

## **African Christology from an African Christian Theological Perspective**

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### ABSTRACT

*African Christology is one of the trending theological issues in African Christian Theology (ACT). ACT views, presents and interprets Christianity through the perception, objectives, cosmologies of the African. African Christian theologians believe that Western theology does not properly interpret the Bible in the context of African religio-cultural understanding. As such, these theologians have been formulating their own theological views and understandings to address African religious, cultural and social concerns. African theologians believe that Christ is the saviour of the world who should be studied without being limited to a particular culture, nation, ethnicity or gender. In that regard, to a greater extent, African theologians are trying to answer questions that Africans are asking in their Christologies. Christ has been compared and contrasted using African symbols and familiar concepts. The results of African theologians responding to the challenge of constructing an African contextual Christology has been impressive and fruitful.*

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## Introduction

In general, African Christian Theology (ACT) is the views, presentation and specific interpretation of the Christianity in light with the needs, objectives, worldview, and intellect of the African. In that regard, African Christian theology has been in existence since the advent and enterprise of early Euro-American missionaries and colonial administrations. In particular, ACT is understood as the methodological and scientific perception, production, and propagation of the Christian faith in the context of the Africans' understandings, needs, objectives, and cosmologies.

However, it is believed that the Bible must be the standard by which these concerns and issues are to be interpreted and understood. The Bible I believe should speak to our culture. ACT must use the Bible as its basis in addressing the issues and traditions of Africa.

In ACT there are numerous trending issues all of which cannot be discussed in a paper of this scope. I will prefer to write on African Christology from an African Christian theological perspective.

## Advent and Development of African Christology

Scholarly works detailing the development of Christology in Africa are numerous; however, some of the more prominent contributions, as well as those that shape the Christological discussion, are compiled in *Faces of Jesus in Africa*,<sup>2</sup> *Jesus in African Christianity*,<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Robert J. Schreiter, ed., *Faces of Jesus in Africa* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991). This work contains eleven essays which present some of the faces of Jesus and how Africans are responding to Christ who encounters their cultures.

<sup>3</sup> J. N. N. Mugambi and Laurenti Magesa, eds., *Jesus in African Christianity: Experimentation and Diversity in African Christology* (Nairobi: Initiative, 1989). This book looks into the personal experience and understanding of the encounter of Jesus by the African

*Exploring Afro-Christology*,<sup>4</sup> *Towards African Theology*, *Jesus in Africa Culture* and "*Christology from an African Perspective*"<sup>7</sup> and *Conversion and Contextual Conceptions of Christ*.<sup>8</sup>

African Christian theologians believe that Western theology does not properly interpret the Bible in context with African religio-cultural understanding. In that regard, these theologians have been formulating their own theological views and understandings to address African religious, cultural and social concerns.

In reference to the preaching of the missionaries, J.V. Taylor states:

Christ has been presented as the answer to the questions a white man would ask, the solution to the needs that Western man would feel, the Saviour of the world of the European world-view, the object of the adoration and prayer of historic Christendom. But if Christ were to appear as the answer to the questions that Africans are asking, what would he look like?<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> John Pobee, ed., *Exploring Afro-Christology* (Frankfurt: Lang, 1992). This book contains essays portraying the African perspectives of Jesus.

<sup>5</sup> John Pobee, *Towards an African Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979). The Africans have sufficient understanding to formulate their theologies that are devoid of Western influences.

<sup>6</sup> Kwame Bediako, *Jesus in African Culture: A Ghanaian Perspective* (Accra: Asempa, 1990). How Jesus is understood and theologised in the African culture is the focus of this work.

<sup>7</sup> Abraham Akrong, "Christology from an African Perspective," in *Exploring Afro-Christology*, edited by John Pobee, 119-36 (Frankfurt: Lang, 1992). Africans are capable of forming their own Christology influenced by their culture and predicaments.

<sup>8</sup> Carl Sundberg, *Conversion and Contextual Conceptions of Christ: A Missiological Study among Young Converts in Brazzaville, Republic of Congo* (Lund, Sweden: Team Offset & Media, 2000). This work emanates from a desire to understand how young urban converts from the Evangelical Church of Congo conceive of Jesus Christ. As such it is a study of religious experiences and beliefs in a specific context. Sundberg presents result of a field research on conversion motifs and contextual statements about Jesus, carried out among young people in six urban parishes in Brazzaville, during two fieldwork periods.

<sup>9</sup> J. V. Taylor, *The Primal Vision, Christian Presence amid African Religion* (London: SCM Press, 1963), 16.

