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The Trinity in Africa

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Abstract
The African pre-Christian experience of God has turned out to be the gate through which Yahweh has penetrated Africa. This does not only mean that for the African Christians the Trinity must emerge from *Nyambe, Nyame, Nyasaye*, and so on—as various African peoples call God—but also that the Son and the Holy Spirit are now constitutive in the identity of those names. In this case, confession of one God (monotheism) is not in the 'common substance-essence' terms of the Greco-Roman heritage, nor in the 'monotheism as one-ness, non-divisible essence' in Islam and Neo-Platonism, nor as oneness in the sense of 'absolute subject' in the philosophy of Idealism. Here, oneness of God is confessed in the context of the fatherhood as contemplated from the point of view of the Father whose *NTU* is split between the Son and the Holy Spirit. The Father in this case is the 'Great *Muntu*' (God) who uniquely shares the Divine *NTU* with the Son and the Holy Spirit. In this mix of things, four things are noteworthy: 1) there emerges yet another way of thinking about God, 2) the Christian faith receives alternative resources for renewal of the church, 3) assumptions of conventional theological thinking are once again re-examined, and 4) Christians have an opportunity to use their own cultural identity for God's glory.

Keywords
African names for God, Christianization, Africanization, primitive or diffused monotheism, *NTU* metaphysics, the Trinity

Introduction: The Significance of African Christianity

Africa has a rather bad memory of its mission history, particularly the widely held perception that it had no God—a perception that is not only ridiculous but also formed the basic reason why African missionaries completely ignored the African pre-Christian experience of God. At the World Missionary Conference held in 1910 in Edinburgh, Scotland, on the theme 'Missionary Problems in Relation to the non-Christian World'—where four other world religions were represented (religions of China, religions of Japan, Islam, and Hinduism), it was roundly concluded that African religious life fit the description

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of what E.B. Tylor earlier had called animism.[1] In other words, the 1910 Edinburgh conference confirmed the thinking at the time and joined the bandwagon in disparaging African religion as having no religious content and no record of interaction with God.[2] This was a bad beginning in terms of attitude and facts. Its effects loom large even in our own generation.

With nostalgia, we read some of the most insightful engagements with God in the works of such early church fathers as Justin, Tertullian, Athanasius, the Cappadocians, and later Augustine. These fathers were not Jews, but their profound sense of their own religious consciousness became the platform upon which they engaged their new Christian experience. They were Greco-Romans and would use the infrastructure of that culture to express their belief in Yahweh, the God of Israel, whom they had come to know in Christ. They belonged to the Greco-Romans, but they had since converted. The God they knew and worshipped was not *theos* as he had been conceived by the Greeks, but Yahweh of Israel. These considerations moved the church fathers to the point that they joined Apostle Paul in his paraphrase of the *Shema:*

> For even if there are so called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many 'gods' and many 'lords'), yet for us there is but one God, the Father from whom all things come and for whom we live, and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live.[3]

The story of theological leadership in Africa resembles the experience of the church fathers in many ways. Those given to reimagine and reconceptualize the Christian faith for Africa often are either first or second generation converts. For them, the future of perceptive theology lies in retrieving the intellectual symbols in the African religious consciousness and redirecting them in the service of God made known in Christ. This task means at least four things: 1) emergence of new and uniquely African ways of thinking about God; 2) exposing hitherto untapped resources for renewal of the church; 3) possible conflict between emerging theological process and conventional theological

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[1] E.B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into Development of Mythology* (London: Philosophy, 1891).

[2] Scottish LMS missionary, Robert Moffat, had earlier published the following: "… Satan has employed his agency with fatal success, in erasing every vestige of religious impression from the minds of the Bechuanas," in Robert Moffat, *Missionary Labours in Southern Africa* (London: J. Snow, 1842), 243-44. Hastings argues that in the case of Africa, the missionary considered anything pre-Christian as harmful or valueless (Adrian Hastings, *Church and Mission in Modern Africa* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 60).

[3] 1 Cor. 8: 5, 6; NIV.

thinking; and 4) conflict between emerging theological process, on the one hand, and African traditional religions and Islam, on the other hand.

God Talk in Traditional Africa: A Platform for Engaging the God of Christian Worship

After all, the animism talk in African mission history was a mere caricature and a reflection of the extent to which those who interacted with Africa at that time, and therefore should have known better, chose to underestimate the African sense of God. The 1960s and the 1970s saw a flood of religious literature by Africans and Africanists addressing themselves to this thinking. Some of the well known and widely published rebuttals are seen in the works of Bolaji Idowu, John S. Mbiti, and Gabriel M. Setiloane.

Bolaji Idowu: One God Extends beyond Any Territory to the Whole World

Bolaji Idowu persistently affirms "the continuity of God from the African pre-Christian past into the present Christian experience."[4] In his mind, God cannot be confined in any way. "His realm is the whole universe. All peoples are his concern. And he has revealed himself primarily to them all, each race apprehending the revelation according to its native capability."[5] Elsewhere, he writes: "God is One, not many; [...] to the one God belongs the earth and all its fullness. It is this God, therefore, Who reveals Himself to every people on earth and whom they have apprehended according to the degree of their spiritual perception,... as those who have had practical experience of him."[6] Appealing to the biblical witness, Idowu reasons as follows:

> On the basis of the Bible taken as a whole, however, there can only be one answer. There is only one God, the Creator of heaven and earth and all that is in them; the God who has never left Himself without witness in any nation, age or generation; Whose creative purpose has ever been at work in this world; Who by one stupendous act of climactic self-revelation in Christ Jesus came to redeem a fallen world.[7]

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[4] K. Bediako, *Theology and Identity* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1992), 281, 284.

