

## Introduction

### The Paradigm Shift

CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY IS GRADUALLY becoming a non-Western theological exercise. This shift has also become paradigmatic and defining for the future of Christianity since numerical and qualitative growth of Christianity is taking place away from areas which are traditionally labeled as the “hinterland” of Christianity. Underscoring this new situation, Philip Jenkins, in his thought-provoking studies of global Christianity, has described Christianity in the non-Western regions of Asia, Latin America, and Africa as the “Next Christendom.”<sup>1</sup> This description envisaged that the next major theological discussions and decisions are going to take place within these regions. Concerning the defining role of African Christianity in this “Next Christendom,” Andrew F. Walls described African Christianity as “*the* representative Christianity of the twenty-first century”<sup>2</sup> because “what happens within the African churches in the next generation will determine the whole shape of church history for centuries to come . . .” and “what sort of theology is more characteristic of Christianity in the twenty-first century may well depend on what has happened in the minds of African Christians.”<sup>3</sup> Walls further observed, “A high proportion of the world’s serious theological thinking and writing will

1. Jenkins, *The Next Christendom*, 3.
2. Walls, “Africa in Christian History,” 2.
3. Walls, “Towards an Understanding of Africa’s Place,” 183.

have to be done in Africa if it is to be done at all.”<sup>4</sup> Similarly, T. C. Tennent has also noted that “At the dawn of the twenty-first century, the typical ‘face’ of Christianity may more likely be encountered in Lagos than in London.”<sup>5</sup> These different observations reveal the defining nature of African Christianity and the attending importance of its theological thinking. Consequently, it is needful to understand Christian theology particularly in the context of the African worldviews and religious traditions since these categories gave African Christianity its unique regional stamp. This consideration places the onus of Christian theology to engage as well as interact with the formidable cultural determinants that appear to make Christian theology at home with the African people. The great reception accorded to Christianity by traditional African society implies that Christianity and traditional African religious categories already shares a defining continuity rather than superficial discontinuity, thus Christian theology must seek to understand the various cultural and religious forms that make such continuity possible. In addition, Christian theology must also seek to understand the force of the so-called superficial discontinuities in order to create a lasting home for Christianity on the African continent. Such concern of Christian theology is predicated on the urgent need to do a “self-theologizing” or re-evaluation of classical Christian theology in light of the dominant African religious worldviews and traditions in order to create a self-defining theology that is grounded in the Scriptures but which also has the unique engraving of the African people. Interestingly, it was such “self-theologizing” that was deemed absent at the beginning of African reflection on Christian theology. Thus for example, in the early seventies John Mbiti categorically observed that the African church is “without a theology, without theologians, and without theological concerns.”<sup>6</sup> Idowu Bolaji described the same situation when he also said that African Christianity has “a prefabricated theology, a book theology . . . what she reads in books written by European theologians. . .” and “what she is told by Europeans is accepted uncritically and given out undigested in preaching or teaching.”<sup>7</sup> Similarly, the theological discourse of those times is characterized by unhealthy reactionary to Western misrepresentations of African cultures and traditions, which

4. Ibid., 182.

5. Tennent, *Theology in the Context*, 105.

6. Mbiti, “Some African Concepts of Christology,” 51.

7. Idowu, *Towards an Indigenous Church*, 22.

normally failed to engage positively the African traditions in creative theological reconstructions to the biblical or classical Christian teachings. Signaling the era of new creative engagement of the African traditions and Christian theology, Kwame Bediako rightly noted,

The era of African theological literature as reaction to Western misrepresentation is past. What lies ahead is a critical theological construction which will relate more fully the widespread African confidence in the Christian faith to the actual and ongoing Christian responses to the life-experiences of Africans.<sup>8</sup>

After these initial setbacks, the dialogue between Christian theology and the African people has generally continued and hence given rise to the present record of Christian growth on the continent. We must underscore the merits and demerits of this encounter between Christianity and the African traditions for the benefit of the universal church. It appears that now we have gone beyond the past stage of mere criticism towards the actual engagement of the traditions of the African people in tandem with Christian theology. In particular, this chapter looks at the relationship between Christian theology and the African continent. It also highlights the close connection between the African continent and Christian theology, the basic constitutions of the Christian faith and the nature of African traditions.

