4:11; 2Sam. 22:4; 1Chr. 16:25; Ps. 18:3; 48:1; 95:1-7; 96:4; 145:3).

These convergences cannot be dismissed as contrived or merely tangential. It has to be granted that, overall, the convergences corroborate some of the aspects of what Christianity teaches and assumes regarding creation and providence. In view of this it is hardly surprising or unexpected that Africans, and other human communities around the world, have metaphysical visions of reality that are similar or compatible with a Christian view of world. For, irrespective of race, culture, and geographical location, all human beings live in and experience the same world; they all share a common nature, and are all graced and bounded by the same determinations with and for which God created them

¹¹⁵ The physical-material realm is associated with corporeal life, finitude, imperfection, and mortality, and spiritual-transcendent realm, with spirituality, eternity, perfection, and immortal (Rom. 1:20; 1 Cor. 15:42-49, 53-54; Col. 1:15-16; 1 Tim. 1:17).

¹¹⁶ Human beings are created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26). This means that they participate, to some extent, in what is traditionally referred to as the *communicable* attributes of God—the attributes by means of which God enters into relationship with human beings. They include such attributes as the fact that God is personal, spiritual, intellectual, and moral, as well as the fact that he is free.

(Acts 14:16-17; 17:24-28). This means that the idea of convergences—between Christianity and African traditions—need not be regarded as intrinsically syncretistic. Convergences are merely a way of recognizing and naming those areas of human experience which bear the marks of the common divine determination. For it remains fact that what people in African traditions and in Christianity see and experience the world to be involves, at some level, concurring with what and how God created the world to be. They all are able to grasp and experience creation because God sustains and concurs with what he created, and because God enables them to do so (John 1:1-4; Col. 1:16-17).¹¹⁷

3. *Convergence in the area of Religion as a Human Response to the Transcendent*

Another area where Bediako assumes that there is convergence between Christianity and African traditions is in the understanding of religion as a “tradition of response to the reality and disclosure of the Transcendent.”¹¹⁸ For him, this view is congenial to Christianity because it conceives of religion in terms of a dynamic or living relationship in which the creature responds to God, as opposed to a conception of religion as a system of beliefs and rituals. But here again, there is the question: Doesn’t such a view of religion make Christianity just one among many other human responses to

¹¹⁷ Laura Smit makes the observation that since the Gospel of John suggests that Christ as the Logos of the Father “is also in some way the content of creation,” the human mind which is “designed to perceive the world” by perceiving or grasping the things in the world “reflect[s] the image of Christ, who as the Logos contains or grasps the essential forms of all that exists,” in “The Depth Behind Things: Towards A Calvinist Sacramental Theology,” in *Radical Orthodoxy and The Reformed Tradition: Creation, Covenant, and Participation*, ed. James K. A. Smith & James H. Olthuis (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 224, 226.

¹¹⁸ Bediako, “How is Jesus Christ Lord? Aspects of an Evangelical Christian Apologetics in the Context of African Religious Pluralism,” in *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa: History and Experience*, with introduction by Hans Visser and Gillian Bediako (New York: Orbis Books 2004), 41.

intimations of the transcendent? Of what benefit is this view of religion to Bediako? Is it worth the risk of appearing to undermine the uniqueness of the Christian religion?

Bediako is not unaware of the potential for misunderstanding. However, he is convinced that the benefits of this view of religion—as a human response to the transcendent—outweigh the risks of misunderstanding by far. The benefits are in the form of two theological insights which, as far as he is concerned, enrich Christianity’s self understanding as a religion in relation to other religions. On the one hand, this view of religion affords all genuine religious traditions a certain measure of dignity because it assumes that religion is warranted human activity. This assumption dignifies all religion. This means Christianity, like other religious traditions including African traditions, participates in this warrant and dignity. On the other hand, this view of religions shows that it is possible to “affirm...the ultimacy of Jesus Christ, whilst accepting the integrity of other faiths.”¹¹⁹ In other words, fidelity to the truth of Christian faith need not be achieved at the cost of denying other religious traditions the warrant and dignity which Christianity itself assumes and expects.

4. African Traditions as a Resource for Christian Faith

Bediako’s view that African religious traditions provide resources that can be of benefit to several areas of Christian faith—in theological reflection, transmission and apprehension of the gospel, and in conversion—also raises some questions. Is Bediako positing parity between African religious experience and Christian experience? Is he

¹¹⁹ Bediako, “How Is Jesus Christ Lord?: Aspects of an Evangelical Christian Apologetics in the Context of African Religious Pluralism,” 44.

suggesting that the content of the former could, conceivably, replace or become the content of the latter? Does this amount to a synergism in which African religious experience contributes to the process of becoming a Christian? Doesn't he run the danger of making the experience of becoming and living as a Christian merely a Christianized version of African religious experience?

The suggestion that Bediako's view implies a synergism that undermines the necessity and finality of Christ may be a little premature. For, on the one hand, there is no doubt that Bediako assumes that African religious experience and Christian experience are distinct, and that there is "the potential for real conflict" between them.¹²⁰ On the other, it is also quite clear that he believes that the claims of Christ take precedence over African religious experience. That is why he warns of the danger of allowing African religious experience to assume a position that "does not let biblical revelation [to] speak sufficiently in its own terms."¹²¹ It seems, therefore, that what Bediako says about African traditions as resource for Christian faith should not be understood as referring to the content of Christian faith or doctrine. Rather, it is best understood in relation to the "issue of [religious] identity,"¹²² something he considers to be the central question in the encounter between Christianity and African traditions.

¹²⁰ These are precisely the criticism Bediako levels again Pobee's earlier Christological proposal. See "Biblical Christologies in the Context of African Traditional Religions," 100; "Jesus in African Culture: A Ghanaian Perspective," 100.

¹²¹ These are precisely the criticism Bediako levels again Pobee's earlier Christological proposal. See "Biblical Christologies in the Context of African Traditional Religions," 100; "Jesus in African Culture: A Ghanaian Perspective," 100.

¹²² Bediako, "A Half a Century of African Christian Thought: Pointers to Theology and Theological Education in the New Century," *Journal of African Christian Thought* 3, no.1 (June 2000): 6-7.

The question of religious identity is one that is concerned with “how far, the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ in African religious consciousness” becomes “integrated into a unified vision of what it [means] to be African and Christian.”¹²³ The issue at stake here is whether there is place for what Andrew Walls calls the “indigenizing principle” which, for him, is what is expressed in the apostolic decision not to impose Jewish ceremonial requirements on Gentiles as a precondition for becoming (Acts 15). According to him the apostles recognized an important gospel principle, namely, that God accepts people “with the *particulars* of their culture and group” as a gracious accommodation to enable them to “feel at home” in their new faith.”¹²⁴ For Bediako, then, African religious experience is of necessity integral to Christian experience in this specific and beneficial sense. However, the beneficial role of African religious experience is directed, not towards Christian doctrine but, towards the process of African Christian religious self understanding and integration after the fact of becoming a Christian.

Bediako’s view of African tradition as a resource for Christian faith could be explained using the distinctions usually made in a Christian understanding of conversion, between regeneration, sometimes referred to as *conversio transitiva (passiva)*, and *conversio intransitiva (activa)*.¹²⁵ The former, *conversio transitiva (passiva)* or regeneration denotes the divine side of conversion whereby a person, without any motion of their own, receives, by means of God’s gracious action, the disposition to repentance

¹²³ Bediako, “A Half a Century of African Christian Thought: Pointers to Theology and Theological Education in the New Century,” 6-7.

¹²⁴ Andrew Walls, “The Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator of Culture,” in *The Missionary Movement in Christian history: Studies in Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996), 7-9.

¹²⁵ See basic definitions and distinction between these terms in Richard Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985).

and a new life in Christ. The latter, *conversio intransitiva (activa)*, refers to the human side of conversion whereby the regenerate will actively turns towards God.¹²⁶ Bediako's view of African traditions as a resource for Christian faith is pitched, not at the level of the former, *conversio transitiva (passiva)* or regeneration but, at the level of the latter *conversio intransitiva (activa)*. In other words, upon conversion the African believer needs to sift through her religious heritage in order to reappropriate parts of it through the lens of the gospel and Christian experience. In this process the truths of Christian faith are also reappropriated through the categories of African religious experience.

V. Conclusion

Bediako's critique of African theology rightly identifies a deficiency in the Christian theological engagement of African religious traditions. It is true that belief in God, more than any other aspect of African traditions, has attracted the most attention in Christian theology. Given the pervasiveness of belief in God in African traditions, on the one hand, and the primacy of belief in God in any Christian theological discussion, on the other, the focus on God in African theology is entirely understandable. Yet it is also true that the wider spiritual universe of African traditions has, by comparison, been relegated to periphery of concerted theological scrutiny. And whatever attention it has received has been negative, usually to justify its relegation or dismissal. The tendency to relegate the spiritual universe of African tradition is, however, counterproductive for Christian witness and theology in the long run. For, like it or not, the wider spiritual universe of African traditions is part of the default environment within which the message of the

¹²⁶ Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology*. Baker Book House, 1985.

gospel is proclaimed, and within which it is expected to thrive.¹²⁷ Engaging it positively is evidently a theological task assumed in gospel mandate to disciple the nations (Mat. 28:19-20).

At the same time, it is also clear that marginalization of the wider spiritual universe of African traditions appears to be more the inadvertent result of a combination factors, rather than a deliberate act of omission or commission. Theological assumptions and philosophical commitments inherited from the modern Western theological enterprise are, no doubt, contributing factors, although it is not easy to be precise about the strength or extent of their impact. The evidence suggests that the real cause of marginalization of wider spiritual universe of African tradition stems from the theological priorities that have shaped the approach to African traditions. The dominant approach to African traditions, especially among evangelical theologians, has been determined by the *formal*, narrower or more restricted criteria of religious truth.

The *formal* or narrower criteria of religious truth are concerned primarily with *right belief in God* as revealed in Christ—referred as the narrowly Christocentric view of God. From this standpoint the wider spiritual universe of African traditions appears to be of little or no value at all for Christian faith. Although there is some truth in this position, considered strictly from the standpoint of Christian doctrine, it does little to address the reality and latent influence of the wider spiritual universe of African traditions. One still needs a theological framework to address them.

¹²⁷ In Bediako' words quoted earlier, it is "immediate universe of spiritual meaning" within which the "true meaning" of the gospel is "meant to become apparent and validated." See his "How is Jesus Christ Lord? Aspects of an Evangelical Christian Apologetics in the Context of African Religious Pluralism," 37.

The theological framework needed is one that has capacity to address, not only belief in God but, the diversity and complexity of African spiritual universe. It is a framework that makes use of the *practical* more inclusive criteria of religious truth which are based on creation and providence. This framework cannot be regarded as a panacea for the Christian theological engagement of African traditions. However it provides the intellectual space, categories, and the rationale for the theological engagement of aspects of the encounter between Christian faith and African traditions which up until now have been regarded as tertiary or peripheral to the main task of Christian theology. Through this, new areas of convergences between Christianity and other religions are revealed in areas such as religious and metaphysical assumptions of reality, the understanding of the religious structure truth and life, and so on.

The process of engaging the wider spiritual universe of African traditions has its benefits and challenges or dangers. It is obvious, for instance, that the religious worldview of African traditions and cultures, provides an intellectual climate that is more congenial for Christian theology than the more secularized intellectual climate of modern Western society. This has pedagogically or epistemologically advantages for understanding and conveying the truths of Christian faith. However, appropriating the postulate of the multiplicity of the transcendent for Christian faith poses the dangers of syncretism and idolatry.

CHAPTER FIVE

BEDIAKO'S CHRISTOLOGY: CHRISTIAN TRUTH THROUGH AFRICAN RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

I. Introduction

This chapter takes up a development in African theology which is based on an inference from two preceding chapters. The two preceding chapters offered a theological account of the three foundational elements of African religious traditions—the African “sense of God”, “sense of reality”, and “sense of [the human] vocation”—by showing how they derive from or presuppose the reality of divine activity in creation and providence. The inference which provides the basis of this chapter can be stated in the following manner. Since the main elements of African traditions are shown to derive from the human encounter with divine activity in creation and providence, the (African) religious experience that has arisen out of this encounter can be a vehicle for expressing the truths of Christian faith in the African context. Christology is among the truths of Christian faith that need to be expressed in indigenous (African) religious categories.

There are, however, broader reasons and circumstances that make expressing the truths of Christian faith in African religious an urgent task. To some African theologians, many aspects of the truths of Christian faith, especially those concerning the person and work of Christ, are still expressed in concepts and categories that are alien to African religious experience. This state of affairs can be traced to the missionary heritage and the influence of the Western theological tradition that is shaped by a more secularized, less religious cultural context. There are also practical and biblical-theological reasons why it

is necessary to express the truths of Christian faith in indigenous idiom. On the practical side indigenous concepts and categories are, not only congenial but also, more effective tools for conveying the truths of Christian faith in the African context. On the biblical-theological side there is an incarnational imperative to make full use of what God has given through creation and providence to convey the message of gospel to people in African context.

This chapter, therefore, is an opportunity to see how some of the claims made in the preceding chapters—regarding the African “sense of God”, “sense of reality”, and “sense of [the human] vocation”—might contribute to an African Christian understanding of one area of Christian theology—Christology. It will be shown that notwithstanding the biblical and theological imperatives for formulating Christology in the categories African religious experience, the process itself is fraught with pitfalls that one has to avoid. Bediako’s Christology illustrates this tension. For while it is true that some indigenous religious categories appear to be convenient vehicles, pedagogically and epistemologically, for conveying specific truths of Christian faith in the African context, they also have the potential to limit or a hinder full understanding of those truths. There is danger that African religious categories could supplant Scripture as a theological norm with the result that Christian truth is absorbed, incorporated in African religious traditions. Formulating an African Christology, therefore, calls for careful theologizing that recognizes both the potential and the limits of African religious categories as vehicles of Christian truth.

By way of method and approach the chapter will make its case through examining Kwame Bediako’s Christology. The arguments will be presented in five sections. After

this introductory section, the second section lays the groundwork by examining the emergence of the idea of an ‘African Christology’ or a Christology expressed in the idiom of African religious experience. It will cover the rationale, arguments, circumstances, and method used in to formulate an African Christology. The third section presents Bediako’s Christology covering, among other things, the concept and role of Ancestor in African religious experience, and why and how it is used as Christological metaphor. The fourth section examines the merits and demerits of Bediako’s Christology in light of scripture, theology, and Christian tradition. In the final section some conclusions will be drawn.

II. The Idea of an African Christology

African Christology simply refers to Christology presented through the lens of African religious experience and categories. There are two sets of arguments, which African theologians usually give to defend or justify the need of idea of an African Christology, the one practical, and other biblical and theological. After outlining these arguments this section will conclude with a brief look at how African theologians envisage formulating Christology for the African context.

A. Practical Arguments for an African Christology

Three practical arguments are usually advanced. The first concerns what African theologians see as a lingering foreign image which Christianity casts in the African context. It is the perception that Christianity expresses itself in forms—liturgy, culture,

and government—which “Africans find...hard to integrate....in their belief system”¹ because they are “incompatible with indigenous religious conceptions.”² Christianity, they claim, projects an image of Christ as a colonial overlord who “entered the African scene as a forceful, impatient and unfriendly tyrant,” and whose message was and is still “presented as invalidating the history and institutions of a [African] people.”³ Also, the gospel itself is, by the standards of African religious expectations, unusual. Charles Wanamaker’s remark put it most clearly:

The European Christian interpretation of God resonates well with the vague notions of deity held by most Bantu people. The difficulty comes in fitting Christ into the African world view since his roles as judge, mentor, and intermediary for Christians comes into immediate conflict with the traditional functions of African ancestors.⁴

In other words, the fact that the gospel makes demands which go beyond what is expected of belief in God in African religious traditions makes it susceptible to the foreignness charge. According to James Cochrane, when some African people among whom he did his research said that “Jesus is tricky”⁵ they were making reference to what they considered unusual, perhaps *foreign*, demands which the gospel makes. The point here, according to Udoh, is that it is belief in Christ rather than belief in God which is

¹ Henry Johannes Mugabe, “Christology in an African Context,” *Review & Expositor* 88, 4 (Fall 1991): 343.

² Matthew Schoffeleers, “Christ in African Folk Theology: The Nganga Paradigm,” in *Religion in Africa: Experience & Expression*, Monograph Series of the David M Kennedy Center for International Studies at Brigham Young University, 4, ed. Thomas D. Blakely et al. (London: James Currey, 1994), 73.

³ Enyi Ben Udoh, *Guest Christology: An Interpretative View of the Christological Problem in Africa* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1988), 64.