[5] B. Idowu, *Towards an Indigenous Church* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), 20; cf B. Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* (London: Longman, 1962), 31.

[6] Idowu, *Olodumare*, 31.

[7] Idowu, *Towards an Indigenous Church*, 25.

Idowu sees God as central to African religious life. He believes that "in Africa, the real cohesive factor of religion is the living God and that without this one factor, all things would fall to pieces."[8] He sees this one God as dominating the whole of Africa. Indeed, he argues that the African proper names for God—like *Yamba* that occurs in parts of Nigeria and appears in the form of *Yambe, Yembe* or *Ndyambi* in the Cameroons and the Congo, and as *Onyame* or *Nyame* among the Akan of Ghana and the Nilotic peoples of the greater Sudan[9]—seem to be a variation of one name. A similar argument had been raised earlier by E.W. Smith. Commenting on *Nyambe*, Smith had noted that the name appears in:

> …its various forms: Nzambi, Nyambe, Ndyambi, Dzambi, Tsambi, Yambe, Sambi, Zam, Monzam etc. This God's name is spread over a very large area of Western Equatorial Africa, from the Cameroons to the Northern border of Bechuanaland, and from the Atlantic Coast to the middle regions of Belgian Congo.… The name is used in at least twenty-five versions of the Holy Scripture.[10]

Idowu seems to be saying two things: 1) that polytheism is not part of Africa's vocabulary, and 2) that the African people have identical yet distinct ways of speaking about the one God. For Idowu, the variation of the same name among different African peoples indicates that the story of God is one story told by different African communities.

John S. Mbiti: Pre-Christian African Interaction with God as *Preparatio Evangelica*

John S. Mbiti takes the view that pre-Christian Africa's interaction with God was first and foremost *preparatio evangelica.* He demonstrates his point by employing a series of metaphors that traditional African societies use to talk about God. The metaphors he employs range from simple anthropomorphic descriptions to theriomorphic and physiomorphic descriptions of the divine. The basic premise of Mbiti's message is that pre-Christian Africa and the early Israelites had many commonalities. For Mbiti, this could mean that traditional

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[8] B. Idowu, *African Traditional Religion—A Definition* (London: SCM Press, 1973), 104.

[9] Idowu, *African Traditional Religion*, 103f; B. Idowu, "God," *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1973), 26; E.W. Smith, *African Ideas of God* (London: Edinburgh House Press, 1950), 157.

[10] Smith, *African Ideas of God*, 156.

Africa shared the verbal context[11] of the metaphors used to describe God with the early Israelites. As far as Mbiti is concerned, pre-Christian Africa and the early Israelites cherished the same God, used the same metaphors to describe God, and systematized the concepts and metaphors into comparable theologies. To demonstrate his point, Mbiti isolates a large number of terms, metaphors, and similes that are used to describe God in pre-Christian Africa and he uses them in a way that reminds one of the occurrences of the same symbols in the Old Testament.[12]

He notes, for instance, that pre-Christian Africa viewed God as the universal creator-father.[13] He extracts this conclusion from usage of such metaphors as excavator, hewer, carver, creator, originator, inventor, architect, and potter that were fashioned by different African people in their description of God.[14] From these metaphors, Mbiti hears the African people saying that God alone is the unfathered Father; he is the one who fathered the world, owns it, and cares for it.

In respect to his essence, Mbiti notes that pre-Christian Africa perceived God as a spiritual being that does not have a material body. As such, some people simply call him "the Great Spirit, the Fathomless Spirit, the Ever-Present Spirit or the God of Wind and Breath."[15] He is the "Great Spirit," the "Creating Spirit and the Saving Spirit," and the "Protecting Spirit" who made all the spirits in the universe (the Shona, the Ashanti, the Ewe, the Kagoro).

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[11] Korpel defines verbal context as "the users' sign-context that acts as a rule narrowing down the meaning of metaphors and similes employed." See M.C.A. Korpel, *A Rift in the Clouds: Ugaritic and Hebrew Descriptions of the Divine* (Munster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1990), 79.

[12] Okot p'Bitek accuses J.S. Mbiti of pasting together bits and pieces of the ideas of God taken from all over Africa. As far as p'Bitek is concerned, African scholars such as Mbiti, Idowu, Danquah, Busia, Kenyatta and Sengor are "intellectual smugglers" who have draped the African gods in "awkward Hellenic garments." He adds that "the African deities of the books… are creations of students of African religions. They are all beyond recognition to the ordinary Africans in the countryside." See Okot p'Bitek, *Religion of the Central Luo* (Nairobi: East African Literature Bureau, 1971), 7, 46, 47, 50, 80, 88. My opinion is that p'Bitek's criticism of Mbiti and the other African scholars is unfair. Mbiti, like Idowu and Danquah, is simply interested in demonstrating that the African peoples had something of the self-revelation of God. Moreover, the notion of "pasting bits and pieces taken from all over Africa" assumes a fundamental diversity of the African Negroes. This position is no longer in vogue. Modern anthropologists, ethnolinguists, and African historiographers argue for fundamental unity of the African peoples. See J.H.O. Kombo, *The Doctrine of God in African Christian Thought: The Holy Trinity, Theological Hermeneutics, and the African Intellectual Culture* (Brill: Leiden & Boston, 2007), 1-7.

