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MODELS OF CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN CHRISTOLOGIES IN AFRICAN THEOLOGY

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Abstract

Christianity has existed in Nigeria for more than one hundred and thirty-nine years as in other African countries. Yet the attitude of Christians seems to prove that Christianity is only skin deep. The extent of Christian presence in most African countries is not reflected in the moral situation of the African society. Recently, there seem to be a resurgence of neo-paganism mainly among the youth as seen in some African countries like Nigeria. All these testify to the fact that the real meaning of Christian life is not yet properly understood by the people. Invariably, this means that people have not properly understood Christ, His person and His teaching. In order to achieve our purpose, the researcher employed the culture area method and analytical method in approaching the research topic, the Models of African Christologies. The researcher found out that two models of African Christologies, namely ancestral model of African Christology and non-ancestral model are elements that are derived from categories which are authentically African and speak immediately to the African's consciousness. Trying to understand Christ through the African lens will really help Africans to comprehend Christ better.

Keywords: Christianity, Models, Contemporary African Christology, African Worldview.

Introduction

Jesus Christ posed the definitive Christological question when he challenged his disciples: "Who do you say that I am?" (Mark 8:29). This important question has been the leaven determining the quest to compose a coherent image of *Jesus.* The result, at least in Western and Eastern Christianity, is a *credo* of meticulously and systematically formulated Christological titles and doctrines which have endured for several centuries.

This Christological quest has not been absent in the perspective of the still nascent African theology and Christianity. African Christians continue to grope for an appropriate Christological identity which can effectively lend support to their profession of faith, which faith is confronted with the challenges of African traditions, cultures and customs.

The pertinence of this Christological quest cannot be underestimated. Not only is it central to the issues of faith in Africa, it also constitutes the pivotal concern of majority of contemporary African theologians. Simply put: the African theologian is summoned to ask whether the received Christological formulas "can be translated into concepts that can be understood in African cultures whose worldviews have been strongly influenced by African traditional religion and its New World descendants ... Or might there be alternative doctrines of Christ's divinity and humanity that move outside these metaphysical boundaries of a Christology that furthers a God who is Greek?"(Hood, 1990: 152). Thus, the African Christological question is

a challenge and a quest to discover an authentic and meaningful African face of Jesus Christ that will respond to questions posed by Africans themselves (Bahemuka, 1989).

The result of their quest is a striking litany of Christological titles, models and proposals; along with an extensive job description for the African Christ: Christ as ancestor, healer, chief, guest, liberator, warrior, initiator, mediator, and so on. Expectedly, this mosaic is far from presenting a uniform face of Christ in Africa. Hence, no African Christological model can make any pretention to absolutism.

The deciding criterion, according to him, is the starting point of each Christology: Some begin by examining scriptural and Christological elements which are then marched with "relevant christological themes" discovered in the African cultural experience. Others adopt the reverse approach (Nyamiti, 1991).

What African Christologists are engaged in is the arduous and imperative task of developing a clear conception of the person of Jesus Christ. Simply put: they seek to make Jesus Christ feel at home within the framework of the ordinary experience of African Christians. This preoccupation is evidenced by the nature of the models employed. The common element one discovers in these models is the fact that they are derived from categories which are authentically African and speak immediately to the African's consciousness. We shall now consider three Christological proposals which draw upon familiar African images and symbolism.

1. Ancestral African Christologies

1.1. Christ as the Ancestor

The concept of ancestor is one that is familiar to many Africans. The category of ancestor is authentically African. There exists what some African Christologists refer to as *ancestral Christology*. Since only a few examples will suffice, we shall limit ourselves to a brief consideration of the ancestral model as elaborated by its two most prominent proponents, Charles Nyamiti and Benezet Bujo.

The pivotal concept of Nyamiti's proposal is the concept of "brother-ancestor" which he defines as "a relative of a person with whom he has a common parent, and of whom he is mediator to God, archetype of behavior and with whom --thanks to the supernatural status acquired through death – he is entitled to have regular sacred communication" (Nyamiti, 1984: 23).