⁴ Charles A. Wanamaker, “Jesus the Ancestor: Reading the Story of Jesus from an African Christian Perspective,” *Scriptura* 62 (January 1, 1997): 281.

⁵ James Cochrane’s claim here is based on findings of field research on Christology conducted in urban (squatter) settlements of Amawoti near Durban, South Africa, “Christ from Above, Jesus from Below,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 88 (Summer 1994): 3-14, at 1, 7-9.

“alien” to African religious experience.⁶ Hence the need to render it in idiom Africans can understand.

The second argument, closely connected to the foreign image of Christ, concerns the theological models or what Manus calls “western historical models and interpretive methods.”⁷ The issue here is that although these methods are helpful in “the libraries of universities and seminaries,”⁸ they tend to portray Christ as “a spiritual intellectual” who is quite removed from the “crisis situations of African life.”⁹ On this view, much of the Christology inherited from the Western Christian tradition—especially the two-natures debate—falls in this category. It presents Christ from an “ontological perspective” which is unconnected to the “real and down to earth” issues which the average person faces.¹⁰ A

⁶ According to Udoh, “God was never an alien in Africa or anywhere else in the world...The new element, and therefore problematic in African religious experience, is the image of Jesus Christ,” *Guest Christology: An Interpretative View of the Christological Problem in Africa*, 76, 80; “God,” says Mbiti, “is no stranger to African peoples, and in traditional life there are no atheists...everybody knows of God’s existence almost by instinct,” *African Religions & Philosophy*, 29.

⁷ Chris U. Manus, “Inculturating New Testament Christologies in Africa: A Case Study of the Yoruba and Igbo Grassroots Christians in Ile-Ife, Nigeria,” in *Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft und Religionswissenschaft* 86, 2 (2002): 139. John Mbiti went even further to suggest that some of the categories and titles which are used to designate Christ, like ‘Messiah,’ ‘the Christ,’ ‘Son of David,’ and ‘Son of Man,’ “have no special relevance to traditional concepts,” in “Some African Concepts of Christology,” in *Christ and the Younger Churches*, ed. with an introduction by Georg F. Vicedom (London: S.P.C.K., 1972), 58.

⁸ Aylward Shorter, “Folk Christianity and Functional Christology,” in *AFER* 24, 3 (June 1982): 135. For Bénézet Bujo these models generate “an African theology which never gets beyond the lecture halls of universities” *African Theology in Its Social Context: Faith and Culture* (New York: Orbis Books, 1992), 70.

⁹ Kofi Appiah-Kubi, “Jesus Christ: Some Christological Aspects from African Perspectives,” in *African and Asian Contributions to Contemporary Theology: World Council of Churches Ecumenical Institute Bossey 1976*, ed. John S. Mbiti. (Céligny, Switzerland: Château de Bossey, 1977), 55.

¹⁰ Chris U. Manus’s criticism is directed against what he sees as the excessive use of Greek philosophical terminology in the formulation of Christology. The result of this is, for him, an “unacceptable and unintelligible Christology of the Greek Fathers with its lack of interrelationship of all being.” See his “African Christologies: The Centre-Piece of African Christian Theology,” in *Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft und Religionswissenschaft* 82, 1 (1998): 5, 6, 11.

further development on this theme is the view that the Christ portrayed in this Christology is one whose work and mission have become part and parcel of the Western *Weltanschauung*. For this reason, the Christ of this Western Christology tends to be conceived of, in the words of John V. Taylor, as the:

answer to the questions a white man would ask, the solution to the needs a Western man would feel, the Saviour of the world of the European world-view, the object of the adoration and prayer of historic Christendom.¹¹

The third argument concerns a pastoral component which arises from the foreign image that Christianity allegedly casts. It is view that that, as long as Christianity continues to, so to speak, *feel* or *seem* foreign, it makes harder for its African adherents to achieve a unified identity as Africans and Christians. They will continue to suffer what African theologians have variously referred to as “divided loyalties,”¹² “religious schizophrenia,”¹³ or “double-mindedness.”¹⁴ The consensus behind this concern is that Christian experience needs to involve the integration of one’s African religious heritage to form a new unified identity that is both fully Christian and fully African at the same

¹¹ John Vernon Taylor, *The Primal Vision: Christian Presence Amid African Religion* (London: SCM Press 1963), 16.

¹² Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1973), 205-206. Writes Idowu,

It is becoming clear even to the most optimistic Christian evangelist that the main problem of the church in Africa today is the divided loyalties of most of her members between Christianity with its Western categories and practices on one hand, and the traditional religion on the other. It is well known that in strictly personal matters relating to the passage of life and the crisis of life, African Traditional Religion is regarded as the final succor by most Africans.

¹³ Desmond Tutu, “Whither African Theology?” in *Christianity in Independent Africa*, ed. Edward W. Fasholé-Luke, Richard Gray, Adrian Hastings and Godwin Tasie (Bloomington & London: Indiana University Press, 1978), 366.

¹⁴ Enyi Ben Udoh, *Guest Christology: An Interpretative View of the Christological Problem in Africa*, 11-13, 16-19.

time. Progress towards such integration is hampered if Christian faith continues to be portrayed as somehow intrinsically foreign or antithetical to African traditions.

Given these perceptions, it is understandable why some African theologians would feel compelled to advocate for a portrayal of Christ that is, in their view, “suitable for African Christian expression of faith in Jesus of Nazareth.”¹⁵ What they desire is Christ portrayed, not as the answer to some other group of humanity but, to use J. V. Taylor’s words, as “the answer to the questions that Africans are asking;” as one who “came into the world of African cosmology to redeem Man as Africans understands him;” and, as the one to whom Africans offer “the praises and petitions of [their] total, uninhibited humanity.”¹⁶ The question presents itself now is whether there are any warrants for an African Christology.

B. Warrants for an African Christology

There are three warranting grounds which African theologians cite to defend and justify the quest for a Christology expressed in terms of African religious experience: theological, biblical or scriptural, and precedents from history or Christian tradition. In their view these warrants show that the idea of an African Christology is, not only within the boundaries of orthodoxy but in fact, mandated by it.

The theological warrant, argued by Chukwudum B. Okolo, is the claim that there is an *incarnational imperative* for a Christology expressed in African religious idiom.

According to him, through the incarnation God “participated in the world of meanings,

¹⁵ Jørn Henrik Olsen, “Contextualized Christology in Tropical Africa?” in *Svensk Missionstidskrift* 85, 3-4 (1997): 248.

¹⁶ John Vernon Taylor, *The Primal Vision*, 16.

values, and customs of the human world, of a definite people and race.” In other words, the fact that the Son of God became a human being within a particular, Jewish, cultural milieu means that all aspects of African life—including food, drink, clothing, and so on—are potentially vehicles of “the mystery of faith.” This fact, namely that all life participates, in some way, in “the mystery of the incarnation” is the theological basis for the use of African religious experience to express the truth of Christian faith.¹⁷

The biblical or scriptural warrant for a Christology expressed in terms of African religious experience is advanced by Chris U. Manus. The text which Manus has in mind is Peter’s confession of Christ as recorded in the Synoptic gospels (Mk 8:28-31; Matt. 16:12-18; Luke. 9:18-22) and corroborated in the fourth gospel (John. 6:68-70). According to Manus, Peter’s confession is the biblical basis for the “emergence” and “development” of what he calls “grassroots African Christologies” or “autochthonous Christologies.”¹⁸ The central biblical idea in this story is in the question: “Who do you say that I am?” This, for him, is the “perennial question” which believers in every generation and culture are obligated to answer.¹⁹ What makes this account paradigmatic for Christology, according to Manus, is that just like Peter’s confession came out of a “purely Jewish-form” of construing Christ’s Messiahship,²⁰ Christology in the African context has to arise out of the experience of Africans “seeing, knowing, and

¹⁷ Chukwudum Barnabas Okolo, “Christ, Emmanuel: An African Inquiry,” *Bulletin of African Theology* 2, no. 3 (January-June 1980): 19.

¹⁸ Manus, “Inculcating New Testament Christologies in Africa,” 119; “African Christologies: The Centre-Piece of African Christian Theology,” 5. Also see Okolo, “Christ, Emmanuel: An African Inquiry,” 16; Henry Johannes Mugabe, “Christology in an African Context,” *Review & Expositor* 88, 4 (Fall 1991): 343.

¹⁹ Manus, “Inculcating New Testament Christologies in Africa,” 119.

²⁰ Manus, “Inculcating New Testament Christologies in Africa,” 118.

understanding Jesus as the Christ in the African situation.”²¹ It has to be the product of the encounter between the gospel and what Henry Owino Kombo calls the “African metaphysics” or the African “conceptual framework.”²² For Manus, an African Christology has to be the answer to the perennial “Who do you say that I am” question as articulated within “the vicissitudes of life in the African world.”²³

The third warrant attempts to show that expressing Christology using intellectual or religious categories that are indigenous to the culture within which the gospel is preached has a *precedent in the history of the Church*. According to this view, the Christological statements that have been handed down in the church have the historical, cultural, and religious marks of culture and time within which they were formulated. On this view, the Christology of the early Church was largely functional. It was shaped successively by a Jewish or “Judaic culturally oriented-soteriology,” in the apostolic period, and by a Greek or “Hellenistic culturally oriented-soteriology,”²⁴ during the period of the Church Fathers. Here, Manus and other African theologians appear to have bought into Adolf von Harnack’s view of Christian doctrine or dogma as something that is, “in its conception and development [fundamentally] a work of the Greek spirit on the

²¹ Manus, “African Christologies: The Centre-Piece of African Christian Theology,” 4.

²² Henry Owino Kombo, *The Doctrine of God in African Christian Thought: The Holy Trinity, Theological Hermeneutics and African Intellectual Culture* (Boston: Brill, 2007), 14-15, 141-161.

²³ Manus, “African Christologies,” 5.

²⁴ Manus, “African Christologies,” 5. African theologians make a sharp contrast between the ‘functional Christology’ of the early Church and ‘ontological’ or ‘metaphysical’ Christologies that developed later. On this view, the former is the original, simple New Testament Christology, and the latter a product of later accretions which distort Christology, making it needlessly abstract and complicated.

soil of the Gospel.”²⁵ Harnack assumed that Christian doctrine is, as Samuel MacComb puts it, “an amalgam of the original teaching of Jesus with Greek Metaphysics.”²⁶ The problem with this, as far as some African theologians concerned, is that an extraneous Greek “amalgam” or form has over time become, particularly in the modern Western Christian tradition, the normative way of formulating Christology when it actually isn’t and shouldn’t be.²⁷ On this view the church in Africa is under no obligation to merely adopt Christology of this kind. Instead, the church in African should reformulate Christology according to the needs and circumstances in the African context. The question of course is: what exactly does this mean? What shape would such a Christology assume?

C. The Method for an African Christology

There is a plethora of Christologies in Africa, the majority of them not formally written.²⁸ Aylward Shorter makes a helpful distinction between two related kinds of

²⁵ Adolf von Harnack, *History of Dogma* Vol. 1, trans. from the third German edition by Neil Buchanan (New York, Russell & Russell 1958), 17.

²⁶ Samuel MacComb, “Do We Need Dogma,” *The American Journal of Theology* 6, no. 4 (October, 1902): 753.

²⁷ This reading of the history of Christian doctrine is prevalent among some African scholars. See Manus, “African Christologies,” 5.; Henry Owino Kombo, *The Doctrine of God in African Christian Thought*, 16-19; Manus, “Inculcating New Testament Christologies in Africa” (2002); “African Christologies (1998); Bénézet Bujo,” *African Theology in Its Social Context: Faith and Culture*, 83-84; John Pobee, *Toward an African Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), 81-98. Gabriel Setiloane, “Where are We in African Theology?” in *African Theology en Route: Papers from the Pan-African Conference of Third World Theologians, 1977, Accra, Ghana*, ed. Kofi Appiah-Kubi and Sergio Torres (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), 64-65; Okot p’Bitek, “Is Jok God?” In *Dini na Mila: Revealed Religion and Traditional Culture* 3, no. 2/3 (1965): 1-16; *African Religions in Western Scholarship* (Kampala: East African Literature Bureau, 1970).

²⁸ Diane Barbara Stinton, *Jesus of Africa: Voices of Contemporary African Christology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2004); Uchenna A. Ezeh, *Jesus Christ the Ancestor: An African Contextual Christology in the Light of the Major Dogmatic Christological Definitions of the Church from the Council*

Christology. There are formal Christologies, which are the product of reflection by trained theologians, and informal Christologies or “folk Christology” which arise out of the way ordinary folk in Africa perceive or understand the person and work of Christ.²⁹ These Christologies, however, share an approach whose outline Mbiti proposed in one of his earlier forays into Christology. For Mbiti, any attempt to formulate a Christology within or for the African context has to begin with two questions:

The first is to ask what Christological points have special or strong interest among African Christians, and why and how they grasp these points. The second is to ask how the Person of Jesus Christ fits into African conceptualization of the world, and what points of contact the New Testament portrait of Jesus establishes with the African traditional concepts.³⁰

In other words, one begins by identifying categories or concepts which are most common in African religious experience, and which have resonance with the truths of Christian faith regarding the person and work of Christ. One then uses these concepts as metaphors to render Christological truth. The concepts that have proved to be most adaptable to use as Christological metaphors have been drawn from some of the commonest practices and offices in African religious experience and culture. They include such metaphors of Christ as healer,³¹ master of

of Nicea (325) to Chalcedon (451) (Bern: P. Lang, 2003); Enyi Ben Udoh, *Guest Christology: An Interpretative View of the Christological Problem in Africa*, 88-156.

²⁹ Aylward Shorter, “Folk Christianity and Functional Christology,” *AFER* 24, 3 (June 1982): 133-137; Manus, “Inculturing New Testament Christologies in Africa”; Kenneth R. Ross, “Current Christological Trends in Northern Malawi,” in *Journal of Religion in Africa* 27, no. 2 (May 1997): 160-176; Henry Johannes Mugabe, “Christology in an African Context”; Raymond Moloney, “African Christology,” *Theological Studies* 48, no.3 (S 1987): 505-515.

³⁰ Mbiti, “Some African Concepts of Christology,” in *Christ and the Younger Churches*, 52.

³¹ For R. Buana Kibongi the traditional healer, *Nganga*, operated in a priestly role that bears some similarities to Christ, see his “Priesthood,” in *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs*, ed. Kwesi Dickson and Paul Ellingworth, (London: Lutterworth Press, 1969) 48-55; Gabriel M. Setiloane suggested that the

initiation,³² guest,³³ chief, and King.³⁴ More recently, however, ‘ancestor’ has attracted attention and systematic treatment as a Christological metaphor.

D. The Emergence of Ancestor as a Christological Metaphor

The role of ancestors in African traditions has been a staple in the African debate on belief in God. Charles Nyamiti points out that there is “no uniform system of beliefs on ancestors in black Africa.”³⁵ There is a wide spectrum within the ancestral beliefs and practices spanning those African societies that have elaborate ancestral rituals, like those among the Akan of West Africa, and those that have hardly any, like the Masai of East Africa. Nonetheless, ancestral beliefs are pervasive and the features they exhibit are

place to “look for the Messiah-*Christos* idea in African thinking [is] somewhere in the area of the African *Bongaka*,” a traditional Sotho-Tswana term for a traditional doctor (healer) who has supernatural powers. See his “Where are We in African Theology?,” 64. An extended discussion and analysis of Setiloane’s *Bongaka* idea is in Enyi Ben Udoh’s, *Guest Christology*, 93-109. For more on Christ as healer see M. L. Daneel, *Old and New in Southern Shona Churches: Leadership and Fission Dynamics*, V 3 (Gweru, Zimbabwe: Mambo Press, 1988); E Elochukwu Uzukwu, “Towards an African Christology,” in *Foundations of African Theology* 3 (January-June 1992): 1-24; Matthew Schoffeleers, “Christ in African Folk Theology: The Nganga Paradigm,” in *Religion in Africa: Experience & Expression*, Monograph Series of the David M Kennedy Center for International Studies at Brigham Young University, 4 ed. Thomas D. Blakely et al (London: James Currey, 1994), 72- 88.

³² Anselme Titianma Sanon’s interpretation of the life and work of Christ in light of African initiation rites is based on the book of Hebrews, in “Jesus, Master of Initiation,” in *Faces of Jesus in Africa*, Faith and Culture Series, 2, ed. Robert J. Schreiter (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), 85-102; Bujo takes the idea of initiation even further and relates it to the inner life of the Trinity suggesting that the Son is “initiated into the inner life of the Father,” which life the Son, in turn, shares with humanity and the rest of creation through the Holy Spirit, *African Theology in Its Social Context*, 85-87.