## Christian Theology and the African Continent

Christian theology has a long history of association with the African continent. This association goes back to the second century in the planting of the church at Egypt, and subsequently in the founding of churches at Numidia, Nubia, and Abyssinia in third to fourth centuries respectively. The names Numidia, Nubia and Abyssinia may be unknown to some readers because these great African kingdoms, apart from Ethiopia, have now disappeared from the pages of world history and have been replaced by the Arab nations of Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, and Sudan. However, despite the obscurity of this heritage, these great Christian kingdoms practiced Christianity and provided theology for the universal church when Europe was still roaming in barbarism and the Western church was merely a footnote in theological debates of those times. Underscoring the significant

8. Bediako, "Understanding African Theology," 17.

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role played by the African continent in the shaping of Christianity, B. B. Warfield rightly noted,

It is from African soil, enriched by African intellect, watered by African blood, that the tree of Western Christianity has grown up until it has become a resting-place for the nations of the earth. If we abjure speculation upon what might have been on this or that supposition, and give attention purely to what actually has been and is, we must need confess that there is a true sense in which North Africa is the mother of us all. Christianity is what it is today, in all its fruitful branches at least, because of what North Africa was a millennium and a half ago, and because of what was done and thought and felt there. The very language in which it still defines its doctrines and gives expression to its devotion is of African origin; and the doctrines and aspirations themselves bear ineffaceably impressed upon their very substance the African stamp.<sup>9</sup>

It is from this close connection between Christianity and the African continent that Mbiti significantly observed, “Christianity in Africa is so old that it can rightly be described as an indigenous, traditional and African religion.”<sup>10</sup> However, despite this defining relationship between the continent of Africa and Christianity often Christianity is viewed as a newcomer to the African continent. We often hear the quick association of Christianity as a “Western religion” and thus unfit for the African people. This description of Christianity as a “Western religion” usually comes from the oversight in seeing Christianity as just coming to Africa during the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century missionary enterprise to Africa from the West. For many Africans, this is the only history of African Christianity known. Unfortunately, such treatment of Christianity as a “newcomer” on the African continent often distorted the theological strides registered by the African continent in defining and shaping Christian thought in earlier times. Describing his indebtedness to Christian theology of this earlier time, Thomas Oden has brilliantly asserted,

The same point applies to the inestimable African tradition of Christian theology. Anyone who reads these pages will quickly see how deeply indebted I am to the early tradition of African Christianity—few authors will be referred to more often than Athanasius, Augustine, Origen, Clement of Alexandria,

9. Warfield, “Africa and Christian Latin Literature,” 518.

10. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 229.

Tertullian, and Cyprian. I am especially troubled when Christianity is portrayed as an essentially European religion, since it has its roots in cultures that are far distant from Europe and preceded the development of modern European identity, and some of its greatest minds have been African.<sup>11</sup>

Unfortunately, Athanasius, Augustine, Origen, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, and Cyprian have been de-Africanized and now Westernized, thus their contributions in the field of Christian theology are presumed to be the initiatives of Western Christianity. To counteract this Westernizing agenda of Western theological academia, Oden has even went further to describe the contribution of African Christianity in the shaping of Western civilization in a thought-provoking piece of work, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind*. This work generally aims at a “rediscovery of how the African continent provided the ‘seedbed’ for Western Christianity.”<sup>12</sup> The preceding historical references to the greatness of African Christianity and its defining part in the shaping of Christian theology in the past naturally creates the need for Christian theology to become at home in a continent that has continually wrestled, debated, and formed theological opinions on the essence of the Christian religion. Describing the exploits of this African Christianity, Mbiti also observed,