In this definition are to be found the five essential traits of African ancestorship: a natural consanguineous or non-consanguineous relationship with the living members of his/her family, clan or community, which is undiminished in death; a metaphysical proximity to God following death which facilitates, thirdly, his/her mediatory role on behalf of the living family or clan members and allows, fourthly, an entitlement to mandatory and regular communication and consultation (invocation, libation, ritual offerings, etc) with the living. Finally, based on the ancestor's exemplary life on earth he/she becomes a model of good living for the entire family and community of the living (Nyamiti, 1984).

In Nyamiti's mind, the parallelism between African ancestorship and Christ's brother-ancestorship is undeniable. Structurally they are the same: Christ meets all the prerequisite conditions for the former and, therefore qualifies to be a brother-ancestor in the African conception of the term. As he affirms: "Christ realized in Himself - at least in principle - all that this definition (of brother-ancestor) entails" (Nyamiti, 1984: 35).

There is, however, a considerable difference between both conceptions. Considering Christ's personality and divinity, his ancestorship subsumes and eminently transcends the restricted and common notion of brother-ancestorship. The ancestral values found in or sought after in African ancestorship are eminently found in Christ. Indeed, our Savior's ancestorship is the "perfect accomplishment of its African pendant" (Nyamiti, 1984: 85). Christ is no longer an ancestor among many others. But the universal Brother-Ancestor *par excellence* "of whom the African ancestors are but poor and faint images" (Nyamiti, 1984: 70).

1.2. Christ as the Proto - Ancestor

Benezet Bujo's approach manifests traits similar to Nyamiti's conception of *ancestral christology*, but he bases his proposal on the concept of "proto-ancestorship." The notion and practice of ancestrology in Africa, according to Bujo, is a ritual enactment of the ingrained belief in the nature of life-force guaranteed by the bond which unites the dead and the living. What the African seeks in the cult of the ancestors is not merely a commemoration of the dead. More importantly he or she seeks a *communion* with the living-dead. This communion is at once narrative, soteriological and eschatological (Bujo, 1992: 22-23).

Taking a retrospective look at the life of Jesus, one discovers that through his mission and ministry he clearly identifies with the soteriological role of the African ancestors. The most important dimension of this role requires the ancestor to be the source of life to all the descendants of the living-dead. Since Christ realizes this ancestor ideal in the "highest degree," elevating it to a superior level of "new fulfillment," it becomes inadequate to consider Christ as an ancestor among many others. He is the "Proto-Ancestor":

> This signifies that Jesus did not only realize the authentic ideal of the God-fearing African ancestors, but also infinitely transcended that ideal and brought it to a new completion ... Jesus Christ is the ultimate embodiment of all the virtues of the ancestors. Further still, Jesus is the Proto-Ancestor, the Proto-Life-Force, bearer in a transcendent form of the primitive 'vital union' and 'vital force' (Bujo, 1992: 80-81).

1.3. Christ as the Chief

Another prominent African Christological proposal is the model of Christ as Chief. The 'traditional' role of Christ as king (the other roles being priest and prophet) and certain scriptural designations of Christ (Royal Son of David, King of the Jews, *Kyrios*) provide the basis for such Christological models which emphasize the chieftaincy of Christ.

In the African conception the ordinary denotation of the term chief is, "someone who holds some authority and who governs a part of the people" (Kabasele, 1991: 104). His functions cover a vast designation of duties. In general, he constitutes the primary locus of the collective identity of the community whom, by virtue of his authority, he protects and holds in constant cohesion. This function is not purely political; it overlaps with the religious functions which

qualify the chief to be a mediator between the people and the deity while presiding over ritual celebrations. His relationship with the deity, as this latter's "anointed one," helps to legitimize his position of power and authority in the community. And as one vested with authority, the chief defends and protects his people and provides the needed context favorable to the increase of the communal life-force that is transmitted from one generation to the other (Kabasele, 1991).