³³ Enyi Ben Udoh, *Guest Christology*.

³⁴ Both Pobee and Bediako discuss “King” and “Chief” as Christological metaphors but dismiss both concepts because they have the potential to lead to a *theologia gloriae*. See Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, 97; Bediako, “Jesus in African Culture,” 104-110; “Biblical Christologies,” 105-110. Those who have used chief and King as Christological metaphors include, Francois Kabasélé, “Christ as Chief,” in *Faces of Jesus in Africa*, 103-115; Manus, *Christ, the African King: New Testament Christology* (Frankfurt am Main, New York: Peter Lang, 1993).

³⁵ Nyamiti, *Christ as Our Ancestor: Christology from an African Perspective*, 14.

common enough to warrant the generalization.³⁶ Even though much of the debate on ancestors has been on whether African religions revolve around the worship of God or the worship of ancestors, Christological implications have always been just below the surfaces in these debates. The specific debate, between those who see ancestor as an apt analogy for Christology³⁷ and those who either have deep reservations about it or are opposed to it outright³⁸ is not the main focus of this chapter—although it may be necessary to visit some of the issues raised in that debate as they impinge on this discussion.

In general, however, the actual application of the concept of ancestor to Christology has taken slightly different routes and emphasized different aspects of the work of Christ. Some have focused on the sense of attachment to ancestors

³⁶ Vincent Mulago, “Vital Participation: The Cohesive Principle of the Bantu Community,” in *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs*, 137-158; Aylward Shorter, “Ancestor Veneration Revisited,” *AFER* 25, no. 4 (August 1, 1983): 197-203; Jean-Marc Ela, *My Faith as an African*, trans. from the French by John Pairman Brown and Susan Perry (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988).

³⁷ Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy*, 8-9, 75-91; Idowu, *Olódùmare: God in Yoruba Belief* (London: Longmans, 1962), 191-196; *African Traditional Religion: A Definition*, 178-189; Ikenga Emefie Metuh, *God and Man in African Religion: A Case Study of the Igbo of Nigeria* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1981), 85-104; Noah Komla Dzobo, “African Ancestor Cult: A Theological Appraisal,” *Reformed World* 38, no. 6 (June 1, 1985): 333-340; Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997), 46-57, 77-82, 154-159.

³⁸ Byang Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa* (Kisumu, Kenya: Evangel Publishing House, 1975); Tokunboh Adeyemo, *Salvation in African Tradition* (Nairobi: Evangel Publishing House, 1979), 87, 92-93; Richard J. Gehman, *African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective* (Kijabe, Kenya: Kesho Publications, 1989); Lenard Nyirongo, *The gods of Africa or the God of the Bible: The Snares of African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective*, Scientific Contributions of the Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education. Series F2: Brochures of the Institute for Reformational Studies, no. 70 (Potchefstroom, South Africa: Institute for Reformational Studies, 1997); Bright Afeke and Pieter Verster, “Christianisation of Ancestor Veneration within African Traditional Religions: An Evaluation,” in *In die Skriflig* 38, no. 1 (March 1, 2004): 47-61; Rodney Reed and Gift Mtukwa, “Christ Our Ancestor: African Christology and the Danger of Contextualization,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 45, no. 1 (March 1, 2010): 144-163.

and sought to use it to explain the doctrine of the communion of saints.³⁹ Damian Lwasa used “blood-relationship”—the biological basis of family, clan, tribe, and of the ancestral relation and function—as a way to understand membership in the “Mystical Body of Christ.”⁴⁰ For Charles Nyamiti the brother (or sister) bond which makes a deceased brother (or sister) a “brother-ancestor” is analogous to the ancestral relation into which believers are drawn by means of the divine Sonship of Christ, which makes Christ their “Brother-Ancestor.”⁴¹ John Pobee, whose proposal is similar to Bediako’s, uses the role of ancestor among the Akan, as *okyame* or the “linguist”—who interprets and conveys God’s message to his people—to interpret Christ as *Nana*, the “Great and Greatest ancestor.”⁴² Bediako’s Christological proposal follows in the path indicated by Pobee.

³⁹ Aylward Shorter, “Ancestor Veneration Revisited,” *AFER* 25, no. 4 (August 1, 1983): 197-203; John Vernon Taylor, *The Primal Vision: Christian Presence amid African Religion*, 106; Mgr. S. N. Ezeanya, “The Communion of Saints,” in *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs*, 45; Edward Fasholé – Luke, “Ancestor Veneration and the Communion of Saints,” in *New Testament Christianity for Africa and the World: Essays In Honour Of Harry Sawyerr* (London: S.P.C.K., 1974); Malcolm J. McVeigh, *God in Africa: Conceptions of God in African Traditional Religion and Christianity* (Cape Cod, Mass.: Claude Stark, 1974), 124, 169.

⁴⁰ Damian Lwasa, “‘Mystical Body of Christ’ on the basis of the blood of Christ in ‘Traditional and Christian Community in Africa,’” in *African Spirituality*, ed. with intr. by Aylward Shorter (Maryknoll NY.: Orbis Books, 1980), 141-142.

⁴¹ Charles Nyamiti, *Christ as Our Ancestor: Christology from an African Perspective* (Gweru, Zimbabwe: Mambo Press, 1985), 15-68. See also Bujo, *African Theology in Its Social Context*, 75-92; and Francois Kabasélé, “Christ as Ancestor and Elder Brother,” in *Faces of Jesus in Africa*, Faith and Culture Series 2, ed. Robert. S. Schreiter, 116-127 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991).

⁴² John Pobee, *Toward An African Theology*, 81-98.

III. Bediako's Christology: Christ as Ancestor

Underlying Bediako's Christology is a basic assumption that Christian faith has been "truly anticipated and prefigured" in African religious traditions.⁴³ Ancestral beliefs are one way in which the prefiguring is discernable. The concept of ancestor is ideal and strategic as a metaphor for Christology mostly because it is "the most potent aspect of religious life in traditional Akan society."⁴⁴ The Akan ancestral cult, from which Bediako draws the metaphor, has been described and discussed by different scholars. Of these, Bediako draws mainly from the work of Bishop Peter Sarpong and John Pobee.⁴⁵ To understand how and why Bediako chooses ancestor for a Christological metaphor⁴⁶ one has to know something about the religious ontology of the Akan people of Ghana. Its basic elements are as follows:

In the Akan ontology, like in most African societies, the physical realm of human existence is rooted in and dependent upon a spiritual and supernatural realm. There are different kinds of beings in the spiritual realm who are part of the religious economy: God, "the Supreme Spirit Being (*Onyame*), Creator and Sustainer of the universe;"

⁴³ Bediako, "Christian Religion and the African World-view: Will Ancestors Survive?" in *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995), 224-225.

⁴⁴ Bediako, "Biblical Christologies," 105; "Jesus in African Culture," 98; Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, 46.

⁴⁵ Peter K. Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect: Some Aspects of Ghanaian Culture* (Tema: Ghana Publisher, 1991); Pobee, *Towards an African Theology*, 81-98.

⁴⁶ Kwame Bediako, "The Doctrine of Christ and the Significance of Vernacular Terminology," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 22, 3 (July 1998): 110-111; "Biblical Christologies in the Context of African Traditional Religion," in *Sharing Jesus in the Two-Thirds World*, eds. V. Samuel and C. Sugden (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 81-111; "Jesus in African Culture: A Ghanaian Perspective," in *Emerging Voices in Global Christian Theology*, ed. William A. Dyrness (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 93-121.

subordinate to God are the “‘gods,’ (*abosom*)” who, according to him, are “sometimes referred to as children of God (*Nyame mma*);” and, “ancestors or ‘spirit fathers’ (*Nsamnfo*).”⁴⁷ It is worth noting that Bediako sidesteps the questions regarding whether ancestors are worshipped or venerated, and, above all, the question regarding the status and role of the *abosom*, gods. We can only speculate about the reason for his apparent reticence. It may be that he did not want to be sidetracked into these debates. The fact that he use *Nsamnfo* (ancestors) instead *abosom* (gods) may be indicative of his preferred view of the status of ancestors.⁴⁸ What is clear, though, is that his primary concern is to expound the role of ancestors.

A. The Role and Function of Ancestors

Ancestors are among that class of beings within the Akan ontology that play some mediatorial function using delegated powers and authority from the Supreme Being. They therefore function as “minister(s) for the Supreme Being” who, as Bediako puts it,

⁴⁷ Bediako, “Biblical Christologies in the Context of African Traditional Religion,” 98; “Jesus in African Culture: A Ghanaian Perspective,” 97

⁴⁸ Later in the two main articles—“Biblical Christologies in the Context of African Traditional Religion,” 102-104; “Jesus in African Culture: A Ghanaian Perspective,” 101-103—there is some indication as to how Bediako might deal with these questions. For instance, in his criticism of African religious traditions, he raises the issue of the “ambiguity” surrounding the *abosom* and the *Nsamnfo* in regard to whether they are “both beneficent and malevolent.” He claims that Christ by his death and resurrection has become Lord in the “realm of the ancestor spirits and gods” and has summed up “in himself all their powers,” effectively suggesting that they—the ancestors and gods—have been displaced and replaced. Elsewhere—in his “Christian Tradition and the African God Revisited: A Process in the Exploration of a Theological Idiom,” in *Witnessing to the Living God in Contemporary Africa*, ed. D. Gitari and P. Benson (Nairobi: Uzima Press, 1986), 85, 87-88—Bediako raises the question whether the African conception of reality with its tendency to “postulate” what he calls the “the multiplicity” or “plurality of the transcendent” is not a “fundamental misconception” which is based on the “fragmentary and partial” nature of the “witness of the Living God” in African traditions; and, whether the postulate of multiplicity of the transcendent does not “ultimately weaken the human grasp of the unity of all things in the Supreme God.”

provide “sanctions for the good life.”⁴⁹ But the role of ancestors is not the kind which is automatically or mechanically fulfilled. Rather, it is a role which the ancestor has to have qualified for. There are at least four required qualifications which are bound up in relationship to and life in the community. First and foremost, ancestors are “essentially clan or lineage ancestors,” which is to say that they are members of the ‘clan’ community, both living and dead, bound to it by blood relations and by historical experience of living in the community.⁵⁰ This is what gives them access and the right to do anything, at all, for the community.⁵¹ It is also what makes what they do “binding on all members of a particular group” or community.⁵² Second, ancestors are members of the community who “have completed their course here on earth,” hopefully at “a ripe old age.” This earns them the right to be heard for they have gone through all the stages of life. Third, although the making of an ancestor begins in this life, only those who have lived in “an exemplary manner” attain the moral stature that makes them defenders of the moral order and guardians of the “well-being (or otherwise) of individuals and communities”⁵³ Fourth, through their death, ancestors have attained a status and a more “powerful” quality of life that enhances their role as ancestor, and enables them to perform it well.

⁴⁹ Bediako, “Biblical Christologies in the Context of African Traditional Religion,” 100; “Jesus in African Culture: A Ghanaian Perspective,” 99.

⁵⁰ Bediako, “Biblical Christologies in the Context of African Traditional Religion,” 99; “Jesus in African Culture: A Ghanaian Perspective,” 98.

⁵¹ This is what Magesa calls the “right of primogeniture,” *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant life*, 47.

⁵² Bediako, “Biblical Christologies in the Context of African Traditional Religion,” 99; “Jesus in African Culture: A Ghanaian Perspective,” 98.

⁵³ Bediako, “Jesus in African Culture,” 98.

B. How the Ancestor Concept Becomes a Christological Metaphor

For Bediako, ancestors and the role they play provide an appropriate analogy for understanding the work of Christ in the African context. In a nutshell, “Christ assumes [all] the roles” of ancestors.⁵⁴ But how exactly does Christ assume the role of ancestors? This is how Bediako envisages it. In order to “arrive at an understanding of Christ that deals with the perceived reality of ancestors,” one has to “read the Scriptures with Akan traditional piety well in view.”⁵⁵ In other words, one comes to the scriptures seeking to find out “how Jesus Christ fulfills our aspirations in relation to the ancestral functions.”⁵⁶ This is the approach recommended by Mbiti where the theologian allows the presentation of the Christian message to be shaped by religious categories which are resident in the recipient culture. In this case one seeks to express the truth of the person and work of Christ through, among others, the “concept of salvation.... ideas of expiation, mediation, placating our ancestors” found in Akan (African) piety and religious experience.⁵⁷ From the stand point of African (Akan) religious experience, there are two things involved here: the human predicament, as Africans (the Akan) apprehend it and, how God’s action in Christ resolves it.

⁵⁴ Bediako, “Biblical Christologies,” 117.

⁵⁵ Bediako, “Jesus in African Culture,” 99.

⁵⁶ Bediako, “Jesus in African Culture,” 117.

⁵⁷ Bediako, “Biblical Christologies,” 116.

C. The Human Predicament as Conceived of in African Traditions

The human predicament in African (Akan) religious experience, as Bediako conceives it, manifests itself in a three ways. First, it manifests in what he calls an “existential gulf” which is felt or perceived between God and humanity. There is, on the one hand, “intense awareness” of the “existence of God,” and on the other, a real sense of his “remoteness.” God is experienced, “paradoxically,” as one who is “continually in people’s thoughts yet is absent from daily living in any practical sense.” According to Bediako, this sense of a gulf between God and humanity points to an awareness of the human fall (Gen. 3) in African religious experience. This awareness is what is often depicted in African myths of human origins as the “withdrawal of God.”⁵⁸

Second, the human predicament manifests itself in “the very plurality of the African primal world-picture,”⁵⁹ what Bediako elsewhere refers to as the “multiplicity of the transcendent.”⁶⁰ There is some “ambiguity” related to the religious experience of multiplicity in two ways. On the one hand, the ambiguity is in regard to the nature of the transcendent itself. Is it “at once beneficent and malevolent”?⁶¹ On the other, the ambiguity is in regard to mediatory role of “lesser deities and ancestral spirits.” Are these

⁵⁸ Bediako, “Biblical Christologies,” 102; “Jesus in African Culture,” 101.

⁵⁹ Bediako, “Christian Tradition and the African God Revisited: A Process in the Exploration of a Theological Idiom,” 88.

⁶⁰ Bediako, “The Primal Imagination and the Opportunity for a New Theological Idiom,” in *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of Non-Western Religion* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995), 97.

⁶¹ Bediako, “Biblical Christologies,” 102; “Jesus in African Culture,” 101.

agents a source of help in times of trouble or are they the source and cause of unknown “terrors and misfortunes which could threaten and destroy life”?⁶²

Third, the human predicament manifests in sin conceived of as “an antisocial act,” and as a “soiled conscience.” Sin as an antisocial act is, for Bediako, a characteristically African understanding of sin. As he puts it, “in our tradition the essence of sin lies in its being an antisocial act.”⁶³ This view of sin, even as Bediako acknowledges, has been criticized as superficial, and dependent on external or social criteria that fall short of a biblical view of sin.⁶⁴ According to Bediako, however, sin as “an antisocial act” is a “biblically valid” view of sin especially if “antisocial” is defined as an act “against another person and community’s interest.”⁶⁵ From this perspective, Adam’s disobedience and Cain’s murder of Abel (Gen. 3 and 4) fit the definition of sin as antisocial acts. According to him Christianity brings a fuller understanding that shows that “sin is more than an antisocial act,” and that “the sinner sins ultimately against a personal God who has a will and purpose in human history.”⁶⁶

⁶² Bediako, “Biblical Christologies,” 104; “Jesus in African Culture,” 103.

⁶³ Bediako, “Biblical Christologies,” 102-103; “Jesus in African Culture,” 101-102; In his *The Primal Vision: Christian Presence Amid African Religion*, Taylor says that “the essence of sin in the primal view is that it is anti-social. The sin that offends God is the sin that is against Man in his solidarity.” Sin can also be understood as “antagonism to the life force in others,” 172, 179.

⁶⁴ See F. B. Welbourn, “Some Problems of African Christianity,” in *Christianity in Tropical Africa: Studies Presented and Discussed at the 7th International African Seminar, University of Ghana, April 1965*, ed. Christian G. K. Baeta (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 182-189; Taylor, *The Primal Vision: Christian Presence Amid African Religion*, chap. 12.

⁶⁵ Bediako, “Biblical Christologies,” 103; “Jesus in African Culture,” 102.

⁶⁶ Bediako, “Biblical Christologies,” 103; “Jesus in African Culture,” 102.

If this is what the human predicament is in the African context—existential gulf, ambiguity of the transcendent, and sin—how does divine action in Christ apply to and resolve it?