African Christianity made a great contribution to Christendom through scholarship, participation in church councils, defence of the faith, movements like monasticism, theology, translation and preservation of the Scriptures, martyrdom, the famous catechetical school of Alexandria, liturgy, and even heresies and controversies.<sup>13</sup>

From this rich historical heritage, it is expected that Christian theology would be a familiar subject on the minds of many African people, however, on the contrary, African people as well as African Christians are still groping in the dark to understand the true essence of the Christian faith. Consequently, the concern of the present work is to describe the engagement of some basic teachings of the Christian faith and the African traditions. It underscores the problems of such engagement or encounter. Similarly, it provides light and clarification between these two systems.

11. Oden, *The Living God*, 9.

12. Oden, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind*, 42–61.

13. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 229.

## The Christian Faith

The use of this label is to describe the basic teachings of the Christian church particularly as reflected in the pages of the Bible. These teachings form the core of the Christian religion. It is the essence of Christian thought. The church had at various times conceived its faith in the form of creeds,<sup>14</sup> thus we have the Apostles' creed, the Nicene creed, the Chalcedonian creed, the Athanasian creed, and other variants of these creedal affirmations.<sup>15</sup> In these creeds, there is a consistent emphasis on the oneness of God, the Trinitarian character of the divine being, the virgin birth, the death and suffering of Jesus Christ, his resurrection and exaltation, his second coming, the judgment of the world, the resurrection of the saints, salvation, the founding of the church, the communion of the saints, and the expectation of a future life in the world to come. Historically, it is these basic teachings which have defined the Christian faith and give the Christian religion its unique character. Unfortunately, these distinctive Christian emphases are often missing in modern church worship. To this end, Gerald Bray has rightly observed,

The confusion and uncertainty surrounding our public worship has its roots in a widespread failure to appreciate the importance of Christian doctrine. The modern church has been so concerned to extol the virtue of love that it has ignored the claims of truth, and conservatives too have fallen into this trap. Our churches can proclaim a gospel which often is grounded in personal experience and is only vaguely related to theological principle. . . . Conservative Christians cannot escape from the charge that they have replaced instruction in the things of God with religious entertainment, and that the doctrinal backbone to their preaching is decidedly weak. Many have no idea that creeds and confessions are an essential aid to Christian growth, and that the quality of our spiritual life is directly dependent on our understanding of spiritual truth. They do not know that the great centuries of the Church have been marked not by an aversion to doctrine and theological controversy, but by a passion for these things. Of course, controversy can be unpleasant and divisive, but the New Testament is full of it, and the great arguments of the past have seldom diminished our respect for the truths for which men fought and died.<sup>16</sup>

14. Demarest, "Creeds," 179.

15. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1168–1207.

16. Bray, *Creeds, Councils and Christ*, 9.

Thus in talking about the Christian faith in this book we are engaging these basic teachings in dialogue with African traditions. Generally speaking, the engagement of biblical teaching with the traditions of a given human context is not a new practice since there is precedence of this endeavor in the history of the Christian faith. In its quest to find a home among different people groups, the Christian faith has on many occasions engaged, challenged, and corrected the various traditions along its path.<sup>17</sup> For example, the Christian faith first sought a home within the cultural and religious matrix of the Jewish community of the first century. During this period, the apostles and the writer of the book of Hebrews sought to make Jesus Christ the fulfillment of the hopes and longings of the Jewish nation and people, thus Jesus Christ was defined in terms of Messiah, the expected Davidic King, and the high Priest which annulled the Aaronic priesthood. Later, through the itinerary preaching and missionary journeys of Paul, the Christian faith also sought a home within the context of the Greco-Roman world. This new context generally necessitated the need to explicate an originally Jewish teaching of Jesus into the world and thought of the Greco-Roman world, thus epistolary letters became generally the mode by which Paul sought to translate the significance of the Jewish gospel of Jesus Christ to the gentile world. Interestingly, even though the epistolary form of mediation for the inspired writing was something strange in the Hebrew canon of the Old Testament, Paul employed this mode to speak to the Greco-Roman world. In this temporal domain, the Christian faith engaged with the issues and concerns of the Greco-Roman world. After the hellenization of the Christian faith in these Greek-styled epistles, the Christian faith moved into the Western world, and has generally stayed there until recent times. During its sojourning in the Western world, the Christian faith has engaged the issues and concerns of the Western world. These concerns basically range from philosophical to scientific issues which the Christian faith addresses in order to remain relevant to the Western world. In all these encounters of the Christian faith with the new contexts, its creedal elements of faith have remarkably provided Christianity with its continuous unique identity despite the precarious task of adjusting or translating its message to a new setting as it seeks eternally to find a new home in different cultures.