[13] J.S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969), 39.

[14] J.S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* (London: Heinemann, 1975), 44.

[15] Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 53.

He is like wind; he comes and goes (the Ga, the Bena, and the Banyarwanda). Mbiti notes that the Nuer's word for God is spirit; thus, they believe his essence is spirit.[16]

God is also said to be responsible for both afflictions and salvation. Mbiti has observed that several African peoples believe God is the reason behind epidemics, calamities, destruction, death, pests, and cattle diseases (the Ambo, the Azande, the Bambuti, the Bongo, the Bavenda, and the Suk). In some cases, the personifications of God may be responsible for certain types of afflictions. The personifications of God are known to send smallpox, spiritual illnesses, bubonic plague, and even death.[17] Whereas God is associated with afflictions, Mbiti concludes that the African people also know him to be the deliverer and savior. He always remembers and delivers those in trouble, the ill, the poor, and the weak.[18] God delivers because he is king and lord.[19] As the great king, he reigns over and owns all things, visible and invisible; he has absolute power, maintains order in the sky, earth, and underworld, and may not be approached directly but only via intermediaries.[20] Since God is king and lord, he is also viewed as master. Thus, he controls the destinies of all things (the Banyarwanda, the Shongay, the Barundi), helps and teaches (the Banyarwanda, the Ganda, the Baluba, the Barotse, the Meru, the Shilluk, the Tswana, the Vugusu, the Mende, the Tiv, the Lodagaa), and, moreover, he gives rain and material things as well as life as the most precious gift.[21]

God is the strong one (Yoruba, Ngombe); he is irresistible (Zulu), and able to alter the natural laws and completely destroy both people and objects (the Abaluhya, the Shona). He is the source of power (the Akan, the Ashanti). God commands the created world, and it obeys (the Bambuti, Banyarwanda). Even the rulers and the moral codes receive their powers from God—he is the one "who gives or breaks dignities" (Banyarwanda, Zulu, the Lugbara).[22] In the African mind, reasons Mbiti, power is viewed "hierarchically in which God is at the top as the omnipotent, beneath him are the spirits and natural

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[16] J.S. Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa* (London: SPCK, 1970), 23f.

[17] Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa*, 80-87.

[18] Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa*, 82f.

[19] This is seen among the Banyarwanda, the Barundi, the Edo, the Baluba, the Twi, the Akan, the Bachwa, the Babuti, the Indem, the Ngoni, the Agikuyu, the Yoruba, the Zulu, the Bena, and the Chagga, among others (Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa*, 71-73).

[20] Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa*, 71-73.

[21] Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa*, 73-76.

[22] Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa*, 8-11; J.S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 50.

phenomena, and lower still are men who have comparatively little or no power at all."[23]

In these accounts and countless other metaphors in Mbiti's *Concepts of God in Africa* and in chapter 8 of my own *The Doctrine of God in African Christian Thought*, one already sees his basic premise that pre-Christian Africa's ideas of God and the early Israelites had many commonalities. In Mbiti's thinking, the commonalities, as they were perceived by pre-Christian Africa, served as *preparatio evangelica* that allowed indigenous people to recognize the missionaries' account of God not only as what was familiar to them, but much more fundamentally as their own account of God.

Gabriel M. Setiloane: The African Experiences God as *Mysterium Tremendum et Fascinans*

The basic concern of Setiloane is the absence of numinousness as a foundational theological truth in Western theologies of God.[24] He is making his contribution in the context of what he sees as:

> . . . the whole discussion in the West—focused in the "Honest to God" and the "Death of God" theology—suggests that the West itself has lost the image of God as "mysterium tremendum et fascinans," and deals, at the best, with a "creator absconditus," a god of the gaps, or a saviour of individual souls destined for a pie in the sky.[25]

For Setiloane, this way of understanding God is not only a threat to theology, but also to the Christian faith. Consequently, he suggests that theology must understand God not just rationally, but also as the *mysterium tremendum* and the *fascinans.*

Setiloane takes the ideas of the *mysterium tremendum* and the *fascinans* from Robert Otto. The ideas convey:

> . . . the daunting and the fascinating, now combine in a strange harmony of contrasts, and the resultant dual character of the numinous consciousness, to which the entire religious development bears witness, at any rate from the level of 'demonic dread' onward, is at once the strangest and most noteworthy phenomenon in the whole

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[23] Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 32.

[24] G.M. Setiloane, *The Image of God among the Sotho-Tswana* (Rotterdam: A.A. Balkema, 1976), 78.

[25] Setiloane, *The Image of God*, 229.