D. Is Christ's Work Applicable in African Traditions?

It might appear, at least from the standpoint of Christian faith, that applying the work of Christ to the religious *problématique*, as described above, in African traditions is a matter of course. But that is not the case. According to Bedaiko, there is a *prima facie* question that needs to be answered. It is a question concerning the applicability of the work of Christ to people in African (Akan) religious traditions. The question is this: given that many Africans, the Akan for instance, take it that the “well-being (or otherwise) of individuals and communities” is naturally and rightfully in the hands of their ancestors or blood relatives, “Why should an Akan relate to Jesus of Nazareth, who does not belong to his clan, family, tribe, and nation?”⁶⁷ Other African theologians have raised the same question in similar ways.⁶⁸ What this question raises can be referred to as the problem of the cultural particularity of Christ. For Bediako, until this problem is resolved there is no automatic way to apply the work of Christ in the African context.

⁶⁷. Bediako agrees with Pobee, affirming that he (Pobee) “rightly” states the “crucial Christological question,” in “Biblical Christologies,” 99-100, and in “Jesus in African Culture,” 98, 113. See Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, 81.

⁶⁸ For Manus the question which, for him is in line with Peter's confession (Mk 8:28-31; Matt. 16:12-18; Luke. 9:18-22), is this: “In what categories do African Christians affirm, like Peter, their faith in Jesus as the Son of God today?” See his “Inculturating New Testament Christologies,” 118. For Bénézet Bujo the question is this: “In which way can Jesus Christ be an African among the Africans according to their own religious experience?” *African Theology in Its Social Context*, 9.

E. The *Prima Facie* Problem of the Cultural Particularity of Christ

The claims of Christ clearly put him in the role of mediator between God and humanity, a role which, in most African traditions, is fulfilled by the ancestors. The problem is not so much that Christ challenges the mediatorial role and credential of ancestors. Rather, the problem is that the challenger, Christ, lacks some of the most important qualifications an ancestor is *ordinarily* required to have. Of the four qualifications discussed earlier Christ clearly meets only two. There is no doubt that he lived an exemplary life, and that he attained supernatural abilities. As to whether he lived a full life, by the standard of African traditions, may be debatable. It is likely that his outstanding achievements in other areas more than compensate for any deficiency in this one area. But it is on the first and most important qualification, membership in the family or clan, that the obstacle is unavoidable. For clearly Christ is not a family or clan member of the Akan or any African tribe. The absence of a family or ethnic bond with the Africans (Akan) poses a fundamental problem, hence the question: “Why should an Akan relate to Jesus of Nazareth who does not belong to his clan, family, tribe and tradition?”⁶⁹ How does one make the case to Africans (the Akan) that Christ’s work is applicable to them? How does Christ’s work avail for those to whom he is not a traditional ancestor?

F. How Christ’s Work Avails for Those to Whom He Is Not an Ancestor

How can the benefits of the work of Christ be applied to the human predicament in the African religious experience—to the existential gulf, the ambiguity of the transcendent, and sin? Before tackling this question, however, Bediako has to find a way

⁶⁹ Bediako, “Biblical Christologies,” 99-100; “Jesus in African Culture,” 98, 113.

around the *prima facie* problem of the cultural particularity of Jesus, as Jew, in order that his work might be appropriated by those to whom he is not a traditional (biological or cultural) ancestor. There are two arguments which Bediako makes. The passage where he makes his first argument merits an extended quote because it contains the beginnings of his response to the problem of sin as well. In it Bediako says:

I... recommend that we make the biblical assumption that *Jesus Christ is not a stranger to our heritage*. I therefore start from the *universality of Jesus Christ* rather than from his *particularity as Jew*. By doing this I do not disregard the Incarnation; rather I affirm that the Incarnation was the *incarnation of the Saviour of all people*, of all nations, and of all times. Also by insisting on the primacy of Jesus' universality, we do not seek to reduce his incarnation and its particularity to a mere accident of history. We hold on his incarnation as a Jew because by faith in him, we too share in the divine promises given to the patriarchs through the history of ancient Israel (emphasis mine).⁷⁰

In the first argument Bediako appeals to the promise God made to Abraham in Gen. 12:1-3. According to him the universality of the promise, which is fulfilled in the work of Christ, trounces the particularity of Jesus as Jew. In other words, since the one who is incarnate as a particular Jew is in fact "the Savior of all people," he, by that very fact, belongs to "all nations, and of all times."⁷¹ He belongs to all nations, not primarily "in terms of racial, cultural, national, or lineage categories" but, because "he has become a partaker of our *human* heritage."⁷² Since he is the criterion of "true human identity" there is no particularity, racial or otherwise, which can block the realization of the promise.⁷³

⁷⁰ Bediako, "Jesus in African Culture," 99; "Biblical Christologies," 100-101. The emphasis added.

⁷¹ Bediako, "Jesus in African Culture," 99; "Biblical Christologies," 100-101.

⁷² Bediako, "Jesus in African Culture," 100; "Biblical Christologies," 101.

⁷³ Bediako, "Jesus in African Culture," 99; "Biblical Christologies," 102.

In the second argument Bediako appeals to the Christology in the book of Hebrews. According to him

[The book of Hebrews] shows Jesus Christ to truly be the answer to the spiritual longings and aspirations which our [African] people have sought to meet in the ways that our traditions have evolved.⁷⁴

As far as he is concerned, the situation in the book of Hebrews is parallel to the situation in the African context. Both are confronted with claims from “an outsider,” Christ—an outsider to the ancestral mediation of African traditions, and an outsider to the “priestly mediation” of Aaron’s lineage. Both are confronted with the same question—why should the African choose Christ over the ancestors? Why should the Hebrews choose Christ over Moses? The Christology of Hebrews follows a pattern similar to that in the first argument. It involves two things. On one hand, there is a shift from the *particularity* axis of divine action to the *universality* axis of divine action. In this case, the shift is from the *particularity* of the divine action among the people of Israel to the “universality of the Lord of heaven.”⁷⁵ It also involves a shift in priestly mediation, from the priesthood of Aaron to the priesthood of Melchizedek (Heb. 6:16-20; 7:1-28; Gen. 14:18-19).

On the other hand, God inaugurates a *pattern* which “involves making room in the tradition of priestly mediation” for an outsider like Melchizedek to become a priest “in an existing tradition.”⁷⁶ According to Bediako, this pattern has its ultimate fulfillment in Christ who, despite not being descended from the priestly line of Aaron, is nevertheless declared priest forever in the order of Melchizedek (Heb. 7:11-18). This pattern offers a way-out of the problem of the cultural particularity of Christ as Jew in relation to the

⁷⁴ Bediako, “Jesus in African Culture,” 114.

⁷⁵ Bediako, “Jesus in African Culture,” 113; “Biblical Christologies,” 112.

⁷⁶ Bediako, “Jesus in African Culture,” 113; “Biblical Christologies,” 112.

practice of ancestral mediation in African traditions. Christ who is otherwise an outsider to the African ancestral mediation system becomes, against cultural precedents, the chief ancestor on the basis of his superior credentials.⁷⁷

Now that the *prima facie* problem of the cultural particularity of Jesus as a Jew has been resolved by the universality of divine action Christ, the benefits of the work of Christ can be appropriated by people in African tradition without reservations. How then, has the work of Christ answered the human predicament in African traditions?

G. How Christ's Work Answers the Human Predicament as Conceived of in African Traditions

Bediako then proceeds to show how the work of Christ has answered the human predicament in African traditions in all the three areas: the existential gulf between humanity and God, the ambiguity of the transcendent, and the problem of sin.

1. Answer to the Existential Gulf between Humanity and God

Divine action in Jesus Christ has put the existential gulf between humanity and God in new perspective because it casts new a light on the nature of divine activity in African traditions. Among other things, according to Bediako, it shows that God's "original revelation" in creation is revelation, not in a "weak and abstract sense" but divine revelation in a robust sense. For in his original revelation God revealed his "Kingship" his "covenant with us," and, his call upon Africans to "freely obey him."⁷⁸ It is not entirely clear whether Bediako necessarily means to suggest that Africans have

⁷⁷ Bediako, "Jesus in African Culture," 113; "Biblical Christologies," 112.

⁷⁸ Bediako, "Jesus in African Culture," 101; "Biblical Christologies," 102.

apprehended this original revelation—divine Kingship, covenant, and calling—as well as they should or could have. If they had, they, according to him, would have the ability to recognize that Christ “has been, from the beginning, the Word of God for us as for all people everywhere;” that “He has been the source of life, and the illuminator of our path in life.”⁷⁹ His tone however suggests that he is speaking in ideal terms, that is to say, in terms of what ought to have been the case. For if the people in African traditions had been able to truly grasp the significance of the original revelation then, perhaps, they would not have needed to hear the gospel.

2. *Answer to the Ambiguity of the Transcendent*

The “ambiguity” associated with the multiplicity of the transcendent has been resolved by the incarnation of God, on the one hand, and by the manifestation of his victory through the death and resurrection of Christ. How exactly is this so? First, according to Bediako, the ambiguity of the transcendent in African religious traditions “can only be resolved in a genuine incarnation of the Saviour from the realm beyond.”⁸⁰ By this, he is suggesting that the ambiguity of the transcendent stems from uncertainty regarding the nature of the transcendent, God himself. In other word, the predicament is such that only the appearance of God, so to speak, in person, that is to say, in the visible, tangible, and personal action of the man Jesus Christ (John 1:18; 14:6-11; Heb. 1:1-3; 1John 1:1-3) can banish all nagging uncertainties regarding who or what God is. What

⁷⁹ Bediako, “Jesus in African Culture,” 101; “Biblical Christologies,” 102.

⁸⁰ Bediako, “Jesus in African Culture,” 100; “Biblical Christologies,” 101.

the incarnation demonstrates is that the fundamental principle of life and existence is ultimately benevolent not malevolent.

Second, given that notwithstanding God's love, sin, evil, suffering, and death are real in the world, God has demonstrated his victory over them through the life and person of Christ. For through his death and resurrection Christ entered "the realm of ancestor spirits and the gods" and became "Lord over them"—an act in which he "sums up in himself all their powers," and "cancels [annuls] any terrorizing influence they might be assumed to have upon us."⁸¹ All the prevarication associated with the multiplicity of the transcendent—deities, divinities, and ancestors—is swallowed up in the *Christus-victor* theme of the glorious resurrection of Christ.⁸² This means that Christology "has to do with...*power encounter*" involving, as Bediako puts it, "a struggle to the death," with "powers and intelligences who hinder men from perceiving the nearness of Christ."⁸³ Therefore, by assuming Lordship even in the realm of the spirits, Christ provides a firm "guarantee" regarding the trustworthiness of the gospel message even for those in African traditions.⁸⁴

⁸¹ Bediako, "Jesus in African Culture," 103; "Biblical Christologies," 104.

⁸² Bediako, "Jesus in African Culture," 102; "Biblical Christologies," 103. In the discussion appended to the latter article (originally presented in conference context) Bediako declares that "Christ assumes the roles of all these points of piety." The "points of piety" include God, deities, and ancestors, 116-117. On the *Christus victor* theme see Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement*, trans. A. G. Herbert with a foreword by Jaroslav Pelikan (New York: Macmillan, 1969).

⁸³ Bediako, "Jesus in African Culture," 111; "Biblical Christologies," 110.

⁸⁴ Bediako, "Jesus in African Culture," 103-104; "Biblical Christologies," 104.

3. *Answer to Sin*

The work of Christ can be understood to apply to the problem of sin in relation to three religious concepts and practices deeply rooted in Akan (African) tradition – sacrifice, priestly mediation, and ancestral function.

First, Jesus Christ fulfills the purpose of sacrifices in African traditions. In African traditions sacrifices are “a means of ensuring a harmonious relationship between the human community.... and the realm of divine and mystical power.” The problem, however, is that there is lingering uncertainty about whether sacrifice “achieves its purpose”. By contrast, Christ’s sacrificial death leaves no uncertainties because it “achieves its purpose” which is to obtain eternal redemption for all (Heb. 9:11-12).⁸⁵ This was made possible because of *who* Christ is (perfectly human and fully divine) and because of *what* he did (offered the perfect sacrifice that reestablished harmony between God and humanity).⁸⁶

Second, Jesus Christ offers perfect priestly mediation. According to Bediako, Christ’s mediation surpasses that of the ancestors because in him we have the inimitable “meeting of the perfect sacrifice with the perfect priestly mediation in the same single person, Jesus Christ.”⁸⁷ He is at one and the same time the mediator who shares “in the human predicament” and is therefore uniquely “qualified....to act for humanity” (Heb. 2:14-15) while remaining the person of “divine origin” whose sets the record straight,

⁸⁵ Bediako, “Jesus in African Culture,” 114.

⁸⁶ As Bediako puts it, “No number of animals or other victims offered in any number of shrines in the land can ever equal the one, perfect sacrifice made by Jesus Christ of himself for all peoples everywhere,” in “Jesus in African Culture,” 114.

⁸⁷ Bediako, “Jesus in African Culture,” 115.

both in the human and in the “divine realm” (Heb. 9:11-24);⁸⁸ being truly human and truly from heaven, Christ exercises a more “effective ministry to human beings (Heb. 7:25) than can ever be said of merely *human* ancestral spirits;” for, by his death he has secured redemption, something ancestors could not (Heb.9:12); and, by his resurrection he possesses “an indestructible life” which ancestors do not (Heb. 7:16).⁸⁹

Third, according to Bediako, Jesus Christ performs the perfect ancestral function because he has credentials that ancestors do not have in two important respects. In the first place, although the cult of ancestors plays a “functional” role, “enshrining and expressing some of the valued elements of a community’s self-understanding,” the cult itself, unlike Christ, “has no basis in fact.”⁹⁰ What Bediako means here is that there is nothing other than the practice itself to prove that the ancestral function, especially the mediatorial role, is divinely instituted. By comparison, Christ was appointed mediator by God (Heb. 5:1-6). In the second place, ancestors, being “essentially human spirits,” have no powers to bestow any benefit that is not fundamentally a human possibility.⁹¹ Christ, by contrast, is from heaven. And, because he has attained “indestructible life” through his resurrection, he is able to offer a more “effective ministry to human beings (Heb. 7:25) than can ever be said of mere human ancestral spirits.”⁹²

⁸⁸ Bediako, “Jesus in African Culture,” 115.

⁸⁹ Bediako, “Jesus in African Culture,” 118.

⁹⁰ Bediako, “Jesus in African Culture,” 116, 118.

⁹¹ For this reason, according to Bediako, the benefits attributed to ancestors “can be seen to be part of the same myth-making imagination which projects departed human beings into the transcendent realm in the first place,” in “Jesus in African Culture,” 117.

⁹² Bediako, “Jesus in African Culture,” 118.

Bediako's view concerning how Christ's work provides an answer to the predicament of sin in the African context is worth noting because one could read it as a critique of ancestral beliefs and practices as a whole. For as far as he is concerned, the fact that ancestral function falls short in this crucial area suggests that "the way is open for appreciating more fully how Jesus is the only real true ancestor and source."⁹³ This is the perfect juncture to transition into the next section in which a critical evaluation of Bediako's Christology as whole is undertaken.

IV. Critical Evaluation of Bediako's Christology

In evaluating Bediako's Christology, the merits of his Christological proposal will be considered before discussing problem areas and issues that his proposal does not resolve. Before that, however, it is necessary to examine the assumptions and arguments behind the idea of an African Christology—that is to say, a Christology expressed in terms of African religious categories and experience. Are these assumptions and arguments justified theologically?

A. The Merits of the Idea of an African Christology

The arguments for a Christology that is informed by African religious experience, as was indicated earlier, are of two kinds or sets. The first of arguments, which are practical, point to three things: the need to replace the foreign face Christianity presents in Africa with one that is more culturally recognizable; the need to replace foreign with more culturally appropriate ways of theologizing; and, the need to achieve an integrated religious identity that is both African and Christian. The second set, which are biblical-

⁹³ Bediako, "Jesus in African Culture," 118.

theological-historical arguments, also cite three warrants: an incarnational warrant; a biblical warrant for autochthonous confession of Christ; and a warrant from history or Christian tradition. It would take this discussion wide of our goal to attempt a full analysis of these arguments. What is relevant for this discussion, however, is that these arguments are part of the network of factors that form the background to Bediako's Christology. This is not to say that Bediako agrees with all these arguments entirely. It is possible, however, to say what Bediako agrees with in these arguments, and what some of his assumptions are.