In the same quest to engage the African continent, since the coming of Christianity to Africa, the Christian faith has continually sought to engage the worldviews and traditions of the African people. In

17. Walls, *The Missionary Movement*, 1.

contemporary times, the greatest challenge faced by the Christian faith is the challenge of transforming African worldviews and traditions as it has greatly influenced and transformed in the past the course of human civilization and history especially within the Western world. Unfortunately, the Christian faith in Africa has refused to seriously engage African traditions at a deeper level of engagement, but has merely scratched the surface of the African cultural consciousness, which has led to the enigmatic character of the Christian faith as the religion of many African people, but with little or no impact seen in the social, political or economic sectors of African society. Regretfully, after almost two centuries of the presence of the Christian faith on the African continent,<sup>18</sup> the Christian faith appears incapable or powerless to transform African society especially in creating new values that would replace the pre-Christian values of African traditional society.<sup>19</sup> It is not an exaggeration to note that the Christian faith without a true engagement of the African traditions at a deeper level of dialogue becomes not only incapable of transforming Africa, but also incompetent to address the problems of African society.

### The African Traditions

There is a common saying in Africa that “traditions are hard to die.” The reason is because by their nature traditions are highly esteemed beliefs, customs, or way of doing something that have been handed down from one generation to the other. This particular way of viewing traditions, presupposes that traditions are “unchangeable” and “rigid” since every generation merely serves as “conduit” for them. This understanding holds a stereotyped view of tradition since every generation only becomes a mere vehicle to transfer the cherished beliefs and values of a preceding time. However, tradition is also conceived as dynamic since no traditions could be transferred in its exact form to the world of another generation without

18. The presence of Christianity in Africa is often dated at the beginning of the eighteenth century when Western missionaries began extensive mission work on the African continent.

19. Describing the same situation in the late sixties, Mbiti observing the strides recorded by Islam and Christianity, noted that, “Although Islam has generally accommodated itself culturally more readily than Western Christianity, it also is professed only superficially in areas where it has recently won converts. Neither faith has yet penetrated deeply into the religious world of traditional African life; and while this is so, ‘conversion’ to Christianity or Islam must be taken only in a relative sense.” See Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 15.



certain modification and adjustments to the realities of this new context. Consequently, while traditions generally claimed certain rigidity yet in actual practice they are flexible since every generation must adapt or bend the received traditions in order to engage with the realities of their times. The adjustment or modification of such traditional may be done on the periphery of such tradition or even the redefinition of the core elements of these traditions. In Africa, African traditions have similarly undergone such modification and adjustment in the light of colonization, intrusion of Western civilization and the presence of Christianity on the continent. This modification could be readily seen as bad and unhealthy for the African people by some individuals because some salient positive aspects of such traditions are lost in the course of such adjustment, however, others, in the light of negative traditions, welcomed the modification or even disappearance of bad traditions. Thus for example, in some African societies, there was the tradition of human sacrifice before the advent of Christianity and colonization; however, such practices have largely become extinct because of the emphasis in Christianity on the sacredness of human life and the emphasis of the same by the colonial administration. On the other hand, many Africans in the urban areas had lamented the disappearance of traditional values such as respect of the elderly and one's responsibility towards the extended family and the clan. For such people, the coming of modern civilization has caused the extinction of these cherished cultural practices, and hence they saw civilization, modernity and even Christianity as agents which sabotage the African traditions. Often the laments of these people come from their observation that traditions of a given people is closely tied to their identity, hence a disappearance of a key aspect of people's traditions is a direct assault on their identity as a people group. This connection of identity naturally makes tradition an interesting subject since it presupposes that traditions' change is directly an alteration of one's identity. Significantly, since we have seen that tradition, despite its claims to "unchangeability," is no doubt foible or flexible in the real life, hence this understanding has bearing in our conception of the relationship between African traditions and the quest for identity.