> history of religion. The demonic-divine object may appear to the mind as an object of horror and dread, but at the same time it is no less something that allures with a potent charm, and the creature, who trembles before it, utterly cowed and cast down, has always at the same time the impulse to turn to it, nay even to make it his own. The 'mystery' is for him not merely something to be wondered at but something that entrances him; and beside that in it which bewilders and confounds, he feels a something which captivates and transports him with a strange ravishment, rising often enough to the pitch of dizzy intoxication; it is the Dionysiac-element in the numen.[26]

In this excerpt, Robert Otto associates God with such elements as 'awefulness,' 'overpoweringness,' 'energy' or 'urgency of the numinous,' 'wrath,' 'the wholly other,' and 'fascination.' Setiloane wraps all these elements in the Sotho-Tswana term *selo* which, in his thinking, is equivalent to *mysterium tremendum* and *fascinans*.[27] Setiloane argues that in the symbols of the Sotho-Tswana, *selo* is described as *selo se se boitshengang, sa poitshego, se se tshabegang, se se mashwe* ("a fearful, awful, ugly, ugly, monstrous thing"). When *selo* is applied to *Modimo* (the name for God in Sotho-Tswana), the term conveys what Otto calls *Ungeheuere, poitshego*, which is translated as "monstrous" or "weird."[28] This allows Setiloane to describe *Modimo* as *selo*—'thing' or 'monster.'[29] He has personality, however. As Smith says, he is "in sharp distinction from everyone and everything else.... He is a being who is not human, and never in the recollection of men was human."[30] Because *Modimo* is *selo*, he is so intense that the Sotho-Tswana approached him through *badimo*. Moreover, the name *Modimo* was a taboo and the Sotho-Tswana did not use it freely as did the missionaries.[31] Setiloane explains that the Sotho-Tswana felt that the missionaries did not recognize the greatness of *Modimo* enough because they used his name so freely.[32]

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[26] R. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (London: Penguin Books, 1923), 45.

[27] G.M Setiloane, "MODIMO: GOD Among the Sotho-Tswana," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, Number 4 (September 1973), 6-7.

[28] Setiloane, *The Image of God*, 78f.; G.M. Setiloane, *African Theology: An Introduction* (Johannesburg: Skotaville Publishers, 1986), 33.

[29] Setiloane, "MODIMO: GOD Among the Sotho-Tswana," 6f. Cf. Setiloane, *African Theology*, 22f.

[30] Smith, *African Ideas of God*, 21f.

[31] W.C. Willoughby explains that *Modimo* has to be approached through the *badimo* (the ancestors) because he is "too great to be approached by the mortals." See the details in W.C. Willoughby, *The Soul of the Bantu* (London: SCM, 1928), 206ff. Setiloane notes, however, that "despite the dangers of direct approach, IT can be called upon in mortal danger" (Setiloane, *The Image of God*, 84).

[32] The Sotho-Tswana still regard the use of the name *Modimo* as taboo. For example, when *Modimo* forms part of a personal name as it stands, the part having the word is avoided in

Christianization: The God of pre-Christian Africa is the God of Christian Faith

Whereas the discussions of Mbiti, Idowu, and Setiloane primarily targeted the much hyped animist label, I see their real contribution in Christianizing pre-Christian Africa's sense of God. Already some amount of Christianization had occurred when the vernacular Bibles read in African languages all over sub-Saharan Africa used the local names for God. The true significance of this kind of reconceptualization is the view that the God of the African pre-Christian tradition has turned out to be the God of Christian worship.

This kind of identification is similar to what is seen in the relationship between the Edomite *Quas* and Yahweh and the Canaanite *El* and Yahweh. Scholars of religion have not only been able to demonstrate that Yahweh displays a number of *El* characteristics, but they have also been able to observe that the Hebrew Bible contains no polemic against *El*. Also, among the Canaanites, Yahweh took over the name *El*, thus making it the gate through which Yahweh penetrated the Semitic world.[33] A similar situation occurs in relating the Edomites Quas to Yahweh. J.R. Bartlett argues as follows:

> . . . it is quite remarkable that the Old Testament, while firmly condemning Ammonite Milcom and Moabites Chemosh as 'abominations' neither names nor condemns any Edomite God. The difference in treatment requires explanation. It may be a matter of chance, or of Israel's ignorance of Edomite belief, but perhaps the most likely explanation is that there was some awareness in Israel that Yahweh belonged to the Edomite region and that the Edomites themselves might be among his worshippers.[34]

Just as Quas and *El* were Yahwehized in the case of the Edomites and the Canaanites, respectively, so were *Modimo, Nyame, Nyasaye, Ngai, Mulungu*, and so on.

The Christianization of *Nyasaye*, for instance, means that the Luo Christian now experiences *Nyasaye* as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In this case, *Nyasaye* has become Christianized. In addition to merely being *Nyasaye* of the pre-Christian Luo, it is more significant that the referent for the Luo name, *Nyasaye*, has been reconceptualized and transformed into the God of Christian

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everyday use of the name, "e.g. a child whose name is 'Tiro-ya-Modimo', the work of MODIMO, would ordinarily be called simply 'Tiro'" (Setiloane, *The Image of God*, 235).

[33] See D. Bosch, "God in Africa: Implications for Kerygma," *Missionalia* Volume 1 No 1 (1973), 3-21; cf. C.E.L. Heureux, *Rank Among the Canaanite Gods: El, Ball and Rephaim* (Ann Arbor: Scholars Press, 1979).

[34] J.R. Bartlett, "Yahweh and Quas: A Response to Martin Rose" in *JSOT* 5 (1978), 29-38.

worship—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Here, the most important item in African religious heritage has clearly obtained a Christian meaning.