Bediako agrees with the premise or assumption that there is a practical, and biblical-theological imperative to render the truths of Christian faith in an idiom that is indigenous to whatever group people the gospel is preached. Is this assumption justified? For if Christology is the understanding of person and work of Jesus Christ and its implications for humanity as a whole, why should it be discussed in relation to a particular cultural group? Is such a Christology unacceptable or inadmissible? Several remarks can be made in this regard:

First, it is generally accepted that the New Testament presents the person and work of Christ from different angles so much so that it is normal to talk of the Christology of Mathew, Paul, or John, and so on.⁹⁴ What is more, these Christologies are diverse not merely for the sake of diversity. Rather, they are diverse, as Marshall observes, because they are "shaped to some extent by the ideas current in the surrounding

⁹⁴ I. Howard Marshall, "A Survey of New Testament Christology for Theologians," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 45, no. 1 (March 1, 2010): 7-41; *The Origins of New Testament Christology: Updated Edition* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1990); Gordon D. Fee, *Pauline Christology: An Exegetical-Theological Study* (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 2007); Frank J. Matera, "Christ in the Theologies of Paul and John: A Study in the Diverse Unity of New Testament Theology," *Theological Studies* 67, no. 2 (June 1, 2006): 237-256; *New Testament Christology* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1999).

world.”⁹⁵ Second, an argument could be made that there is entailed in the gospel mandate a theological principle of accommodation. What this means is that it was to be expected that the mission of the Church—to turn the nations, τὰ ἔθνη, into disciples, μαθητεύσατε, of Christ (Matt. 28:19)—would involve accommodation of the gospel to the language and idiom of the nations to which it was to be preached. The principle of accommodation seems to be evident in the Apostle Paul’s preaching and ministry. He routinely accommodated his message to his audiences depending on whether he was speaking to Jews (Acts 13:15-41) or Gentiles (Acts 14:8-11; 17:22-31). It also seems to be the case that he used accommodation as a ministry strategy, particularly among people of diverse cultural and religious backgrounds. This may be the principle underlying his confession to the effect that he “became all things to all people” (1Cor.9:22).

Thus far there appears to be nothing in scriptural teaching and apostolic practice that precludes the idea of a Christology expressed in the idiom of African religious traditions. Indeed the idea itself cannot be considered to be particularly novel. The question that is not answered is how one goes about formulating a Christology of this kind. This brings to the methodological dimension of Bediako’s Christological proposal.

B. The Merits of Bediako’s Methodology

There are two main things to examine, and these are Bediako’s methodological framework, and the theological content of his proposal. Bediako methodology follows in the path indicated by Mbiti where one identifies a religious practice of “special or strong” significance in African traditions then uses it to convey the meaning of the person and

⁹⁵ Marshall, “A Survey of New Testament Christology for Theologians,” 29.

work of Christ.⁹⁶ For Bediako the religious practice that is best suited to convey Christ's redemptive work is ancestral beliefs.

By choosing ancestor as a Christological metaphor Bediako taps into a religious theme and practice which many people in African traditions, Christian and non-Christian alike, understand and resonate with. He draws parallels between religious experiences or practices in Christianity and in African traditions he considers be analogous. Thus, for instance: between the "existential gulf" in African religious experience and what Christianity teaches on the fall;⁹⁷ between the circumstances and message of the book of Hebrews, and the life situations of African people today; between the practice of sacrifice and priestly mediation in African traditions, and the sacrifice and mediatory role of Christ.⁹⁸ In essence Bediako uses ancestral function as pedagogical tool to translate the meaning of Christ's work into a language many Africans can recognize. Thus, he can underscore the surpassing significance of Christ by arguing that through incarnation (Heb. 2:11, 14-15) Christ has identified with Africans "far more....than the mere ethnic solidarity....of ancestors;"⁹⁹ and, that as "the Son of the Father (Heb. 1:1, 48; 9:14)" Christ's mediatorship is more effective than "*merely* ancestral spirits."¹⁰⁰

Clearly Bediako's method portrays African traditions in general and ancestral beliefs in particular, to their best advantage. There are nevertheless some theological issues and concerns that are left unresolved. Three of them stand out: the issue of

⁹⁶ Mbiti, "Some African Concepts of Christology," in *Christ and the Younger Churches*, 52.

⁹⁷ Bediako, "Jesus in African Culture," 101, and "African Christologies," 102.

⁹⁸ Bediako, "Jesus in African Culture," 114.

⁹⁹ Bediako, "Jesus in African Culture," 117.

¹⁰⁰ Bediako, "Jesus in African Culture," 117-118.

theological norm, the relationship between ancestor-ancestral beliefs and Christ, and Bediako's conception of the Christological question or problem. These issues will now be examined in turn.

1. The Issue of Theological Norm in the Formulation of Bediako's Christology

It is generally accepted in Reformed and evangelical traditions that the norm for theology and religious life and practice is Scripture.¹⁰¹ It is reasonable to expect that, being himself a minister and theologian in a Presbyterian tradition, this is a norm Bediako himself subscribed to. There is need for greater clarity and precision on how this theological norm functions especially in the intricate process of translating Christian truth into the categories of African religious experience. How, for instance, is rendering the truths of Christian categories different from interpreting African religious beliefs and practices in terms of Christian faith? There those who have wondered whether this isn't merely an exercise in Christianizing what essentially is African religion? They fear that this runs the risk of incorporating Christian faith into African traditions.¹⁰²

2. The Relationship Between Ancestor and Christ

Closely linked to the question of theological norm is the nature of the relationship between Christ and 'ancestor' as the receptor concept in African (Akan) religious traditions. What exactly is the nature of the signification between 'ancestor' and Christ?

¹⁰¹ Calvin, *Institutes* I. vi. 1-3.

¹⁰² James Henry Owino Kombo, *The Doctrine of God in African Christian Thought: The Holy Trinity, Theological Hermeneutics and African Intellectual Culture*, 10-12; John Parratt, *Reinventing Christianity: African Theology Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 199-200.

This question is complicated by what Bediako says about a ‘theology of ancestors’ in general. According to Bediako,

A theology of ancestors is about the interpretation of the past in a way which shows that the present experience and knowledge of the grace of God in the Gospel of Jesus Christ have been *truly anticipated* and *prefigured* in quests and responses to the Transcendent ...in lives of African people.¹⁰³

At issue here is what *anticipation* and *prefiguration* mean, because whatever they mean has implications for the signification between ancestor and Christ. Is Bediako here suggesting that there is a strong typological relationship between African traditions and the gospel, similar to the one which exists between the Old and New Testaments? Or does he have a weaker, more tangential relationship in mind? If the former, does he mean to suggest that ancestors and their role in African traditions are as significant of Christ’s work as the Old Testament priestly ministry and sacrificial system are? The fact that the role of ancestor in African traditions seems to be a major center in Bediako’s interpretation of the work of Christ suggests that a much stronger—rather than merely tangential—correlation between ancestor and Christ is presupposed. Could this be a factor in what Bediako conceives the key Christological question to be?

3. *Bediako’s Conception of the Key Christological Question*

It has already been shown that the quest for an African theology is rooted in the perception that the Christology inherited from missionaries and Western Christian traditions was expressed in categories that are alien to African religious understanding

¹⁰³ Bediako, “Christian Religion and the African World-view: Will Ancestors Survive?” in *Christianity in Africa*, 224-225. Italics added for emphasis.

and experience.¹⁰⁴ One of the aspects singled out for criticism in this regard is the prominent place the two natures (of Christ) debate occupy in traditional formulations of Christology.¹⁰⁵ Yet, there is little doubt that the crux of the Christological question has traditionally been the two natures Christ, human and divine. As Richard Norris Jr. rightly points out, the chief burden of Christology has been twofold: to “understand or evaluate” Christ’s “relation to God,” on the one hand, and his “representative character as a human being,” on the other.¹⁰⁶ All the early controversies—Marcionite-Gnostic, Arian, Apollinarian, Nestorian, Monophysite, Monothelete—all revolved around the deity and humanity of Christ.¹⁰⁷ There appears to be a shift in Bediako’s approach to Christology. His point of departure is epitomized in the question ‘why should an Akan or an African relate to Jesus of Nazareth, who does not belong to his clan, family, tribe, and nation?’¹⁰⁸

The contrast between the way the Christological question has been posed traditionally

¹⁰⁴ Henry Johannes Mugabe, “Christology in an African Context,” 343; Matthew Schoffeleers, “Christ in African Folk Theology: The Nganga Paradigm,” 73; Enyi Ben Udoh, *Guest Christology: An Interpretative View of the Christological Problem in Africa*, 64.

¹⁰⁵ Chris Manus, “African Christologies: The Centre-Piece of African Christian Theology,” 5, 6, 11.

¹⁰⁶ Richard A. Norris, “Introduction,” *The Christological Controversy*, Sources of Early Christian Thought (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 2.

¹⁰⁷ Irenaeus’ *Against Heresies* reaffirmed the full divinity of Christ as Creator against the Marcionite and Gnostic dualism that denied the true divinity of the Creator of the world. Athanasius’ *On the Incarnation of the Word* showed why the divine Logos of Father assumed humanity, against Arius’s denial of the full deity of the Son. The Council of Nicaea (A.D. 325) affirmed the deity of the Son and the Father, contra Arius. Nestorius’ sermon against *Theotokos* raised important questions about the relationship of human and divine nature in person of Christ. Eutyches attempted a solution by positing one nature (Monophysitism). The Council of Chalcedon (A.D. 451) proposed a formula to answer valid questions raised by Nestorius and Eutyches, and to draw boundaries that rule out error. This formula has since then been the touchstone of orthodoxy. Emperor Heraclius, following a path marked out by Monophysitism posited a single will in Christ (Monotheletism) which was condemned by third Council of Constantinople (A.D. 581). See *The Christological Controversy*; Edmund J. Fortman, *The Triune God: A Historical Study of The Doctrine* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972); *Christology of the Later Fathers*, Library of Christian Classics: Ichthus Edition, ed. Edward Rochie Hardy in collaboration with Cyril C. Richardson, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1961).

¹⁰⁸ John Pobee, *Toward an African Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), 81.

and the way Bediako poses it could not be more obvious. For while the traditional way of posing the question makes the twofold nature of Christ—why did *God* become *human*?—the focal point of the discussion, Bediako’s way of posing the question makes the cultural particularity of Jesus, as a Jew, and of Africans and their religious traditions the focal point of the discussion. How legitimate is the shift, from a Christological debate centered around the two natures of Christ, to one centered around his cultural particularity as Jew? What are the implications for how one understands the work of Christ and its benefits? This apparent paradigm shift calls for a careful examination of Bediako’s Christology.

C. Paradigm Shift from the Two Natures to Cultural Particularity Paradigm

In Bediako’s formulation, the fundamental Christological problem, conceived of from the standpoint of cultural particularity, is that Christ is an “outsider” to the African ancestral arrangement, in the same way that Melchizedek was an “outsider” to Jewish religion and the priesthood Aaron. Christ, the outsider, gains acceptability within Africa by virtue of the universality of his priesthood, just as Melchizedek, the archetypal outsider, became a priest to God’s people by means of divine action.¹⁰⁹ It is important that we are clear about what is at issue here. The issue is not the new formulation of Christology advanced by Bediako *passé*. After all, as was noted earlier, the New Testament itself has a variety of Christologies.¹¹⁰ Nor is the issue the cultural particularity of Christa as a Jew. By all appearances, the New Testament authors treat both the cultural

¹⁰⁹ Bediako, “Jesus in African Culture,” 101, and “African Christologies,” 102.

¹¹⁰ For good measure, Howard Marshall, in remarks directed against the tacit assumption or perception, in the church, that the on the two-natures debate is the paradigmatic expression of Christology, warns against what he calls “illegitimately narrowing down the scope of Christology,” “A Survey of New Testament Christology for Theologians,” 34.

particularity of Jesus as a Jew¹¹¹ and the distinctively Jewish complexion of the early Christian community¹¹² in a matter of fact way. What is at issue is the way in which the cultural particularity of Christ as Jew becomes a controlling motif in the formulation of Christology in place of the two natures. Is this move justified biblically and theologically? Does it preserve and convey the cardinal truths of work of Christ as understood in the traditional understanding of the doctrine? What is the true place of cultural particularity in Christology? A detailed answer to these questions is not possible within the scope of this study. However, two salient biblical-theological observations give us a basis that is sufficient to evaluate Bediako's use cultural particularity of Christ.

First, it is clear from the gospel accounts that Christ's preaching and actions signaled a relativization of all ethnic and cultural particularities. Thus, although Jesus came to fulfill the promises made to the people of Israel (Matt. 1:18-24, 15:24; Luke 1: 46-55, 67-79; 4:14-20), his message had a much wider scope. It is clear, among other things, that physical descent from Abraham is no longer a guarantee or even sign of right relation to God (John 8:32-59); and, that religious outcasts like Zacchaeus could be true heirs of Abraham on the basis of faith (Luke 19:1-10). Furthermore, by going out of his way to commend non-Jews like the Roman Centurion (Matt. 8:5-13; Luke 7:1-10), the widow of Zarephath, and Naaman (Luke 4:25-27) as paragons of faith, Christ signals that ethnicity was neither a requirement nor a determining factor for acceptability to God.

¹¹¹ It set forth in the gospels in all kinds of ways, just to mention a few—in the infant stories (Luke 2:21-22), anecdotal encounters like the one with Canaanite woman (Mat. 15:21-28), and the Samaritan woman (John 4).

¹¹² The gradual transformation from a predominantly Jewish to a mixed and increasingly Gentile Christian community is clearly evident (Acts 6:1-7, 15:1-35; Gal.2:11-20). This is not to mention the struggles, both theological and physical, the apostles, especially Paul, had to endure in defense of the integrity of gentile Christianity on the basis of the gospel alone. See Acts 10:9 – 11:18, 14:1-20, 16:11-24, 17:1-15, 18:5-16, 21:26 – 23).

Second, Apostolic preaching and teaching, especially in the Epistles, elaborates the theological basis of the gospel's relativizing power. The gospel has rendered the cultural and ritual distinctions between Jews and non-Jews irrelevant (Rom. 10:12; Gal.3:38; Col. 2:11); it has revealed that God is, after all, the God of both Jews and Gentiles (Rom. 3:29); it has shown that Israel's special relation to God is not absolutely exclusive since it is based, not on their cultural distinctions or merits as Jews (Deut. 7:7-9; 9:4-6) but, on God's elective purpose in which Gentiles are also included (Acts 15; Rom. 3, 4 and 9; Eph. 3:6); and, it has further shown that the Jew/Gentile divide is not primarily a cultural or ethnic divide, but rather a theological divide between those who are—by virtue of God's grace—participants in the “covenants of the promise” and therefore deemed citizens or members of the household of God, and those who are not yet participants in the “covenants of the promise” and therefore deemed strangers or aliens (Eph. 2:11-12, 19). In other words, Jews and Gentiles are separated, if at all, not by the cultural particularities on the horizontal plane but, by whether or not they participate in God's gracious action and plan which is vertically inclined from on high towards humanity.

These biblical-theological considerations are sufficient to raise the question as to whether the cultural particularity of Christ as a Jew carries the same theological gravitas as the two natures Christ. It also raises questions about Bediako's construal and use of the Melchizedek-Christ typology in the book of Hebrew. Should this typology be construed, the way Bediako does, horizontally, that is, Melchizedek and Christ as outsiders or foreigners who have to overcome a cultural divide in order to gain acceptance in Jewish religion/African ancestral system? It is not hard to see how a—horizontal—construal

would have appeal in a context where Christianity is under the suspicion being a foreign religion. But is this, ultimately, the right construal and application of the typology?

It is the view of this study that the context of the text suggests that the Melchizedek-Christ typology is best construed, not horizontally but, vertically. This is because the typology posits a vertically inclined contrast between what is heavenly, enduring, and eternal (Heb. 9:23) on the one hand, and what is earthly, temporal and mere shadow of the real thing (Heb. 8:5; 9:23), on the other; between an earthly priesthood with its limitations (Heb. 5:1-3; 7:11, 18-19, 23, 27-28; 8:9-10), and a heavenly priesthood with its unlimited benefits (Heb. 7: 3, 16, 20-28; 8:8-13; 9:11-14, 23-28); between futile human efforts, and heavenly intervention that achieves what no earthly religious institution could (Heb. 2:14-18; Gal. 4:4).