The methodology of African Christologists who propose this model does not differ radically from that of the proceeding proposals. Having examined the traditional conception of chieftaincy, proponents of the chief paradigm conclude that the person of Christ is the one who eminently merits the application of the title of "chief." He is the real and only king and ruler: "The prerogatives of a Bantu chief are seen to have been fully realized by Jesus Christ. Power belongs superlatively to Jesus Christ because he is a mighty hero, because he is the chief's son and the chief's emissary, because he is 'strong,' because he is generous, wise, and is counselor of human beings" (Kabasele, 1991: 105).

1.4. Christ as the Guest

One of the latest African Christological proposals is Christ-as-Guest. So far, the only proponent of this model is Enyi B. Udoh. He affirmed that Christianity is a "guest religion" in Africa. This signifies that as a way of life it surfaced as a meaningful alternative among the African peoples who are long used to other equally meaningful ways of life. If Christianity is a guest religion, *afortiori*, its single most important personality, Jesus Christ, is a guest in Africa. This is the starting thesis of Guest Christology: "Jesus Christ is first and foremost a guest in Africa" (Udoh, 1988: 87).

Unfortunately, as guest or alien in Africa, Jesus Christ has not always enjoyed a good reputation. Given the hermeneutics of the Scripture adopted by some of the early Missionaries and these latter methods of "enforcing" belief in the Christ, the image of Jesus Christ invariably became deficient. Jesus Christ is not only a stranger to Africa; also, he cuts the image of someone whose domineering presence and thrust upends the accepted patterns of behavior and outlook of the Africans (Udoh, 1988).

One of the central preoccupations of guest Christology is to resolve the problematic element of Christ's presence. If Jesus Christ is to be accepted and proclaimed Lord and King of all, he must first be welcomed and *initiated* to Africa as a guest. To facilitate his acceptance as guest, a few requirements must be met which are in keeping with the status of guest in Africa.

In the first place, a guest cannot be a guide. He/she is nescient of the worldview of the host culture, and is in dire need of initiation into the patterns of thought and ways of proceeding of his host. Consequently, any claim to divine estate by the guest would amount to a display of arrogance which could further deepen the gulf separating the guest and the host.

This, precisely, defines the first step of Guest Christology: Christ-the-guest must take the *kenotic* step of relinquishing his claim to divinity. For the Africans, he cannot be man, one among them as guest, and yet claim to be God. Thus, he is accepted as a human person, and his humanity is a declaration of intent: he is an alien, liable to commit errors, but errors from which he is exonerated on the basis of his lack of full familiarity with his host culture. There

is an obvious advantage to Christ's guest status: "It offers him a world of possibilities from which he may choose freely and responsibly. Besides, the guest status of Christ offers us the most adequate prerequisite for his leadership or saving role" (Udoh, 1988: 229).

The locus of Christ's welcome and entrance as guest is the family. For the Africans, the family is the single most important institution. It defines the life of an African as a relational being in an extended and extensive community, comprising the living and the living-dead. More importantly, for guest Christology, it also serves as the entry point which opens up to a larger complex entity that includes homesteads, kin, clan, state, nation and race. It is here, also, that the rite of welcome (for example, the kola-nutrite) and naturalization is celebrated. To say that Christ enters through the family is to say that he enters *from below,* a dynamic milieu wherein the commonality of the constituent members and their diversity are dialectically embraced and effectively harmonized (Udoh, 1988).

Guest Christology argues that if Christ is accepted and welcomed as guest in and through the family, his status is no longer that of a mere alien or stranger. The cultural initiation which he has undergone alters his alien status and transforms him into a respectable citizen. In other words, he moves to the post-ritual phase of kin where his capital concern is not to destabilize the host culture, but to relate to it and participate in it as a co-sharer in its history and destiny, because his "initiation puts him on equal footing with us, not only as completely human but also as one with whom we share a common history and destiny" (Udoh, 1988: 243).