Africanization: Reconceptualizing Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit in the African Cultural Milieu

In this paper, Africanization is considered to be the equivalent of Hellenization of the Christian faith as it occurred in the early church. Under Hellenization, the church utilized Greek metaphysics to describe Christian concepts to the indigenous Greek culture. Africanization here then is the use of African intellectual culture to explain the triune God to African audiences. This therefore means that—of necessity—the Trinity must emerge from *Nzambi, Nyambe, Ndyambi, Dzambi, Tsambi, Yambe, Sambi, Zam, Monzam, Nyasaye* and so on, and is not borrowed from outside. In other words, *Nyasaye*, for instance, is now known to the Luo Christian as Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. This reconceptualization of God has come about as a result of the manner in which we meet God and see him revealed in the pages of the Bible. The process, however, involves re-identification and inculturation of monotheism, as well as reconceptualization of both the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Re-identification

African Christians are to determine their own identity. In this task, African Christians are to separate themselves from the Greco-Roman influence that came with missionary Christianity, distinguish themselves from the expanding Muslim population, and critically draw from African religious consciousness without reverting to African traditional religions. African Christians are a new people, a new race, and a new *ethne*, and their numbers are explosive. By 1900, Africa had 8.7 million Christians. This figure rose to 60 million in the 1960s. By the year 2000, Africa had 360 million Christians, and this figure is poised to reach 633 million in the year 2025.[35] This numerical strength simply means that "Africa has become, or is becoming a Christian continent in cultural as well as numerical terms."[36]

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[35] L. Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity? The Gospel Beyond the West* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 14.

[36] Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity*? 36.

The call for re-identification finds resonance in the New Testament and in the experience of the church fathers. In the New Testament writings, the identity of Christianity as a "race, a nation, a people" is evident.[37] In his reference to the Christians, Peter preferred to use "a race, a nation, a people." In contrast, Paul speaks about "the Jews, the Greeks, and the community of faith."[38] By the time of the church fathers, this triple division on the basis of religion and worship had become accepted as a basis for developing a distinct Christian consciousness in the Greco-Roman context.[39]

Fundamental to re-identification is conversion—turning the African world to Christ. In his comment on conversion, Andrew Walls says:

> To become a convert… is to turn, and turning involves not a change of substance but a change of direction. Conversion, in other words, means to *turn what is already there in a new direction*. It is not a matter of substituting something new for something old—that is proselytizing, a method which the early church could have adopted but deliberately chose to jettison. Nor is conversion a matter of adding something new to something old, as a supplement or in a synthesis. Rather Christian conversion involves redirecting what is already there, turning it in the direction of Christ. That is what the earliest Jerusalem believers had already done with their Jewish inheritance. Turning that inheritance toward Messiah Jesus transformed the inheritance but did not destroy its coherence or its continuity. On the contrary, it produced a model of thought and life that was Christian because Jesus was at its center; yet it remained essentially and inalienably Jewish.[40]

Worship of one God: Monotheism

Pre-Christian Africa had a form of monotheism that has been called "primitive monotheism" or "diffused monotheism,"[41] ably defined by Bolaji Idowu as a type of monotheism, where "the good Deity delegates certain portions of his

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[37] See 1 Pet. 2: 9.

[38] See 1 Cor. 10: 32; and cf. John 4: 21ff.

[39] Bediako, *Theology and Identity*, 36.

[40] A.F. Walls, "Old Athens and New Jerusalem: Some Signposts for Christian Scholarship in the Early History of Mission Studies," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* (October 1997), 148.

[41] The concept of 'primitive monotheism' or 'diffused monotheism' may be traced to the middle of the 19th century. Some of the early discussants of this concept include Henry Callaway, Andrew Lang, and Edwin W. Smith. See the books: Henry Callaway, *The Religious Systems of the Amazulu* (London: Routledge and Kagan Paul, 1870), Andrew Lang, *The Making of Religion* (London: Longmans, 1909), and Edwin W. Smith, *African Ideas of God* (London: Edinburgh Press, 1950). The other serious discussants of this concept are E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion*

authority to certain divine functionaries who work as they are commissioned by Him."[42] The Yoruba, for instance, recognize the supremacy of *Oludumare* but they also have innumerable divinities. No one really knows the actual number of the Yoruba divinities, they simply call them *orisa*, meaning 'legion.'[43] Indeed, research has not been able to offer a reasonable account of the divinities among the people of West Africa, Central Africa, Southern Africa, and parts of East Africa. The divinities among these people are simply too numerous and complex.

Note however, that pre-Christian African religious consciousness had no place for polytheism—the worship of many gods. D.C. Scott writes about God as he is perceived among the Nyanja people and says, for instance, that "you cannot put the plural with God because God is one. There are no idols called gods, and spirits are spirits of the people who have died, not gods.... [H]ence God is one, is a distinct person, cannot be identified with the powers of nature, nor confounded with spirits in general."[44] Kwame Bediako comes to a similar conclusion when he writes that "virtually all African indigenous languages make a distinction between Supreme God and the divinities, ancestors and natural forces that are not God. Worshipers know who is God, and who is not."[45] In all this discussion, there is ample clarity about 'primitive monotheism' and its attendant intermediaries, on the one hand, and polytheism, on the other hand.

Conversion now requires the African worshiper to turn around 'primitive monotheism' in the direction of Christ. Situating Christ and the Holy Spirit in the center of primitive monotheism has the effect of expunging the agency of the intermediaries, powers of nature, or spirits from the service of deity. This is then the fundamental difference between primitive monotheism and Christian monotheism. The other difference, of course, is in the way the divine category is conceived. Whereas in primitive monotheism, God is a monad—although he employs the services of intermediaries—in Christian monotheism

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(London: Oxford University Press, 1956) and G. Lienhardt, *Divinity and Experience: The Religion of the Dinka* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961).

[42] Idowu, *Oludumare*, 62, cited in Kombo, T*he Doctrine of God in African Christian Thought*, 169, 170; see also Schmidt, *The Origin and Growth of Religion*, 262-282.