Our discussion so far raises a theoretical but nevertheless tantalizing question: would a ‘vertical,’ rather than ‘horizontal,’ construal of the Christ-Melchizedek typology have led Bediako to adopt cultural particularity as the point of departure for Christology? Whether Bediako intended it or not, there appears to be some correlation between the ‘horizontal’ construal of the Christ-Melchizedek typology and the preference of cultural particularity is the point of departure for Christology. It would be interesting to know whether one could make an analogous correlation between a ‘vertical’ construal of the Christ-Melchizedek typology and the two natures approach to the Christology. Be that as it may, we have arrived at that point where it is necessary to consider how the shift, in the center of gravity of Christological formulation, from the ‘two natures’ to the ‘cultural particularity of Christ’, influences Bediako’s understanding of the work of Christ?

D. Bediako's View of Christ's Work and Its Overall Benefits for Humanity

The way Bediako poses the key Christological question—Why should an Akan (African) relate to Jesus of Nazareth, who does not belong his clan?—imposes a mould for his Christology as a whole. This mould ensures that the claims of Christ are accommodated to the priorities of the religious experience and understanding of the African (Akan) tradition. In this case, the priorities that shape Bediako's interpretation of the work of Christ come from two key areas of African religious experience. The first is the understanding of the human predicament, which includes the existential gulf, the ambiguity of the transcendent, and sin as antisocial behavior.¹¹³ The second is ancestral rituals, which include sacrifice, priestly mediation, and ancestral function.¹¹⁴ Ordinarily, there is nothing necessarily wrong about presenting the truth of Christian faith using a conceptual mould supplied by African religious experience, so long as one takes care to ensure that Christian truth is allowed to speak with the full range and authority it possesses. The advantages are tangible.

Bediako clearly shows that some of the religious categories in African traditions have the capacity, pedagogically and epistemologically, to be vehicles of the truths of the gospel to the considerable advantage of Christian faith. Thus, for instance, the practice of sacrifice and priestly mediation in African traditions provides a natural avenue for expounding the sacrificial death of Christ and his office as mediator. The myths of human origins that intimate divine withdrawal from human affairs can be instrumental for rendering what scripture teaches about the fall and human sin. The African conception of

¹¹³ Bediako, "Biblical Christologies," 102-104; "Jesus in African Culture," 101-103.

¹¹⁴ Bediako, "Jesus in African Culture," 114-119.

the transcendent, especially its ambiguity, lends itself to easily conveying what Christianity teaches about the devil and demonic forces in the world and, especially, about Christ's victory over them.

However, there are unexpected pitfalls lurking within the advantages that African religious concepts provide. For, in reality, the conceptual mould which one uses can some influence on the way the truth is apprehended and even received. Although such influence need not be seen as necessarily negative, it is important to be cognizant of it both potentially and really. In the case of Bediako's Christological proposal, the danger may lie in the African religious categories which are apparently congenial to Christian faith. This can happen if the religious categories assume, inadvertently or otherwise, a controlling stake that allows them to exert an influence that might prove limiting or even distorting to the understanding and expression of Christian truth. Two questions could be raised in this regard. First, is it not possible that the close identification of the mediatorial function of Christ with the practice of sacrifice and priestly mediation in African tradition runs the danger of the former being absorbed into the latter? Second, is it not possible that over-reliance on a conceptual mould supplied by the African religious traditions could lead to an attenuated understanding of vital Christian doctrines, especially those concerning the human predicament (sin) and the work of Christ (salvation)?

The question ultimately is this: does the cultural particularity paradigm—with its reliance on the African view of the human predicament, and the mediatorial role of ancestors—provide a platform that is adequate for explicating the person and work of Christ in the African context? The answer to this question lies somewhere between two polar recognitions. On the one hand, recognition of the strengths of the cultural

particularity paradigm in relation to the truths it is capable of conveying. On the other, recognition of limits and weakness intrinsic to the particularity paradigm in relation to the truths it is incapable of rendering. As indicated above, there are aspects of Christ's work—like the necessity of sacrifice and mediation—which the cultural particularity accentuates positively. There are other areas of Christ's work, however, which may not shine to their full advantage in the cultural particularity paradigm. It is in these areas that the 'two natures' paradigm has distinct advantage and retains enduring relevance for formulating Christology in and for the African context.

E. The Enduring Relevance of the Two Natures Debate

Some African theologians have criticized and even jettisoned the two natures¹¹⁵ as a paradigm that can yield a Christology that is meaningful to people in African traditions ostensibly because of the Greek philosophical terms which are used. However, a better understanding of the debate as it unfolded over centuries can show that these terms may not be as arcane as they appear at first, and that the 'two natures' debate is relevant for Christology in the African context. While it is not possible, nor absolutely necessary, to go into the history of the controversy, three observations can forecast what a fresh outlook on this debate might look like.

First, it important to remember the philosophical terminologies—*ousia*, *homoousios*, *hypostasis*, *prosopon*—which have come under such heavy criticism were,

¹¹⁵ The two natures debate were the subject of the Christological controversies in the first five centuries of the church. The watershed moments of the debate were the Council of Nicea (A.D. 325), the Council of Constantinople (A.D. 382), and the Council of Chalcedon (A.D. 451). See *The Christological Controversy*, ed. Richard Norris Jr.; Edmund J. Fortman, *The Triune God: A Historical Study of The Doctrine; Christology of the Later Fathers*, ed. Edward R. Hardy.

not to obscure or mystify but, to clarify *right belief* concerning the person of Christ. Second, it worth recalling that those who adopted these terms were churchmen who did so, not in the spirit of academic nitpicking but, in response to real life issues and controversies in which *right belief* about Christ was at stake. They were motivated by a firm conviction that a proper construal of the redemptive work of Christ depended on right understanding of his nature as both human and divine. Third, although cultures and circumstances are different now from what they were then, the underlying premise that a proper construal of Christ's redemptive work depends on right understanding of his two-fold nature is as valid today as it was then.

The claim here is 'two natures' paradigm opens up a world of truths regarding the person and work of Christ in ways that the cultural particularity paradigm is unable to. We can test this claim against what are considered the two quintessential questions Christology, one concerning the cause or reason for salvation, and the other, the means of salvation. By doing so, it will be shown that the two natures paradigm, rather than the cultural particularity paradigm, is better equipped to supply answers to these questions.

1. The Two Natures Debate in Relation to the Cause or Reason for Salvation

Why did God choose to save humanity? In the context of this discussion the question is this: did Christ come to fulfill the hopes and aspirations of African religious traditions? Does the claim, by Bediako and others, that "the knowledge of the grace of God in...Jesus Christ have been truly anticipated and prefigured" in the traditions and "lives of African people,"¹¹⁶ suggest a contract or a special understanding between God

¹¹⁶ Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 224-225.

and people in African traditions? What is the basis for belief in such an arrangement? Indeed given the belief, in African traditions, that humanity is to blame for her own sinful and impure state, why should God care to save, rather than condemn or leave humanity to her own devices? Was God under obligation to provide salvation for humanity? These questions are undeniably Christological because they bear directly on divine sovereignty, freedom, nature, and motivation in the act of salvation. The cultural particularity paradigm does not have the resources to answer these questions. By contrast, the debate surrounding the two natures has wrestled with some of these questions in ways which Christians in the African context could learn from.

To return to the questions, it is clear from the scriptures that salvation originates in the counsels of God's will, before time (Eph. 1:3-14). It is motivated by the love of God (John 3:16; Rom. 5:6-11; 8:3, 31-9; 1John. 4:16) which caused God to freely offer his Son as a lamb to be "slain" for human sin "from the creation of the world" (Rev. 13:8). It is by the same love God made that initial promise of salvation, *protevangelium* (Gen. 3:5). This free self-giving love, considered in relation to his freedom and independence, rules out the suggestion that God might have been under some form of obligation or compulsion.¹¹⁷ For Karl Barth, a passionate defender of divine freedom, God willed it that in acting *pro se* (for himself) he also acted *pro nobis* (for us). That is to say, he became incarnate in such a way as to accrue the greatest benefit for humanity.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁷ According to Athanasius, "the cause of the bodily appearing of the Word of the Father" was not "a consequence of his own nature" but rather an act of his "loving kindness and goodness....for our salvation," *On the Incarnation of the Word*, in *Christology of the Later Fathers*, Library of Christian Classics: Ichthus Edition, ed. Edward Rochie Hardy in collaboration with Cyril C. Richardson (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1961), 56.

¹¹⁸ According to Karl Barth, God in his "omnipotent mercy" acts in such a way that in "doing what He does for His own sake, He does it, in fact, *propter nos homines et propter nostrum salutem*," on our

If there was any necessity upon God at all, it was the necessity created by his plan for human salvation rooted in his love (Eph. 1:3-11).¹¹⁹ And this plan of salvation is something only God knows, and only God can make known (1 Cor. 2:6-16; Eph. 3:2-13).

2. *The Two Natures Debate in Relation to the Means of Salvation or Necessity of Incarnation*

Why did God, having purposed to save humanity, choose to do so by means of the incarnation? Some African theologians—like Samuel Kibicho—raise this question, albeit indirectly or inadvertently, when they insist that the divine (general) revelation, on which African traditions are based, is on par with divine revelation in Christ.¹²⁰ For, if “the God worshipped in Christianity” is also “fully known [and] worshipped...in African traditional religions,”¹²¹ God’s revelation in the incarnation, life, and death of his Son would appear to be gratuitous, even irrelevant. Fortunately, over the years the two natures debate has delved into this question and produced a rich harvest of answers that give biblical and theological insight into various aspects of the love and wisdom of God in the incarnation.

account and on account of our salvation, *Church Dogmatics*, vol.4/1, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956-75), 212, 214.

¹¹⁹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* III, q. 1 a, 2 and 5; q. 46 a. 1.

¹²⁰ Kibicho, “The Continuity of the African Conception of God into and through Christianity: A Kikuyu Study,” 370-372, 388; *God and Revelation in an African Context* (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2006), 170-172.

¹²¹ Kibicho, “The Continuity of the African Conception of God into and through Christianity: A Kikuyu Study,” 388.

The traditional response to this question, from the patristic age to the Reformation period, is based on what is considered to be the scriptural view.¹²² It is the view that the sole purpose of the incarnation was the redemption of humanity.¹²³ For Irenaeus, the Son of God recapitulated creation in himself, that is, “became what we are,” in order that we might become “what He is Himself.”¹²⁴ Both Aquinas and Calvin adhere closely to the Scriptural testimony about incarnation.¹²⁵ Although many arguments have been given to account for the necessity of incarnation, all of them suggest that the incarnation reveals something which could not have been known in any other. Three of the arguments stand out.

The first of these arguments explains the incarnation as the divine solution to the trilemma precipitated by the human fall. The trilemma involves (i) God’s love that wills to be merciful to fallen humanity (ii) God’s holiness that requires that sinners be brought to justice and evil be eradicated, and (iii) sinful humanity who is guilty but completely

¹²² In gospel accounts, see Matt. 1:21; 9:13; 20:28; Luke 1:68; 2:30; John 1:29; 3:16; and in the Epistles, see Rom. 8:3; Gal. 4:4-5; 1 Tim. 3:16; Heb. 2:14; 1 John 3:8.

¹²³ This position is either stated or implied in Ecumenical creeds and Protestant confessions. In the Nicene Creed, for instance, “For us and for our salvation he [the Son of God] came down from heaven... became incarnate... and was made human.” In the Belgic Confession, “God... seeing that man had plunged himself in this manner into... death... set out to find him” by fulfilling the promise of a redeemer “when he sent his only and eternal Son into the world. The Son took the ‘form of a servant’... truly assuming human nature,” Art. 17 and 18.

¹²⁴ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers* Vol. 1, *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, reprint edition of the American Edition, with brief notes by A. Cleveland Coxe, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody: Hendrikson Publishers, 1999) Bk. V, preface, and chapters. i and xiv.

¹²⁵ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger, 1948; repr. 5 vols. Westminster: Christian Classics, 1981), III, q. 1. a. 2 and 3; Calvin, *Institutes* II, xii. 4 and 5.

unable to do anything that would extricate herself from her situation.¹²⁶ The key question is this: how can human salvation (God's love) be realized in accordance with God's will (justice)? The answer is substitutionary atonement by one who fulfills three requirements: is willing, approved of God, and able. Only one who loves humanity with extraordinary love would be willing to do so; one who is holy and approved of God is qualified to offer acceptable atonement for human sin; and one who is truly human would be able to assume culpability to actually do so.¹²⁷ Only in the incarnation of the Son of God are these conditions fully met. Christ's qualifications are understood in relation to Old Testament antecedents that point to the threefold nature of the office of mediator, as *prophet, priest, and king*.¹²⁸

The second argument is based on appreciation of the significance of the passive obedience of Christ, especially his suffering, humiliation, and death on the cross. According to this view, divine intervention through the incarnation reveals the enormity of human sin, the depth of divine love, and what it took to heal sin, like nothing else can. According to Stott, only through the incarnation or the cross does it become clear how "extremely horrible" human sin must be and how "wonderful beyond comprehension" God love is.¹²⁹ Barth puts it rather pithily: "Where the intervention of God in person is

¹²⁶ It is a situation John Stott describes as "the inevitable collision between divine perfection and human rebellion, between God as he is and us as we are," *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1986), 88-89.

¹²⁷ Calvin, *Institutes* II. xii. 1-2.

¹²⁸ Christ as *Prophet* is anointed to proclaim God's Word, and to fulfill prophecies (Luke 4:18; Isa. 61:1-2; 1 Cor. 1:30; Col. 2:3); as *Priest*, he fulfills the priestly ministry of mediation, intercession, and sacrifice (Ps. 24:3-4; Heb. 9:7, 11-28); and as *king*, he rules and fulfills the hopes and aspirations of the theocratic kingship of David – peace, security, prosperity, and blessedness (Ps. 89:35-37; Luke: 1:31-33, 67-69). See Calvin, *Institutes* II, xv. 2 -3; Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* III, 364-368.

¹²⁹ John Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, 83.

needed, everything is obviously lost without that intervention, and man can do nothing to help himself.”¹³⁰ The incarnation was divine intervention, not at a distance but, as the expression goes, ‘up close and personal’ (2 Cor. 5:21; Gal. 4:4-5). Christ assumed humanity fully in order to confront the human predicament at its roots. As Gregory of Nazianzus observed, since “the whole of his [human] nature fell,” the whole of human nature had to be “united with the whole nature of Him that was begotten” [Christ] in order to be “healed.”¹³¹ For Barth,

[I]t needed nothing less than God Himself to remedy the corruption of our being and ourselves, to restore order between Himself as Creator and the world as His creation, to set up and maintain again the covenant broken by man, to carry it through against man for the sake of man, and in that way to save man from destruction.¹³²

The third argument is based on an appreciation of the active obedience of Christ. It takes into account the unsung humiliation of the divine entailed in the of Christ’s earthly career—having to be born and to conform to the conditions and limitations of a mere human. This humiliation includes having to be subject to human parents (Gal. 4:4-5; Heb. 2:14-17; Luke 2:59); giving up or emptying himself (*kenosis*) of his divine prerogatives (Phil. 2:5-8); submitting to the Father in everything including death (John 5:19, 30, 43; 6:38-40; Phil. 2:5-8); and learning obedience through suffering (Heb. 5: 7-9). Although many aspects of Christ’s active obedience do not appear to have benefits that are as dramatic and as tangible as those associated with his passive obedience—like the resurrection and the *Christus-Victor* theme—this view looks at Christ’s life as “a single

¹³⁰ Barth, *Dogmatics* vol.4/1, 251.

¹³¹ Gregory of Nazianzus’s widely-quoted saying, “that which he has not assumed he has not healed,” is also uttered here, *Letter in Apollinarian Controversy*, Text to Cleodnius Against Apollinari, in *Christology of the Fathers*, 218-218.

¹³² Barth, *Dogmatics* vol.4/1, 251.

whole.”¹³³ It assumes that all aspects of Christ’s life—suffering, death, and earthly career—are necessary for human salvation; that humans are saved as much by his death and resurrection as by the tenor of his obedient life.¹³⁴ According to Barth, because Christ took “our place” through incarnation, he now “gives us authentic information about ourselves.”¹³⁵ For him the incarnation furnishes us with two most vital pieces of information about the human condition: first, that humans are “pseudo-sovereign creatures,” but second, that by taking “our place” Christ has reversed our rebellion and returned or restored our human nature to its original place of obedience and submission to God.¹³⁶ Looked at from this perspective, Christ’s entire earthly career and disposition is indispensable for our understanding of what it means to be a human being, and what the human vocation, goal, and destiny is.

V. Conclusion

The strengths of Bediako’s Christology lie in its evangelistic nature and missionary focus. It is driven by the desire to transmit the truth of the gospel by translating it into categories that are relevant within the context of African religious experience. His goal is so that Africans might recognize Christ, not as alien deity, but as the savior/ancestor whom they have always sought and needed. His method is based on the assumption that the tools for translating the gospel into African idiom lie in African religious experience itself. This assumption is rooted in the theological conviction that

¹³³ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* III, 378.