In the history of the African people, the quest for identity has been closely tied to the observance of cultural or religious traditions, which were practiced in the past, thus after independence most African countries, in their quest to assert an African identity, went back to revive traditional cultural practices which were condemned by the early missionaries. In fact, a celebration of the cultural practices and traditions become a hallmark of

one's Africanness. This African renaissance is clearly ideological since it presupposes that African identity is to be found in the cultural past, and thus the revival of the cultural practices and traditions of the African past. A classic illustration of this tradition-identity syndrome is the FESTAC festival in 1977 whereby Nigeria and surrounding African countries came together in order to assert culturally the worth, dignity and beauty of the black culture. The overwhelming conviction behind such an elaborate festival was that African identity cannot be divorced from African traditions, thus traditions of the past were conceived as intricately connected to the identity of the African people of modern times. Despite the good of such African renaissance, however, the African people are clearly faced with issues of identity crisis particularly as seen in the daily bombardment of its cultural practices and traditions by Western cultures which has attained certain dignified status among the different cultures of the world.<sup>20</sup> This bombardment of African culture can be seen in the Hollywood cultures of the entertainment industry, the Westernized media, the internet, satellite channels and airwaves, thus changing the language, clothing, housing, lifestyle, and education of the African people. For example, in the past, a Yoruba man could be easily pointed out among group of people by his traditional tribal marks, his accented speech and clothing; however, with modern socialization such criteria become inadequate in order to identify a Yoruba person. The same is true of many African people whose traditional tribal marks, tribal fashion, and language could not be used as a means of identifying them. If we can no longer be identified by means of traditional tribal marks, clothing or language, we must ask ourselves what constitutes the African traditions, or to put it simply, since the traditional mode of identifying a particular African tribe has now changed, on what basis should the African person now be identified? As one could easily see, this identity has nothing to do with clothing, traditional tribal marks, language, housing, or even music since these categories have readily changed with the intrusion of Western culture. Today, we see African people clothed in Western clothing, speaking Western language, living in a Western style houses, working in a Western conditioned job, listening to Western music, and driving a Western car. In all fairness, could we call such a person African? If yes, is it all about his skin color? Is the black skin color enough criteria, reason or basis for African identity? These questions are valid since Black Americans have black skin color, but their worldview

20. On African identity crisis see Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing*, 54; Ujomu, "The Crisis of African Identity," 14-17; Magesa, "Africa's Struggle," 235-39.

or way of life is practically Western. Are they less African because of the absence of an African way of thinking or worldview? Is there anything like an “African way of thinking” or “worldview”?

The answer to the last question is yes, there is a particular way the African people look at the world. This often is the force behind their existence. It is the architect of their identity and way of life. Thus despite modernization of the African people in terms of modern and Western advancement such as planes, internet, satellites, and other modern inventions, yet in their thinking or worldview Africans have always remained African. Thus African identity is not about the externalities of its traditions such as traditional tribal marks, language, unique tribal clothing, festivity or location, but it is a worldview. It is such worldview that gives the tradition its force or vitality. Without such an African worldview underpinning and enforcing the traditions, African traditions in the midst of expedient modification and adjustment would have become extinct by now. But on the contrary, African traditions have remained strong on the continent despite the onslaught of colonization, civilization, and even Christianity because these antecedents have merely scratched the surface or externality of the African way of life. They have not readily engaged the African people at the level of their worldview. An African on the plane with his laptop on his lap, and his handset by his sides, still thinks, believes, and lives in deep recognition of the world of spirits as passed down to him by generations of traditions. In many cases, such a worldview appears to be something that is inherited rather than the art of environmental conditioning. It seems Africans are born with certain intuition and premonitions of these spiritual realities.