[43] R.J. Gehman, *African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective* (Kijabe: Kesho Publications, 1989), 125.

[44] D.C. Scott, *Dictionary of the Nyanja Language* (London: Religious Tract Society, 1929), 348.

[45] K. Bediako, "Their Past is also our Present. Why all Christians Have a Need of Ancestors: Making a Case for Africa," *AICMAR Bulletin* Vol 6 (2007), 11.

the one God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—yet, they are not three lords, but one lord without intermediaries.

The readers of vernacular Bibles are convinced that the monotheism that speaks to African spirituality arises out of their experience of God displayed in the pages of the Bible. The Luo Bible translators, for instance, used *Nyasaye* as referring to God, and wherever the term 'Father' appears in the text of the Bible, the Luo translators of the Bible rendered it *Nyasaye Wuoro* (God the Father). Thus, the Luo Christians see God (*Nyasaye*) and the Father (*Wuoro*) as mutually interchangeable. In everyday worship, God the Father (*Nyasaye Wuoro*), God the Son (*Nyasaye Wuowi*), and God the Holy Spirit (*Nyasaye Roho Maler*) are confessed. These vernacular readers of the Luo Bible and converts to Christianity understand the confession of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as worship of one God (monotheism), not in the 'common substance-essence' terms of the Greco-Roman heritage, nor in the 'monotheism as one-ness, non-divisible essence' in Islam[46] and Neo-Platonism, nor as monotheism oneness in the sense of an 'absolute subject' in the Idealism philosophy. Here the one-ness of God is confessed in the context of the fatherhood as contemplated from the point of view of the Great *Muntu*, whose *NTU* is split between the Son and the Holy Spirit. In this case, the Father is the Great *Muntu* (God) who uniquely shares the Divine *NTU* with the Son and the Holy Spirit. For the Luo Christian, for instance, this must of necessity mean that the Son and the Holy Spirit are now constitutive in the identity of *Nyasaye* or monotheism. In other words, the Luo Christian can no longer conceive of the eternal identity of *Nyasaye* (monotheism) without splitting the same between the Son and the Holy Spirit.[47]

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[46] O. Skarsaune, "Is Christianity Monotheistic? A Perspective on a Jewish/Christian Debate," *Studia Patristica* 29 (1957), 340-363, 348. Cf. H.A. Wolfson, "The Muslim Attributes and the Christian Trinity," *HTR* 49 (1956), 1-18.

[47] See Kombo, *The Doctrine of God in African Christian Thought*, 245-247, for a detailed discourse on the application of the *NTU* metaphysics to the Trinity. The primary meaning of 'person' in the African context is "the genuine *Muntu.*" The "genuine *muntu*" in human persons is only a "tributary" of the "Great *Muntu*" or simply a reflection of the "Great *Muntu.*" But to say that the Son is a person is not the same as saying that he is a person in the sense that you and I are persons. The "genuine *Muntu*" that you and I have, are but tributaries of the "Great *Muntu*." The "genuine *Muntu*" that the Son has, is the "Great *Muntu*" himself. Thus, the Son is a perfect reflection of the "Great *Muntu*," the Holy Spirit is a perfect reflection of the "Great *Muntu*," and the Father is a perfect reflection of the "Great *Muntu*." Thus the Son is a person in the ultimate sense, the Holy Spirit is a person in the ultimate sense, and the Father is a person in the ultimate sense. Just as each of us reveal the nature of the "genuine *Muntu*," the little "tributary" of God in each of us, so the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit fully reveal the "Great *Muntu*." No one can fully reveal the "Great *Muntu*" except an ultimate person, and we know of three ultimate

Would this amount to polytheism? Not at all because the Christian faith has always seen itself as monotheistic in the same way the Rabbinic thought of the second century did.[48] Justin Martyr raised the matter of the existence of ητερος θεος with Trypho.[49] In the argumentation of Justin Martyr, "Christ, not the Father, was the one who appeared in the theophanies of the Old Testament… he is to be identified with God's Wisdom, who is spoken of in the Bible as a second divine person, begotten by God, but not separated from him."[50] In response to this thesis, Trypho the Jew does not say that that particular position destroys the Christian claim to monotheism. In fact, Trypho already believes that the Christians reject idolatry and, at the same time, admits that the scripture may know a ητερος θεος.[51] The implication of this submission in the pre-Nicene sources is that the divinity of Christ and of the Holy Spirit does not reject the Jewish understanding of monotheism. In fact, there is a general lack of awareness that the admission of the divinity of the Son and of the Holy Spirit may create theological problems to the Jewish concept of monotheism.[52]

Islamic religion and African traditional religions may reject Christian monotheism. Their reasons for rejecting the Christian stand are not theological. Scholars of African religions who reject Christian monotheism do so on cosmological ground. J.N.K. Mugambi, for instance, believes that the 'persons' in the Trinity should be done away with because, in the African mind, "they are misleading, vague and confusing."[53] Studies on Islamic polemics of the Middle Ages, on the other hand, indicate that the Muslims' rejection of Christian monotheism was based on their understanding of the Neo-Platonic concepts of essence and attributes.[54] According to the Neo-Platonic doctrines

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persons from Christian theology: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Persons cannot exist in isolation. These ultimate persons have always existed and will always exist in a community. See also P. Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy* (Paris: E.T., 1959), 28; G.M. Setiloane, *African Theology: An Introduction* (Johannesburg: Skotaville Publishers, 1986), 13; and B. Idowu, *Towards an Indigenous Church* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), 19.