The acceptance of Jesus Christ as one among us – through the process of introduction, initiation and naturalization – does not constitute the ultimate goal of this process. The climax of this process is his elevation to the status of Lord and Savior of and by his host community. Apparently, this elevation becomes the logical consequence of Christ's prior *kenotic* act: he now takes up his divine estate (which he previously had to strip himself of to become one like us). Through the culturally sanctioned channels of initiation, he is thus proclaimed as the ultimate head of the family, lives and deliberations; a "master-builder" and "life-giver" of *all* Africans, who consent to welcoming him as a humble and unpretentious guest (Udoh, 1988).

2. Non Ancestral African Christologies

The second strand in African Inculturation Christologies is non-ancestral Christologies. The proponents of this strand explore to the mystery of Christ in non-ancestral terms, but with the object of doing a contextual and relevant Christology for their respective peoples. An example is K.A. Kubi, whose Christological functionalities have Jesus as Mediator, Liberator, Healer, Saviour, Power, and Redeemer, amongst others (Kubi. 1976).

A.T. Sanon uses the African understanding of initiation rituals and biblical teachings to identify Jesus with the Head and Master of initiation. Anne Nasimiyu-Wasike points out that Christ the healer, as a Christological model, is much closer to the African reality where the need to eradicate suffering is paramount. Other proponents of non-ancestral African Inculturation Christology include: Takatso Mafokeng, Zablon Nthamburi, and P.N. Wachege, amongst others.

2.1. Christ as the Liberator

Takatso Mafokeng, one of the chief proponents of Black Christology in South Africa, presents Jesus Christ as "the answer to the South African quest and hunger for freedom and complete emancipation from the shackles of apartheid" (Wachege, 1991: 177). Certainly, 'Christ the liberator' is central to the Black theology of South Africa. As Allan Boesak says: "God's love is an active deed of liberation manifested in divine power" (Boesak, 1977: 95). Writing before apartheid was dismantled in 1994, Boesak expresses the conviction of Black Christology in South Africa that the gospel is not silent on the issue of oppression.

Others within Black Christology category in South Africa include Manas Buthelezi and M.G. Motlhabi. As noted, they portray Jesus Christ as the ideal liberator from the shackles of apartheid. Their Christologies, thus, are centered on the black experiences.

The other category of liberation Christologies in Africa are the Christologies that incorporate the theme of liberation not only in the political issues but also in other cultural elements. These views imply that inculturation in African theology is not the only requirement for an ongoing incarnation of the gospel and of Jesus Christ in the world, for if there is a 'priestly' dimension of the image of Christ as healer, there is certainly a 'prophetic' dimension to Christ as the liberator. For just as religion and society could not be separated in Christ's world, so likewise in Africa religion, as religion is coterminous with life (Waruta, 1998).

2.2. Christ as the Restorer

As the restorer, Jesus calls his disciples' attention to the harmony, form and beauty found in the lilies to which no human splendour could equal even that of King Solomon (Matthew 6:28–29). He was aware of the sufferings that the people endured at the hostility of nature.

He is also aware of and understands the sufferings of Africans today (Nasimiyu-Wasike, 1998). That is, drought, floods and famine are harsh realities, which have claimed millions of African people. Christ who rebuked winds and ordered harmony and tranquility to be restored (Mark 4: 35–45) is the one who will restore peace and harmony to the African continent and to the world at large.

2.3. Christ as the Healer

As the healer, Jesus heals individuals and societies of men and women. In his cure of the paralytic, he says, 'my son, your sins are forgiven … stand up, take your bed and go home' (Mark 2: 5–11). In Matthew 9:27–29, we find a similar situation. Jesus the healer restored the vision of the two blind men after they affirmed that they believed in the power possessed by Christ. He touched their eyes, saying, 'According to your faith be it done to you'.