¹³⁴ Calvin, *Institutes* II. xvi. 5.

¹³⁵ Barth, *Church Dogmatics* Vol. 4/1, 211-288, 240.

¹³⁶ Barth, *Church Dogmatics* Vol. 4/1, 231, 234, 254, 259.

the gospel has been truly anticipated and prefigured in African traditions. His method, therefore, correlates the truths concerning Christ's work with those elements of African religious experience in which Christ's work is prefigured. He uses it, quite effectively, to render the truths of the gospel in ways many Africans can understand and identify with: the practice of sacrifice and priestly mediation in African traditions is used to expound the sacrificial death of Christ and his office as mediator; the myths of human origins are a bridge to what scripture teaches about the fall and human sin; and, the African conception of the transcendent, especially its ambiguity, is an ideal foil for presenting Christ's victory over the devil and all powers of darkness.

There is however some tension in Bediako's Christology. It is a tension between the need to present the truth of Christian faith in ways that are relevant to people in African traditions, on the one hand, and the nature of Christian truth itself, on the other. This is part of what leads him to prefer cultural particularity rather than the (traditional) two natures as the point of entry for Christology. From the discussion it is clear that there are aspects of the meaning of the work of Christ which the cultural particularity paradigm is unable to render as clearly as the traditional two nature paradigm. There is also the danger that the Christian understanding of the work of Christ might get absorbed and become just another component of ancestral beliefs in African traditions.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

I. The Main Arguments of the Dissertation Summarized

This dissertation draws attention to the fact that behind the rapid spread of Christianity on the African continent, there is an encounter and interaction taking place between Christian faith and what has been referred to as the “perennial spiritualities of Africa.” Ironically, although the encounter and interaction between Christianity and African traditions is an open secret, genuine theological understanding of it is far from obvious. The debate within the threefold typology—exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism—framework has not shed nearly as much light on the nature of this encounter and interaction as one might expect. This is because the logic of the threefold typology is oriented towards Christocentric and soteriological priorities of the Christian message, rather than towards the theological exposition of other religious traditions as a whole.

This dissertation has shown that as much as Christocentric and soteriological priorities are important and unavoidable especially in the proclamation of the gospel, a true understanding of the encounter and ongoing interaction between Christian faith and African traditions is not possible without a wide ranging theological grasp of African traditions as whole. A theological grasp of this nature presupposes an approach to the discussion that is rooted in a genuine endeavor to account for African religious traditions as a whole, but especially the foundational elements of African traditions—the African “sense of God”, the African “sense of reality”, and the African “sense of vocation”.

This dissertation has used an approach that casts the debate on Christianity and African traditions in the wider frame of reference of creation and providence. It is an approach that begins from the assumption that, in the encounter with African traditions, the onus or obligation rests squarely with Christian faith to account for *what is already there* in African traditions. This onus, and the frame of reference that is based on it, spring from two fundamental theological imperatives, one rooted in the reality of creation and providence, and the other in the message of the gospel. As an approach, it differs from that proposed by Pinnock, Yong, and Kärkkäinen who opt for a non-*Filioque* construal of the activity of the Holy Spirit as the only way to account for divine presence in other religions fully. Their approach aims to break out of the impasse caused by the Christocentric-Soteriological orientation of the threefold typology by giving prominence to activity of the person of the Holy Spirit. To do this, they feel obliged to disengage the activity of the person of the Holy Spirit from the activity of the person of the Son. The creation-providence in view of redemption framework used in this dissertation renders this kind of Trinitarian tinkering unnecessary. This is because in the creation-providence framework the activities of the members of the Godhead, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are assumed, recognized, and affirmed simultaneously. For what the Father willed to create through the activity of the Son is kept into being and preserved for redemption by the activity of Holy Spirit, all for the greater glory of the entire Godhead.

Based on a framework furnished by these two theological imperatives—creation and providence, and the gospel—this dissertation has offered an account of foundational elements of African traditions. Overall, it has argued that the foundational elements of African religious traditions— the African “sense of God”, the African “sense of reality”,

and the African “sense of vocation”—derive from a primal substructure rooted in creation and providence. These elements have been accounted in three broad claims:

First, the African “sense of God” derives from *primal factors* that constitute the minimum conditions necessary for the possibility of a human knowledge or awareness of God. These *primal factors*, which are part of the primal or original endowment given through creation and providence, fall into three categories: the *ontic* category, which consists in the reality of God himself, as the essential ground and absolute condition for the possibility of the knowledge of God; the *epistemological* category, which comprises creation and divine self-revelation in and through creation, as the objective basis for the possibility of a human knowledge of God; and, the *noetic* or *anthropological* category, which consists in humanity created in the *imago dei*, as the subjective basis for the possibility of a creaturely knowledge of God. The point here is that if God had not condescended to impart an imprint of his own life, personality, and nature on otherwise lifeless matter, there would be no possibility of a creaturely knowledge of God. Overall, the significance of the African “sense of God” lies in the fact that the *primal factors* from which it derives are factors which Christianity assumes and in which it participates

Second, the African religious ontology and way of life are based on a view of the world and an understanding of the human vocation that is generally consonant with Christian teaching and assumption about creation and human life. Within the African “sense of reality” it is assumed that the world originates in supernatural ordination (creation); and, that the physical realm is symbolic of or rooted in a spiritual and supernatural realm. The African “sense of vocation”, the that human life is a religious undertaking lived as a transaction between the physical and the transcendent realm,

carries an echo of the Christian view of humanity as creatures that are created to live for and serve God. Looked at from the standpoint of creation and providence, the African “sense of reality” and “sense of vocation” are a spiritual-religious resources that can be redirected for the sake and benefit of Christian faith

Third, the idea of an African Christology—a Christology expressed in the categories of African religious experience—illustrates one use of some elements of African traditions to express the truth of Christian faith. The idea being that, if the best elements of African traditions derive from divine activity in creation and providence, it need not be surprising that some of those elements lend themselves to the transmission and reception of the gospel message in the African context. The theological merits and justification of the idea of an African Christology is in this that God’s unique self-revelation in the incarnation can be communicated using the religious resources deposited or instigated in African traditions God’s original activity of self-revelation in creation and providence. By an act of divine providence, African religious traditions supply pedagogical and epistemological resources that serve the cause of the gospel.

In general however, it is important to recognize that the account of foundational elements of Africa tradition given here is seminal to a fuller theological exposition of African tradition. The scope of such an exposition is enshrined with the theological imperatives of creation and providence, on the one hand, and the gospel, on the other. The creation-providence theological imperative presses in the direction of a theology of a theology of religions of sorts, specifically an African Christian theology of religions. The gospel theological imperative presses in the direction of a clearer statement of a natural theology of the regenerate, specifically an African Christian natural theology. The point

of departure of the former is a Christian understanding of divine activity in creation and providence. And, the point of the departure of the latter is a Christian doctrinal understanding of who God is. What an African Christian theology of religions, and an African Christian natural theology look like cannot be delineated fully in the space available to us. Only a general outline of each can be attempted here.

II. An African Christian Theology of Religions

The goal of an African Christian theology of religions is to give an account or explanation of the religious phenomena in African traditions through the lens of a Christian view of reality. It seeks, first, to name the religious phenomena, and then to account for the conditions that cause them. In this dissertation, the major religious phenomena in African traditions have been named—the African “sense of God”, “sense of reality”, and “sense of vocation”. The “sense of God” is the particular way in which belief in God is held in African tradition—belief in God which has neither the benefit of creedal formulation nor the protection of the authority of dogma. Rather, it is pervasive sensibility that arises out of the human encounter with divine presence in creation. The “sense of reality” is a worldview or ontology that sees all reality as comprised by a physical-material realm that is rooted in and dependent upon a spiritual-supernatural or transcendent realm. The “sense of vocation” is an intuitive construal of the life that is rooted in the African “sense of reality”, namely, the view that human life is fundamentally a religious transaction between the physical realm and transcendent realm. How does the “sense of God”, and the religious state of affairs—*reality* and *vocation*—ensuing from it, come about?

From what we have seen so far the religious state of affairs in African traditions is caused by *primal factors* that fall in three categories which have already been delineated—the *ontic* category, which is the reality of God himself, the *epistemological* category, which is creation and divine self-revelation in it, and the *noetic* category, which is humanity created in the *imago dei*. On a Christian understanding, these factors—excepting God who is in and of himself without beginning or end—come into being with or at creation. This has several implications for the relationship between Christianity and African traditions. First, the fact that *primal factors* are creational means that they are factors in which Christianity itself necessarily participates. The factors are the conditions without which religion or a human awareness of God is inconceivable and impossible. It is precisely on these factors that Christianity is on common ground with African traditions. Second, *primal factors* furnish a theological matrix through which to interpret religious belief and experience in African traditions and to recognize the areas of affinity with Christian faith. It is clear, for instance, that the African “sense of God”—that wide variety of names, concepts, and idioms concerning God in African traditions—could have originated in nothing other than the encounter with the reality of God and his self-revelation. The African “sense of reality” and “sense of vocation” presuppose, as has already indicated, a world like the one Christian faith teach about.

However, it would be precipitate and misleading to equate Christianity and African traditions on account of the *primal* or creational factors which they share. It is important to remember that the account of African traditions thus far is incomplete or partial because it based only on the theological imperative of creation providence. It needs to be *complemented* and *completed* by an account of African traditions from the

standpoint of the theological imperative of the gospel—a theological imperative that points in the direction of an African Christian natural theology.

III. An African Christian Natural Theology

The goal of an African Christian natural theology is an account of the knowledge and experience of God in African religious traditions from the standpoint of Christian revelation. To put it in another way, its goal is to arrive at a natural theology of the regenerate in the African context, as distinct from an African natural theology *simpliciter*. The necessity of an African natural theology of the regenerate arises from the fact that the gospel posits knowledge of God that is distinct from that which all other religious traditions might claim to have. To the extent that it does so, Christian theology is under obligation, especially in context of proclaiming the gospel, to account for the knowledge of God non-Christian religious traditions putatively have. There are at least four steps or things Christian theology needs to do in course of articulating an African Christian natural theology: (i) *distinguish* between the foundations of a Christian and a non-Christian knowledge of God (ii) *relate* the respective distinct foundations to each other (ii) *differentiate* the knowledge of God arising from these respective foundations, and (iv) *define* and *clarify* concepts that are commonly used in the debate.

A. Foundations of the Christian and Non-Christian Knowledge of God Distinguished

The sources of the African or non-Christian knowledge of God have already been indicated. They lie in the three *primal factors* which provide the conditions that make religion or a human awareness of God possible—God as the *ontic* basis, creation and

revelation as the *epistemological* basis, and humanity created in human in the *imago dei* as the *noetic* basis, of the possibility of the knowledge of God. It has also been shown that Christianity assumes and participates in the *primal factors*, and therefore that *primal factors* are an area of common ground with African traditions.

However, it is also equally true that *primal factors* are by no means the only or even a *sufficient condition* for knowledge of God that is distinctively Christian. What makes or produces Christian faith is the knowledge of God as revealed in Christ. This is another way of conceding that, although *primal factors* are an integral part of the foundation of Christian faith as whole, the scriptures are the authoritative and decisive foundation for a Christian knowledge of God. What the scriptures reveal about God is not only distinct and different, but authoritative in a way that supersedes the knowledge of God that arises from *primal factors*. The scriptures are uniquely authoritative as the Word of God in a fourfold sense:

First, the scriptures are uniquely authoritative because of *what* they reveal. As distinct from the knowledge of God that arises from the *primal factors*, the scriptures reveal the knowledge of God concerning the divine means for the redemption of humanity (John 20:31; 2Tim. 2:15). For, while *primal factors* provide the conditions necessary for a human knowledge or awareness of God, the Word or scripture provides the knowledge of God concerning human redemption.

Second, the scriptures are uniquely authoritative because of *who* they reveal and the *means* or *manner* in which the one who is revealed reveals himself. In regard to *who* the scriptures reveal the archetypal Word, λόγος, of God who, in this sense, is the personal self-knowledge and self-expression of God who is also identical with the second

person of the Trinity (John 1:1-2, 14, 18; Heb. 1:1-3; Rev. 3:14; 19:11-13). In regard to *means*, the Word has revealed himself in the incarnation (Heb. 1:1-3; 2:10-11, 14-18).

This anticipates the third sense in which scripture is authoritative.

Third, scripture is uniquely authoritative as the personal speech or Word of God to humanity. For, in the Word who became incarnate in the man Jesus Christ, God addresses humanity, not through someone else or through some other medium, but through himself. Christ, the Word, speaks to humanity not as someone to whom the mind of God has been revealed in a special way—albeit second hand—but as someone who is himself God, and who shares in God’s inner life (John 1:1-2, 18; 3:31-34; Heb. 1:1-3; 2:10-11). This means that there can be no higher revelation of God than his appearance in his incarnation in Jesus Christ (Col. 1:19; 2:9-10; Heb. 1:1-3).

Finally, the scriptures are uniquely authoritative because of the way God superintended the processes of their inspiration, transmission, and preservation. God illumined the prophets and the apostles to receive his Word, and inspired them to utter and to write it down (2Tim. 3:16). God was the primary agent throughout this process, and human beings only the secondary agent (2 Pet. 1:19-21). God also ensured that his originally spoken word was written down and collected in the bible to protect it against the vagaries of human experience and history (John 20:30-31; 2 Pet. 1:12-15). God continues to authorize scripture by turning the *written* Word into the *Living* Word through the activity of the Holy Spirit. He also imbues the Word with authority by confirming it—through the activity of the same Holy Spirit—in the hearts and minds of those to whom it is proclaimed, especially those who believe (John 14: 14-15, 26; Heb.

4:12). It is clear from this then, that the authority of scripture is ultimately the authority of the Godhead—Father, Son and, Holy Spirit.

B. Foundations of the Christian and Non-Christian Knowledge of God Related

It goes without saying that God's revelation through the scriptures works in concert with the *primal factors* that derive from God's activity in creation and providence. That is to say, that whatever is *of* God by means of creation and providence is assumed in God's redemptive activity through the Word. What this means is that it can be assumed, in principle, that all the knowledge of God in African traditions which arises out of divine activity in creation and providence is deemed to be organically related to God's redemptive activity in Christ. It does not need special justification or proof to be deemed so. For the fact that there is knowledge or awareness of God—as evidenced by the beliefs, names, and concepts of in African traditions—is itself proof of the reality of divine activity and presence. These beliefs, names, and concepts of God can, therefore, be assumed and used in the transmission and proclamation of God as revealed in Christ without much ado or apology. How exactly can the relationship between knowledge of God in African tradition and in Christian faith be conceptually represented?

Calvin's metaphor of the scriptures as "spectacles" can help us to both distinguish and relate the knowledge of God deriving from the *primal factors* and from the scriptures. According to Calvin the scriptures can be likened to "spectacles" that "aid" and correct the "bleary-eyed [and] weak vision" of human beings so that they can grasp what God has revealed through creation correctly (*Institutes* I.vi.1). If we might be so bold as to expand upon Calvin's metaphor, the suggestion here is to look at the function of the scriptures, not merely as regular spectacles but, as *bifocal* spectacles. That is to say, as

spectacles with a corrective lens that has two distinct optical powers—the *primary lens* power, and the *secondary lens* power. On this view, the *primary lens* power, which is analogous to the part of lens used to read the fine print, brings into view God’s love and merciful grace, which go back to the beginnings of humanity but, which were climactically demonstrated in the life and death of Jesus Christ. The *secondary lens* power, which is analogous to the part of lens used to see the things or the world around in general, brings into view divine activity in the whole of creation and in human experience. Two deductions can be drawn from the *primary/secondary lens* distinction made here in relation to the function of scripture.

First, with regard to the *primary lens* power function, the scriptures do not merely reprise or clarify what people in African traditions, or other human beings in general, apprehend of God through creation and providence. The scriptures bring to light new truths—regarding God’s redemptive activity for and on behalf of humanity—that are not available anywhere else. Second, with regard to the *secondary lens* power function, the scriptures also cast creation and providence in new light, revealing deeper truths beyond what people in African traditions, and human beings in general are, ordinarily or on their own, capable of knowing. Although some of the deeper truths (regarding creation and providence) are, in themselves, available in and through creation, yet they are no longer self evident in human experience or to the human understanding. This is due, in large part, to human limitations and to the noetic effects of the fall.