[48] See Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*, chapters 10 - 19 and 55-63.

[49] Justin Martyr, *Dialogue*, 55.1.

[50] O. Skarsaune, "Is Christianity Monotheistic? A Perspective on a Jewish/Christian Debate," in *Studia Patristica* vol 29, 1957: 357; cf. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue*, 56-62, 126-129.

[51] Skarsaune, "Is Christianity Monotheistic? " 362.

[52] Skarsaune, "Is Christianity Monotheistic? " 355.

[53] J.N.K. Mugambi, *The African Heritage and Contemporary Christianity* (Nairobi: Longman, 1989), 75, 77.

[54] Skarsaune, "Is Christianity Monotheistic?" 347.

of essence and attributes, plurality presupposes materiality of the underlying substance.[55] Since God is not material, he cannot be said to be plural.

The Incarnation

The Bible shows the Son in a manner that requires belief that God became incarnate, suffered on the cross, and redeemed mankind by dying and rising again.[56] In other words, God endured to be born, to become man, and to suffer. Thus, as Fulton has clearly observed, "nowhere is the union of God and man so concrete and definite, and so universal in its import as in the Christian religion."[57] Some of the biblical passages which lend themselves to this interpretation are (1) passages of identity which posit simple identity of Christ with God, (2) passages of distinction which distinguish one 'lord' from another 'lord,' and (3) passages of derivation which suggest that the Son is from the Father.[58]

Why is incarnation important to Africa? In answering this question, I refer to John S. Mbiti's long held view that the African is incurably religious. For him,

> … [it] is highly doubtful that even at their very best, those other religious systems and ideologies current in Africa are saying anything radically new to, and different from what is already embedded in Christianity. And yet the strength and uniqueness of Christianity do not lie in the fact that its teaching, practice and history have all the major elements of the other religious traditions. The uniqueness of Christianity is in Jesus Christ.… [It] is He, therefore, and only He, who deserves to be the goal and standard for individuals and mankind.… I consider traditional religions, Islam and other religious systems to be preparatory and even essential ground in the search for the Ultimate. But only Christianity has the terrible responsibility of pointing the way to that Ultimate Identity, Foundation and Source of security.[59]

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[55] Aristotle, *Metaphysics* (England: Oxford University Press, 1912-1952). See particularly XII.8.1074A.

[56] In Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho*, Judaism is portrayed as having no problems with the issue of a "second God" (see *Dialogue* 16; 57.1; 58.2; 60.3; 63.1), however, Judaism recoils at the idea that this other God actually became man. In *Dialogue* 68.1, Trypho says: "You are enduring to prove an incredible and almost impossible thing, that God endured to be born and to become man!"

[57] W. Fulton, "Trinity," *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1921), 458.

[58] J. Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971), 175.

[59] Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 277.

The uniqueness of Christ must mean, therefore, that he is not just a friend, liberator, elder brother, ancestor, brother, king/chief, healer, master of initiation, and so on. More importantly, he is God himself. In other words, the genuine *Muntu* of the Son is the Great *Muntu* himself. The Son is therefore a perfect reflection of the Great *Muntu*—God himself.[60]

The African thinking says that salvation and deliverance belong to God. He always remembers and delivers those in trouble, the ill, the poor, and the weak.[61] He performs these functions because he is king and lord.[62] As the great king, he reigns over and owns all things, visible and invisible; he has absolute power and maintains order in the sky, earth, and underworld.[63] He controls and commands of all things, helps, and teaches, and moreover, he gives rain and material things, as well as life—the most precious gift.[64] Even the rulers and the moral codes receive their powers from God.[65]

The Bible seems to say that salvation and deliverance belong to Christ. To the African Christian mind, this must mean that Christ is God contemplated from king, lord, and savior. Christ is therefore not a 'mode of God,' as indicated by Idealism, nor is he a mere attribute of God, as Judaism and Islam would accept. Similarly, Christ is not *Nommo*—'the son of God'—in the sense of the Dogon, and neither is he one of the two sons of God as the Ganda believe, nor merely a god in the sense of being one of the sons of God who is conceived to be the father of gods.[66] Christ is God because he shares in the *NTU* of God and as such he is king, lord, and savior. Salvation and deliverance in Christ are all encompassing and extend to the entire African world—they apply to all the elements in the African world: the spirits, man, animals and plants, and even phenomena and objects without biological life (such as rocks, time, beauty, authority and so on). The Son, therefore, saves mankind and presents him/her as holy and blameless before God, but his salvation has direct consequences to the entire ranges of *umuntu* (all the life forces with intelligence), *ikintu* (things, objects, animals, plants and minerals), *ahantu* (place

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[60] Kombo, *The Doctrine of God in African Christian Thought*, 245.

[61] Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa*, 82f.

[62] This is seen among the Banyarwanda, the Barundi, the Edo, the Baluba, the Twi, the Akan, the Bachwa, the Babuti, the Indem, the Ngoni, the Agikuyu, the Yoruba, the Zulu, the Bena, and the Chagga, among others (Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa*, 71-73).

[63] Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa*, 71-73.

[64] Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa*, 73-76.

[65] Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa*, 8-11; Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 50.