Taylor's question, "... if Christ were to appear as the answer to the questions that Africans are asking, what would he look like?" is to a greater extent what African Christian theologians are trying to answer in their Christologies. In that respect, scholars have compared and contrasted the ministry and work of Jesus with African traditional healers . Jesus<sup>10</sup> is referred to as "the great ancestor, our ancestor par excellence" and "an intermediary spirit between God and people;"<sup>11</sup> he is referred to as: "Ancestor/Proto<sup>12</sup> Ancestor,"<sup>13</sup> ancestor' in fullness,"<sup>13</sup> an African "Priest",<sup>14</sup> and "Chief."<sup>15</sup>

African Christian theologians believe that Christ is the saviour of the world who should be studied without being limited to a particular culture, nation, ethnicity or gender. B. Diane Stinton states that "at the heart of Christian faith is the person of Jesus Christ. Consequently, the very core of Christian theology is Christology... in the ongoing development of Christian theology African accounts of Christology warrant careful consideration in view of Africa's prominent place in Christian history at the turn of the millennium."<sup>16</sup>

In Stinton's views, the seed of the gospel is planted in a completely different but fertile soil in Africa than in the West. African Religion, the place of ancestors, collective mentality, kinship and marriage, the challenge of sickness and death, poverty, slavery, and colonialism are the cultural contexts in which Jesus reveals himself to Africans. Hence, it is a different soil than the West. In contrast to what many Western theologians and mission experts thought, the indigenous African religion and the socio-economic context is a fertile soil for the gospel.

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<sup>10</sup> Aylward Shorter, *Jesus and the Witchdoctor: An Approach to Healing and Wholeness* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985).

<sup>11</sup> Z. Nthamburi, *African Church at the Crossroads: Strategy for Indigenisation* (Nairobi: Uzima Press, 1991), 61-64.

<sup>12</sup> Kwame Bediako, "Jesus in African Culture: A Ghanaian Perspective," in *Emerging Voices in Global Christian Theology*, edited by William A. Dryness, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 96-104.

<sup>13</sup> Sundberg, *Conversion and Contextual Conceptions of Christ*, 14.

<sup>14</sup> See Sundberg, *Conversion and Contextual Conceptions of Christ*, 22; Nthamburi, *African Church at the Crossroads*, 63.

<sup>15</sup> Bediako, "Jesus in African Culture," 106-10.

Stinton gives us the portrait of Jesus Christ in an African cultural context. She states: “the All African Conference of Churches (AACC), constituted in Kampala in 1963 in hope of achieving selfhood for the African church<sup>17</sup> and inspiring African theology, held an assembly in Abijan in 1969.” With regards to the "socio-political scene, African theology as an intellectual discipline arose during the 1950s, when the struggle against colonialism led to several newly independent states.”<sup>18</sup> Christ began to appear as the answer to the question of Africans in their context. He was no longer a messiah of the white man. He was seen as one who truly loved Africans, as such, Africans wanted Christ to be involved in their activities and circumstances.

Clifton R. Clarke in his in-depth study of the Akan African Independent Churches (AICs), discusses the ongoing dialogue among Pentecostals from the global South, who desire a Christology shaped in their image and not in the image of western Christianity.<sup>19</sup> He puts forward the fact that in the trending field of global Christian studies, personal experience and cultural environment are important in the interpretation of an authentic faith in the person of Jesus Christ. In the case of Akan AICs, Clarke shows how they retain aspects of their traditional religious worldviews while embracing the Christian faith.

The cultural and political revolutions that overtook Africa in the sixties were contributing factors to the development of African Christology. “To counter the disdain with local cultures had generally been held during colonial times. Africans made intensive efforts to reaffirm their identity and integrity in many spheres of life, including names, dress, music, dance forms, architecture, and indigenous expression affecting church life and practice.”<sup>20</sup>

According to Westerners, to be truly Christian, Africans must take biblical or Western names, dress in Western style attires, and churches were built in Western architectural style. The transplanted gospel in Africa produced the

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<sup>17</sup> Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*, 69.

<sup>18</sup> Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*, 7.

<sup>19</sup> Clifton R. Clarke, *African Christology: Jesus in Post-Missionary African Christianity* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick, 2011),

<sup>20</sup> Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*, 7.

Christ of the West who was not entrenched in African cosmologies. The missionaries were convinced it was a good way to plant Christianity by infusing European socio-cultural values in the minds of Africans under the influence of the colonialists. Unfortunately, the works of colonial masters and Western missionaries in Africa did not properly relay the biblical image of Christ as “a lamb slain for the sin of the world” (Rev 5:9-13), “the good shepherd who gives his life for the sheep” (John 10:14-15), “the wonderful counselor” (Isa.9:6), “the prince of peace” (Isa 9:6), “a brother” (Matt 12:49), etc. As such, Africans thought that “Christ entered the African scene as a forceful, impatient and unfriendly tyrant. He was presented as invalidating the history and institutions of a people in order to impose his rule upon them.”<sup>21</sup> It is no wonder then Nigerians were thinking of Christ for a long time as “merely a stranger,” “an illegal alien,” “a refugee, a dissident or a fugitive who in desperation has come to Africa for sanctuary,” or as “the most visible and publicized symbol of foreign domination ever.”<sup>22</sup>

As African scholars vigorously began to critique Christianity and missionary influences of the African church, Christology in the form of apologetic theology began to be developed by Africans. Preference was given to regenerating local cultures and to indigenizing mission churches within the wider context of African reformation in literature, philosophy, and history. African theologians like John Mbiti, Byang Kato, Kwame Bediako, Harry Sawyer, Fashole-Luke and others, argued that “Jesus Christ is not a stranger to [Africans’] heritage. Jesus is the *Universal* Savior and thus the Savior of the Africans. Through faith in Christ African believers now share in all promises made to the patriarchs and Israel, and the good news becomes ‘our story’.”<sup>23</sup> Through mother-tongue/vernacular scripture, contextualized theology, biblical teaching and preaching, and through indigenized worship, Christ has found home in Africa now.