C. Knowledge of God from Primal Factors and from the Scriptures Differentiated

It is clear from what has said in the preceding subsection that there is, what could be referred to as, a reflexive relationship between the *primal factors* as the conditions for the possibility of a human knowledge of God, and the gospel as the condition for knowledge of God that leads to human redemption. While the *primal factors* are assumed and incorporated in God's redemptive plan revealed in scripture, God's revelation in scripture casts the *primal factors* in new light. It is impossible, within the limits of this subsection, to do justice to the full range of the way in which the knowledge of God that is purely from the *primal factors* differs from that which is available through the scriptures. However, a general outline of the difference can be captured under two main categories: God and Creation and how they are related, and the human predicament and religious quest.

1. *God and Creation and How They Are Related*

As has already been indicated, a basic feature of the African "sense of God" is the strong awareness and universal acknowledgment of the reality of God as the creator. He is apprehended as divine not human, spirit not corporeal, eternal not temporal, and as self-sufficient and omnipotent, not dependent or vulnerable in any way (Rom. 1:19-20; John 4:24). The African "sense of reality" and *vocation* includes a general acknowledgment that the physical world is divine bounty—a bounty for the wellbeing of humanity. Although it is not possible to quantify the role which the foundational elements of African traditions—the "sense of God", *reality*, and *vocation*—play in the apprehension and reception of God as revealed in Jesus Christ, that role cannot be

gainsaid. It is possible, however, to show areas in African religious experience where certain kinds of knowledge are deficient or lacking. Thus for instance, although the knowledge of God as creator is relatively clear, the knowledge that God's graciously disposed towards humanity is far from clear. It is far from clear in African religious experience creating humanity in his image God stooped to draw humanity to himself, to invite humanity to fellowship with him. Knowledge of God in Africa traditions lacks the scope and depth to shed light on this incredible grace. A Christian account of God and creation makes explicit his gracious disposition and approach to humanity.

The Christian view of creation begins with an understanding of God as an independent, sovereign, omnipotent divine being who is and has always been utterly complete and glorious in himself (John 5:26; 17:5, 24; Acts 17:24-25). This rules-out many reasons that might otherwise be given to account for creation, including the suggestion that creation is brute fact or that it is an act of sheer divine omnipotence. The creator God who is revealed in scriptures has no need to prove himself to anything or anyone. This means that there can only be one reason for creation which is consistent with who God is, and with what creation is. And this reason is that creation is pure gift of divine love and good pleasure. On a Christian view of God and creation there are three profound and rich senses in which creation is gift

First, creation is a gift of what was earlier referred to as divine *life-giving condescension* (Chapter Three, IV, C. 2a). The *life-giving condescension* is revealed in that fact that he (God) who has always been utterly complete and sufficient in himself chose to bring into being, out of nothing, a creaturely realm; that he deigned to garnish it

with his goodness, glory, and presence; and, that he did all this entirely for the benefit of the creatures he created.

Second, creation is a gift of God's *self-giving love*. The *self-giving love* is revealed in the fact that God chose to bestow a nature analogous to his own, *imago dei*, upon one of his creatures, the human being. By that act of self-giving God conferred an incomparable dignity on humanity—a dignity that puts humanity on the most intimate terms any creature could ever have with divinity (Ps. 8).¹

Third, creation is a gift of *unselfish and prodigious generosity*. The *unselfishness and generosity* of the divine person is revealed in the fact that God gave humanity a destiny and inheritance that, by far, surpasses her station; a destiny and inheritance into which “even angels long to look” (1Pet. 1:12). This is the destiny to be or to become children of God (John 1:12-13; Eph. 1:3-6; 1John 3:1). Considering that humanity had no prior claim to or qualification to merit this honor, God is *unselfishly and prodigiously generous*.

What is important to note here is that the understanding of creation as described above assumes knowledge of God of a specific kind. It is not knowledge of God as deity in some generic sense. Rather, it knowledge of God as deity who has specific qualities—the kind of qualities manifested in God's revelation in Christ. In other words, the divine self-giving that brought creation into being is conceivable only if God is, as Christian doctrine teaches, Trinity. According to this doctrine, the Godhead is a transcendent

¹ Considered from the perspective creation and in comparison to creatures, it is impossible to overstate the grandeur of the gift of being a human being. “Man [humanity], says Calvin, “[is] the loftiest proof of divine wisdom” and also “a workshop graced with God's unnumbered works, and at the same time, a storehouse overflowing with inestimable riches.” Such is the grandeur of being human that contemplating it humanity should simply “break forth in praises” to God, *Institutes*, I. v. 3 and 4.

community of three fully personal divine entities—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—who are fully united in a common divine essence. Far from being a monad, the three divine persons in the Godhead are interrelated in a never ending activity of mutual love, mutual self-giving, and self-communication.

2. The Human Predicament and Religious Quest

African religious traditions, as noted earlier, are unabashedly anthropocentric. Within this anthropocentric focus, there is a strong awareness of the reality of evil and of malign forces that seek to destroy humanity. A major part of the religious quest in African traditions is devoted to courting and marshalling the beings and forces in the wider spiritual universe to the cause of fostering human survival and wellbeing. Within this quest however, there is a lingering fear and uncertainty regarding the ultimate nature of the transcendent realm—a fear regarding whether it is benevolent, or malevolent, or both. Divine revelation in the Christian scriptures provides a much better account of the human predicament, and superior motivation for the religious quest. The Christian account of the human predicament and religious quest makes three basic claims.

First, Christianity provides a better foundation from which to account for the human predicament and religious quest. On the Christian view of the world, there is no uncertainty regarding the nature of the transcendent, or the foundation and the goal of creation. There is no ambiguity about what or who is ultimately in charge. The creator God, who is the fount of all goodness and love, is also the Lord who reigns over everything. Human beings are creatures who are loved by God, and who are called to a destiny of being children of God. Although the realization of God's original purpose for humanity has been frustrated by the human fall, yet that purpose has been restored in

Christ. And, the hope of realizing humanity's restored purpose has been made more certain through the person and work of Christ (Heb. 6:13-20).

Second, Christianity gives a more plausible account of the source and cause of the human predicament and its remedy. The human predicament involves three components. The first of them is that humanity is created in image of God, a key aspect of which is the capacity to exercise free will for the good of self and neighbor—even though the exercise of that will has been tainted by the fall. The free will, however, remains. It is expressed, among other things, in the quest for the good and for happiness, and in the ceaseless deployment of talents and resources to realize that happiness. The second component is that due to the effects of the fall, humanity is—through greed, selfishness, and pride—often the cause and perpetrator of the misery she suffers. The third and final one is that in a fallen world, humanity is also often the victim of general evil whose cause is beyond any individual or group. What this means is that on a Christian view of the world, the good human being experience and the happiness they long for are real because they have their source in God who is the fount of all goodness and happiness. Similarly, the evil human beings suffer, both within and without, is real too because of the fall.

Third, Christianity gives a more plausible account of this interim period in African context. The interim period is one in which the African religious knowledge and experience of God—which is rooted in divine activity and presence in creation and providence—overlaps with period in which message of the knowledge of God as revealed in Christ is being proclaimed. A Christian understanding of divine activity and presence in the aftermath of the fall gives us definite pointers about how to view this period. It is generally recognized that God could have justly allowed humanity to bear the full

consequences of her rebellion (Rom. 3:19, 23; 6:23).² But to the contrary, God's response to human rebellion guaranteed the possibility of human life after fall in a number of ways: (i) God condescended to seek humanity out (Gen 3:8-13) rather than abandon her to her own devices (ii) God extended the promise of redemption to humanity out of his sheer goodness and kindness (Gen. 3:15)—history is a clear testimony God has continued to extend his mercy by forbearing with human evil (Acts 14:17; 17:30) rather than mete out his justice against all evil doing (iii) God has allowed his self-witness in and through creation to continue despite human rebellion (Acts. 14:17a; 17:26-28; Rom. 1:18-20), and (iv) God faithfully sustains the world in such a way that it continues to be a place human beings can thrive, human evil and unfaithfulness notwithstanding (Matt. 5:45; Acts 14:17b; 17:14-25). In the end, the entire created order, especially humanity, is the beneficiary of divine forbearance (2Pet. 3:9). The goal of divine forbearance is the redemption of humanity which was manifested the incarnation, life, and death of the Son of God (John 3:16; Rom. 5:6-8).

IV. Defining and Clarifying Frequently Used Concepts in the Debate

Inasmuch as the combined resources of an African Christian Theology of Religions, and an African Christian Natural Theology have the potential to shed light on the ongoing interaction between Christianity and African traditions, the quality of the theological engagement would be greatly improved overall if there was more clarity and uniformity in the way the most frequently used terminologies and concepts in the debate

² As the first article of *The Canons of Dort* puts it “Since all people have sinned in Adam and have come under the sentence of the curse and eternal death, God would have done no one injustice if it had been his will to leave the entire human race in sin and under the curse, and to condemn them on account of their sin.”

are employed. Terminologies and concepts that fall in this category need to be defined and qualified appropriately to avoid misunderstanding and ambiguity. The most frequently used terms and concepts to be considered here include the general/special revelation distinction, continuity, discontinuity, *praeparatio evangelica*, fulfillment, and especially, and the idea that African traditions can be of value to or for Christian faith. The clarifications and qualifications made here are merely to indicate the appropriate and inappropriate ways of predicating these terms and concepts with specific reference to Christianity and African traditions.

A. The General/Special Revelation Distinction

There are some ways of construing the distinction between general and special revelation that are potentially misleading. The common ones are the tendency, either to posit a near absolute disjunction between general and special revelation, or to assume or suggest that the former, general revelation is, in itself, deficient. To avoid these misconceptions there is need to remember two things. The first is that there is an organic relationship between general and special revelation which is rooted in the fact that the divine agent in creation and providence is the same agent in redemption. The second is that divine activity in redemption presupposes and is rooted in divine activity in creation and providence.

B. Continuity

Continuity, as used by proponents of inclusivism, can or should be understood as capable of being used or predicated in a *primary* and *secondary* sense. When it is used in the *primary* sense, the continuity is predicated of the reality of divine revelation and

activity itself. Such predication merely recognizes the fact that Christianity and African traditions both presuppose and are dependent upon the same divine activity in creation and providence. When it is used in *secondary* sense, however, the continuity is predicated of the actual beliefs themselves, that is, of the human construals of divine presence in creation and providence. Continuity in the *primary* sense is a more straightforward argument to make than continuity in *secondary* sense. This is because human construals of divine revelation in creation and providence may differ along a wide spectrum that can stretch between superficial differences, on the one end, to contradictory beliefs, on the other.

C. Discontinuity

Discontinuity, as used even by the most uncompromising proponents of exclusivism, is never absolute. The notion of absolute discontinuity would tend to posit a religious or spiritual *tabula rasa* that contradicts what Christianity affirms about creation and providence. In reality, discontinuity is properly predicated in relation to the human apprehension and religious experience of God, on the one hand, and in relation to the proximate sources or foundations of the knowledge and experience of God, on the other.

The discontinuity between Christianity and African traditions is properly predicated of human apprehension for two reasons: first, because the ontological distance between humanity and God entails that all human knowledge of God is necessarily partial, limited, or at best analogical; and second, because the noetic effects of the fall entails that all human knowledge of God is not only defective, but sometimes, even false. Therefore, not only is it right to assume that the knowledge of God in African traditions is limited

but that, it is also prudent to allow for the possibility that some of the knowledge of God in African traditions may be found to be defective and even false.

The discontinuity between Christianity and African traditions is also properly predicated of their respective proximate sources of knowledge and experience of God. The proximate source of the knowledge and experience of God in African traditions is divine activity and presence in creation and providence. The proximate source of the knowledge and experience of God in Christian faith is scripture. Although an organic relationship obtains between divine activity in creation-providence and in scripture, yet it is true that the respective religious experiences they produce are related but not identical.

D. *Praeparatio Evangelica*

Praeparatio evangelica generally refers to way in which God's activity in creation and providence functions as a preparation or a foundation—especially in generating belief in God, and the need to worship God—for the proclamation of the gospel. However, the preparatory nature of divine activity in creation and providence is distinct from the preparatory nature of the Old Testament. The former is a *praeparatio evangelica* by virtue of organic unity of divine action in creation-providence, and divine action in redemption. The Old Testament, by contrast, is a *praeparatio evangelica* by virtue of the special divine ordination of a specific group of people, events, and religious practices, to adumbrate the incarnation of the Son God to redeem humanity. There may be some parallels between the two kinds of *praeparatio* but they cannot be equivocated.

E. Fulfillment

Fulfillment is closely related to *praeparatio evangelica* and needs to be qualified in a similar way. Fulfillment, primarily and most fully, describes the relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament or gospel. Christ came to fulfill what had been said or promised in the Old Testament, or what had been adumbrated or prepared for in Old Testament religious practices. But since African traditions are not a *praeparatio evangelica* in the same way as the Old Testament, it would not be appropriate to say that Christianity is a fulfillment of African religious traditions in the *primary* sense. It is appropriate, however, to claim a fulfillment relationship between Christianity and African traditions in the *secondary* sense. More precisely, Christianity fulfills the best hopes and aspirations of African traditions. Christianity fulfills them, not as ethnic or cultural aspirations but, as genuinely human aspirations that are rooted in God's design for humanity from the foundation of the world, a design which is ultimately revealed in Jesus Christ (Eph. 1:3-5).

F. The Idea that African Traditions Can Be of Value to or for Christian Faith

The idea that African traditions can be of value to or for Christian faith is not meant to suggest that African traditions contribute to the content of Christian doctrine. This idea has been hinted at in several sections of the dissertation, especially in the chapter on the African "sense of reality" and "sense of vocation". In general, however, the idea is one of the outcomes of an African Christian theology of religions, and an African Christian natural theology. It is meant to highlight the fact that some aspects of African traditions can contribute to a deeper understanding of what Christians *already*

believe about, for instance, God as the living God who is everywhere present in his world; the nature of the world as physical-material realm that is grounded in spiritual and supernatural reality; human life as religious vocation in which life in the physical realm is lived in relation to the spiritual and transcendent realm. In short, various aspects of African traditions are of value for Christian faith, not in the *primary* sense as *proclamation* but, in the *secondary* sense as *witness* to the reality of divine activity and presence among people in African religious traditions.

APPENDIX

THESES

Theses Based on the Dissertation

1. The foundational elements or *sensibilities* of African religious traditions—the “sense of God”, “sense of reality”, and “sense of vocation”—derive from a primal substructure rooted in creation and providence, and the ability to discern them as such is *primal sensing*.
2. In the encounter between Christian faith and African traditions the onus is upon Christian faith to account for *what is already there* in African religious traditions, in particular to account for the African “sense of God”, “sense of reality”, and “sense of vocation”.
3. The African “sense of God” presupposes *primal factors*, that is, an original endowment given through creation and providence, as the minimum conditions necessary for the possibility of a human awareness and knowledge of God.
4. The meaning and significance for Christian faith of African “sense of reality” and “sense of vocation” is better appreciated through the theological lens of divine activity in creation and providence.
5. While the notion of an African Christology is fundamentally theologically fecund for translating the truths of Christian faith into indigenous religious idiom, it also has the potential for theological pitfalls could undermine the truths of Christian faith.

Coursework Theses

6. The argument advanced by Alvin Plantinga, to the effect that religious belief is justified in basic way, offers a helpful framework for an intellectual understanding and critique of the preponderance of religious and theistic beliefs in African traditions.

7. The African religious worldview—dubbed by some the “primal imagination”—may prove to be a helpful dialogue partner for proponents of Radical Orthodoxy in their quest to engage and critique modernity and post-modernity.
8. The predominantly *Christus victor* understanding of the doctrine of the atonement in large sections of the Church in Africa is inexplicable without a proper of appreciation of the nature of the wider spiritual universe of African traditions.
9. The basic moral sensibilities and beliefs that are prevalent in African traditions and societies are more indicative of an underlying Natural Law moral disposition than they are of a Divine Command moral disposition.
10. The fundamental elements and assumptions of pre-critical exegesis resonate with the religious assumptions of Christian experience in Africa sufficiently to make the *quadriga* a recommendable approach for the preaching and teaching of the Bible in the African context.

Personal Theses

11. To say that Christianity is an African religion is either deeply problematical or profoundly theological.
12. Calvin and Zwingli may be more productive, than some modern counterparts, as dialogue partners for African Christians, like me, who are seeking to synthesize their non-Christian religious experience in terms of a distinctly Christian identity.
13. It is not necessary to demonize non-Christian religions in order to secure the truth of Christian faith.
14. The religious ferment currently brewing in African societies, often side by side with cultural trends rooted in modern scientific developments, highlights the need for an alternative conception of the idea of a secular society—one that is neither intrinsically religiously neutral nor hostile to religion.

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