[66] Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa*, 114-116.

and time), and *ukuntu* (modalities in which power acts, such as quality, quantity, relation, action, passion, position, and possession).[67]

The Pneumatological Question

Pre-Christian Africa perceived God as a spiritual being and not having a material body. God is "the Great Spirit, the Fathomless Spirit, the Ever-Present Spirit or the God of Wind and Breath."[68] He is the "Great Spirit," the "Creating Spirit and the Saving Spirit" and the "Protecting Spirit."[69] These terms simply denote that God is a spiritual being. But the African conceptual framework also has spirits as a special category. Spirits are part of *umuntu*, but they have a higher *NTU* than some forms of existence within *umuntu* (e.g., man) and, therefore, they can influence them. The spirits can also influence *ikintu, ahantu*, and *ukuntu.* On this account, the Holy Spirit presented the first translators of the Bible into the African languages with a special difficulty because they needed to separate the Holy Spirit from God, on the one hand, and from the spirits, on the other hand.

There are African words for 'holy' and 'spirit' but, as Mbiti explains, "…the combination which gives us the 'Holy Spirit' as part of the Trinity is specifically Christian heritage."[70] In the context of the Bantus of East Africa, for instance, the Kiswahili word, *Roho*, was adopted to represent the concept of the Holy Spirit instead of the vernacular words for spirit.[71] The Protestant Acholi of Uganda adopted *Cwiny Maleng* (heart), while their Catholic counterparts adopted *Tipu Maleng* (shadow, depiction, and ancestral spirit), and *Maleng* that specifically refer to either physical or ethical purity.[72] Although (from these two examples) the new concept *Roho* and *Cwiny Maleng* or *Tipu Maleng* refer to the third person of the Trinity, the exact reference of the theological terms, *Roho, Cwiny Maleng*, or *Tipu Maleng*, has remained elusive to many African Christians due to the traditional interferences imposed by cosmological structures.

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[67] For an indepth analysis of the *NTU* philosophy, see Kombo, *The Doctrine of God in African Christian Thought*, 151-153.

[68] Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 53.

[69] Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa*, 23f.

[70] Mbiti, "The Holy Spirit in African Independent Churches," 103.

[71] Mugambi, *The African Heritage and Contemporary Christianity*, 65.

[72] H. Behrend, *Alice Lakwena and the Holy Spirits: War in Northern Uganda 1985-97* (Nairobi: EAEP, 1999), 116.

There is so much mention of the Holy Spirit in African Christianity, but there is very little by way of reflective theology on the same. Theology that will adequately distinguish the Holy Spirit as the third person of the Trinity, it seems to me, will seek to proceed as follows: 1) distinguish the spirits in African cosmology from the Holy Spirit; 2) relate the Holy Spirit to Christ;[73] and 3) relate the Holy Spirit to the Father. The spirits in African cosmology are part of *umuntu*, and they can control *ikintu, ahantu*, and *ukuntu.* The Bible depicts the Holy Spirit who operates in the church (gives gifts, sanctifies, empowers, and so on) and in the world's history as the same Spirit who exegetes the Father. He is the very same Spirit of Yahweh who was known in Israel. The Holy Spirit is God—the Great *Muntu* himself. As such, he sustains the spirits and all elements of *umuntu, ikintu, ahantu*, and *ukuntu* because he is the Great *Muntu* himself. The pneumatological problem in Africa will be how to separate the spirits in African existence, on the one hand, and how to differentiate from each other the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, on the other hand.

Concluding Remarks: Christianity is an African Religion

God has revealed himself as one, yet, we in the Christian faith have experienced him as Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. This view, explains Karl Rahner,

> . . . [confirms] . . . that knowledge of the unique, transcendent, personal God which is always stirring into life whether naturally or supernaturally. . . . Second, the Christian conception will always express God's passionate protest against every kind of polytheistic or pantheistic deification of the world. . . . Third, it alone will be able to say unambiguously and definitively just how the personal, transcendent desires *in actual fact* stand to the world in his sovereign freedom: namely, as the God who actually discloses his inmost self to man out of grace.[74]

Africa exists in what Ali Mazrui has called the triple heritage: African traditional religions, Islam, and European influence. Note that Ali Mazrui writes in the mid 1980s and speaks about two major religions of Africa, but omits Christianity—apparently because he prefers to place it into the rubric of

[73] Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*, 213.

[74] K. Rahner, *Theological Investigations* I. Trans. C. Ernest. (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1965), 85, 86.

European influence.[75] When Okot p'Bitek wrote in the 1970s as an apologist for the African consciousness, he also did not have kind words for African Christianity.[76] Today, there are no scholars of renown on this side of the debate. Kwame Bediako, Lamin Saneh, and Philip Jenkins[77] have indicated from research that, in our own time, Christianity has become an African religion. This paper is an attempt to bring this new African religion to testify most effectively, truthfully, and reverently of the inexplicable Great *Muntu* who has revealed himself to us in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

[75] A.A. Mazrui, *The African: A Triple Heritage* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1986).

[76] O. p'Bitek, *Religion of the Central Luo* (Nairobi: East African Literature Bureau, 1971).

[77] The following are some of the most incisive publications on Christianity as an African religion: K. Bediako, *Christianity in Africa. The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh: Orbis Books, 1995); L. Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity? The Gospel Beyond the West* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2003); and P. Jenkins, "The Next Christianity" in the *Atlantic Monthly*, October 2002. Link to the article: http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/2002/10/jenkins.htm. Another reference of his which I thought useful is found at http://www.theatlantic.com/unbound/interviews/int2002-09-12.htm.