Unfortunately, it is at this level that Christianity has failed to change the African people. The early missionaries have stopped them from singing, drumming, and dancing, but most Africans after the missionaries went away reintroduced these banned practices. In South America, the African slaves in Brazil in particular reintroduced their own form of Christianity based on their worldview, which they carried with them across the Atlantic Ocean. Roman Catholic Christianity was reconstructed in order to accommodate the spiritual worldviews of the traditional African society, even if some of this contextualization was possibly suspect from an orthodox perspective.

The power of traditions as the origin of worldview cannot be underestimated, thus we must take seriously the challenge that the African worldview poses to biblical Christianity in Africa. The Christian faith must engage the African people at the level of their worldview. It is the

worldview that now defines the African people. Since it is the worldview that provides the African people with a continuous identity from one generation to the other, it is fitting to engage this seat of African identity. For the African Christian is also faced with certain dilemmas because he or she is called to observe certain apostolic traditions, which have their origin in the Bible. Even though Jesus frowned against traditions, as readily seen in his indictment of the Pharisees (Matt 15:1–6; Mark 7:1–13; cf. Col 2:8), yet the teaching of Jesus was handed down in what is known as the apostolic traditions (1 Cor 11:23; 15:1–10). The apostles were the direct successors of Jesus Christ who were commissioned personally by him to teach or carry on his teachings (Acts 1:20–22; Matt 28:19–20; 10:1–23).<sup>21</sup> In the same sense, African Christians must prioritize between whose traditions should he or she venerate whether the traditions of his dead ancestors or of the living Christ? Interestingly, the apostolic traditions are enforced by a biblical worldview. Such biblical worldview is expected to engage the African worldview, thus leading to a transformation of the African worldview by a biblical one. The African Christian can no longer put his allegiance wholly on the African worldview, but on a transformed African worldview. Interestingly, the African and the biblical worldviews share certain relationships and common interest. For example, both worldviews acknowledge the existence of God, angels, demons or evil spirits respectively. From these shared categories or forms, the African worldview can be easily engaged and transformed. The transformation of the African worldview has serious implication for African culture or traditions. Everywhere, the Christian faith aims at such transformation because without such transformation of the indigenous worldview the true meaning of the Christian faith is neither fully known nor experienced.

### Conclusion

The Christian faith has a long interaction with the African continent. The failure of Christianity to have a formidable impact on the continent is because of the failure of Christianity to engage the worldview of the African people. These African worldviews are daily encouraged and practiced on the continent despite the increasing Westernization of the Africa in terms of clothing, housing, language, occupation, and lifestyles. It is at

21. On the history of the Christian traditions, especially the Reformation, see Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*.

this basic level that Christianity must engage, thus aiming at the ultimate transformation of African worldviews.

The formidable task before the African church is the task to Christianize the African people. This Christianizing agenda has unfortunately taken place without adequate understanding of the African worldview. The church has merely taken interest in the external issues surrounding the African people, however, it has not adequately engaged the African worldview in terms of close dialogue. Admittedly, the African continent has witnessed great conversions of people from the traditional religions to the Christian faith, and Christian theologians have sought to underscore the significance of this encounter between Christianity and traditional African society, however, these people thronging to the church are often left without a biblical blueprint that should provide them with direction in dealing with the inherited African worldview. The struggle often is the parallel observance of the things from the Bible and the African worldviews, thus leading to dual allegiance of these Christians. The thought of reaching Christian maturity becomes nearly impossible in the context of this divided loyalty. Christian theology must seek to help these Christians to better engage the traditional African worldview by advocating a transformation of the African worldview in the light of biblical revelation.