### **From Christology to Christologies**

Most African theologians argue that since Christ is formed in the lives of

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21 Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*, 10.

22 Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*, 10.

23 Clarke, *African Christology*, 1-10.

24 Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*, 11; Clarke, *African Christology*, 1-2.

of Africans in various places, at different times, and in diverse human situations in Africa, we must consider a plurality of Christologies in Africa. The invariable dialogue between the biblical text and different contexts in Africa leads to different understandings and interpretations of Christ in the continent.<sup>25</sup> “A widespread methodological presupposition is that genuine Christological reflection cannot be separated from Africa’s socio-political, religio-cultural and economic contexts—this is the real and concrete everyday experience within which we Christologize.”<sup>26</sup>

By intentionally deviating “from the approaches of the dominant theologies of the West, a theology that arises from and is accountable to African people”<sup>27</sup> is developed. This theology does not view Christ as an abstract construct. Christologies are formulated in order for the Christian faith to appropriately address the varied contextual situations. “For the gospel to preserve its vitality and wholeness, theology needs the reflection of the people committed to Christian practice in a particular cultural context. Orthodoxy should not be divorced from orthopraxis because it demonstrates the Christ who was<sup>28</sup> “powerful in word and deed before God and all the people” (Luke 24:19).

Clarke constructs his Christology using source material specific to Akan AICs, including the Bible, hymns and songs, prayers, personal testimonies, and sermons. Through a methodology based on questionnaires, focus group sessions, and interviews with leaders and lay people, Clarke appropriates the primary mode of expressing religious sentiments - oral theology. He defines oral theology as the “encounter of God through the language that is heard and spoken by the visible and invisible participations

of the African universe.”<sup>29</sup> The recognition of Akan oral theology by the Catholic Church is also an acknowledgement of the rich heritage and traditions of AICs.

In contrast to a formal propositional Christology, Clarke’s oral Christology is based on the African encounter with God through language.

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<sup>25</sup> Clarke, *African Christology*, 9-10.

<sup>26</sup> Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*, 16.

<sup>27</sup> Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*, 16.

<sup>28</sup> Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*, 17.

<sup>29</sup> Clarke, *African Christology*, 132.

Theological reflections are interactive and dynamic, occurring within and outside of the Church. The voices of African proverbs, myths, names, songs, stories, folklore and biblical texts serve to express the activity of God, Jesus and humanity in the overarching realm of visible and invisible realities. Clarke's study reveals crucial areas of an Akan traditional religious ethos: *Onyame* ("God"), *Sunsum* ("Spirit"), *Abosom* ("lower spirits"), *Nananom* ("Ancestors"), and "symbolic power." The notion of Christ however, does not have a clear correlation with an Akan indigenous worldview. Without an adequate concept of Christ, what are the implications for the Christology of Akan AICs? Would the AICs seek to understand *Yesu Kristo* as *Sunsum*, a Spirit made flesh or incarnate, who is ultimately from *Onyame*?

Another area of concern addressed by Clarke is the connection between culture and religion. He argues that the Christology of Akan AICs maintains a vital, reciprocal relationship between an authentic Christian faith and traditional African culture. His analysis calls for the removal of western theological lenses so that the theology and praxis of the Church at large – and the African church in particular – can be heard in their various contexts. The term "inculturation," favored by Clarke and other theologians, means the "on-going creative and dynamic relationship between Jesus Christ and culture."<sup>30</sup>

## **Conclusion**

African Christologies are present and trending. The search and arguments on the issues will linger for a very long time. Missiological issues of culture and religion, inclusion and exclusion, universality and particularity will continue to be debated. The gospel proclaimed and received by people in varied contexts and situations, is understood and digested differently by different individuals, depending on the context of reception and their motivations for accepting the gospel.

The quest for relevant Christologies is to make the message of the gospel relevant and contextual to the African. African theologians are maintaining the view that Western theology does not adequately interpret the Bible in concepts and cosmologies that adequately address the African context.

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<sup>30</sup> Clarke, *African Christology*, 10.



This precipitated and propelled African theologians to develop their own culture specific theology to enable them examine their theological quest in light of the African political, educational, religious and social factors. The results of African theologians responding to the challenge of constructing an African contextual Christology has been impressive and fruitful <sup>31</sup>.

Christ among Africans is viewed as “life-giver”, “mediator”, “loved one”, and “leader.”<sup>32</sup> The Jesus of Africa is the Jesus of the poor and the rejected. By destroying various walls of partitions in Africa he can be a reconciler. In a continent that is prone to chaos, war and bloodshed, he can be a prince of peace.

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<sup>31</sup> Clarke, African Christology, 2.

<sup>32</sup> Stinton, Jesus of Africa, 250-66.

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