Healing needs not imply only personal needs and, in an African context, always implies something communal. Seen in this light, African nations have been injured by the effects of colonisation, slave trade, the post-colonial formation of the nation-states, neo-colonialism's - economic dependency, intertribal violence and war, the corruption of many post-independence national leaders, endless wars, civil wars, poverty, racism, manipulations by the industrialised world, political mismanagement, religious intolerance, unjust international

economic systems, human-made environmental crises amongst others (Nthamburi,1991). With all these injuries, is Christ not what Africa needs than ever before?

2.4. Christ as the Cultural Reconstructionist

As the cultural reconstructionist, Christ becomes the Lord of culture, the culture itself, and even transcends it as He transforms it (Niebuhr, 1951). To crown it all, He teaches contextually by relating the message to the particular Jewish culture in the imperialistic Graeco-Roman setting. He gives, for instance, a contextual example of Jews and Samaritans, to show the ethnic prejudice between the two (Luke 10:25–37).

In so doing, He teaches us about good neighbourliness through addressing the cultural differences that existed between the Jews and her neighbours and shows how racism, tribalism and xenophobia, which are thorny issues in Africa, can be eradicated by changing our definition and attitude towards our fellow members of the human society (Luke 10:25–37) – the neighbours.

Interestingly, he instructs his audience to go and do likewise, thereby, making it official not only to see our fellow members of the humanity as neighbours who should always strive to shore up one another in time of need but also to be proud of our cultural backgrounds and diversities. To this end, the disciples were not expected to denounce their cultural heritage. Rather, they were to learn to assert their heritage with due care and consideration of the cultures and religions of those to whom they preached. As in the case of Christ, St. Paul used the same approach with regard to the people he evangelised in the Mediterranean region (Acts 17:22–34, Acts 19, 20). Without abandoning his Jewish heritage, he demonstrated how thoroughly and constructively he appreciated the people's cultures.

3. Evaluation

Positive Aspects

1. These and other related Christologies are indications on how seriously our Saviour and Redeemer Jesus Christ is taken in respective African cultures;

2. They manifest an appreciation of the indispensable good aspects in our God-given cultures more so our cosmotheandric perception of being and beingness;

3. They are real efforts in actually doing African Christian Theology through the lenses of African modes of understanding and not just a mere talk of methods, problems and needs of doing such theology that remain at prolegomenon level;

4. The very bold fact of systematically and creatively employing intrinsic use of African elements and not merely giving parallels and differences is commendable.

Negative Aspects

1. Some of them do not adequately manifest serious anthropological research of their respective ethnic groups they opt for;

2. Poor commitment to intellectual demands imposed on this kind of work, employing solid metaphysics - apart from scholars like Charles Nyamiti and Benezet Bujo - results in superficial Christologies;

3. There is a need for an inter-disciplinary approach to make some of this Christologies deeper and broader;

4. Judging by the measure that theology should be pastoral, as a result of the above limitations, most of this Christologies are not pastoral enough.

5. As a result, they risk equating Christ to the attributes they identify Him with, which He of course surpasses super-eminently, thereby (though un-intended) resulting in unlawful mixture technically called syncretism.

4. Conclusion

The problematic element in the African religious experience is the "Christian Christ". Thus, the crisis of faith, as evidenced by the inability' of the African Christian to give full and effective allegiance to this Christ, is first and foremost a Christological problem. The question is: Who is Jesus Christ for the African?

The quest to resolve this quandary has yielded promising Christological models and proposals which seek to discover and present an authentically African face of Jesus. While some of these are potentially relevant to the positive growth of Christianity in Africa, others fail to bear up under strict scrutiny.

This paper has tried to present some of the models of contemporary African Christology in African Theologies. It presented both the ancestral and non-ancestral African Christologies. It attempted a general evaluation of the models of African Christology presented, noting their collective positive and negative points.

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