CHRISTIAN IDENTITY IN THE AFRICAN CONTEXT: REFLECTIONS ON KWAME BEDIAKO'S *THEOLOGY AND IDENTITY*

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The dramatic shift in the center of gravity of global Christianity in the last fifty years is now universally recognized.[1] As a result the African church has become a major influence in the world Christian movement, which makes it increasingly important to keep abreast of Christian reflection and debate on the African continent. Few contributors to that debate are more widely influential, especially among evangelicals, than the Ghanaian scholar Kwame Bediako, founder and director of the Akrofi-Christaller Memorial Centre for Mission Research and Applied Theology in Ghana, and a theologian of international reputation. Moreover, the issue of Christian identity which he addresses in his most celebrated work, *Theology and Identity: the Impact of Culture on Christian Thought in the Second Century and Modern Africa,*[2] is among the most critical concerns of African theology. It is this work that constitutes the focus for the present discussion.

The question of identity has indeed emerged as a leading issue in many of the theologies coming out of churches in the Two-Thirds World. Conversion to Christ necessarily involves a measure of discontinuity with the pre-Christian past, and this has been perceived by some as problematic, the more so if it is felt that missionaries involved in the transmission of the gospel also impose their own culture. In the African context theologians such as E. Bolaji Idowu and John Mbiti have sought to address the problem, but it is not an entirely new one. In the Gentile church of the early centuries Christian thinkers also debated the relationship between the Christian faith and the religious context from which new believers had been drawn. In his article, "The Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator of Culture," Andrew Walls has drawn attention to this correspondence, pointing out that Idowu and Mbiti were "wrestling with essentially the same problem as" Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria.[3] It is this parallel that Kwame Bediako seeks to

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[1] See, e.g., Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

[2] Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture on Christian Thought in the Second Century and Modern Africa* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1992).

[3] Andrew F. Walls, "The Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator of Culture," in *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996) 14.

develop in his influential study *Theology and Identity*, comparing theological development and the pursuit of identity in the early centuries of the church's history with the writings of some African theologians in the second half of the twentieth century. The original research was carried out at Aberdeen for the degree of doctor of philosophy (Bediako's second doctoral degree) under the supervision of Andrew Walls, who has commended the work as "a book of quite outstanding importance." It has indeed been widely appreciated and was reissued in 1999.

I. "THEOLOGY AND IDENTITY": GREEK AND AFRICAN PERSPECTIVES

Bediako underlines the importance of the identity question for the African church. While he focuses on the comparison between African theology and that of the early church, it is clear that in his view the issues are not identical; there is contrast as well. The contemporary African Christian identity problem derives not just from the fact of conversion to Christianity from traditional religion, but also from the whole impact of the West on Africa. This, he argues, began well before the arrival of missionaries, particularly with the slave trade which shaped negative European attitudes to and stereotypes of Africa.[4] He sees the missionary enterprise as part of a benevolent Western movement to elevate the condition of African peoples, which meant that they must not only be given Christianity but also a total Western cultural package.[5] Underlying this approach were evolutionary and racial theories that had come to permeate Western thinking, and which saw African culture as inferior and in need of the contribution of the West.[6] Such ideas were shared by those who came with the gospel, and so not only did missionaries challenge African traditional religion, but they disparaged traditional African civilization at every level; conversion therefore implied both accepting Christian faith and embracing the culture of the West. To become a Christian was to become in some sense European and, in sharp contrast with the Pauline mission to the Gentiles, there was little or no conception of the validity, or even the possibility, of a transposition of the gospel into African categories.[7] The result was to rob African believers of their past, and so of their identity as Africans, and this has had serious and lasting consequences.

Most particularly, Bediako argues that the lack of a serious encounter with African traditional religion, the result of its denigration by the missionaries, severed African believers from their religious heritage and so denied them a truly African theology "by not allowing in the first place for the existence of a 'heathen' memory in the African Christian consciousness, the widespread European value-setting for the faith created a Church 'without

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[4] Bediako, *Theology and Identity* 226.
[5] Ibid. 227–28.
[6] Ibid. 230.
[7] Ibid. 234–40.

a theology.'"[8] Bediako therefore concludes that the African quest for an authentic Christian identity has been bedeviled by the very missionary enterprise that brought the gospel in the first place. In consequence Christianity is too readily seen by non-Christian Africans as a foreign imposition, a religion inherently alien to Africa, and has been critiqued as such by the modern African counterparts of Celsus,[9] such as Okot P'Bitek.[10] Accordingly, the central thrust of Bediako's argument is that the creation of a distinctively African Christian identity depends in large measure on a positive re-evaluation and recovery of the traditional African religious past which was the precursor of Christianity.[11] This, he argues, is the key task of African theology, and one already addressed by a number of African theologians, including Idowu, Mbiti, and Mulago, whose work he analyses.[12]

The bulk of Bediako's argument consists therefore of an analysis and critique of four writers of the early church, and then of four modern African theologians. Of the early church theologians two, Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria, sought to identify substantial continuity between the Greek Socratic philosophical tradition and the Christian faith, while the others, Tatian and Tertullian, insisted on radical discontinuity. Turning to four recent African voices, Idowu, Mbiti, and Mulago argue for continuity, while Kato is the only dissenter.

Bediako supports the case for continuity, and he reserves his sharpest criticism for Byang Kato. He favors the way in which Justin and Clement gave positive value to the Greek philosophical tradition. Thus Justin rejected the pagan, polytheistic religious tradition of his day but was more optimistic about classical philosophy in which he discerned a partial illumination, the result of the universal presence of the Logos. In other words, he identified a double Greek tradition, one positive and the other negative. Consequently some, but not necessarily all, non-Christian religion may be truthbearing and salvific, a point Bediako takes up. What distinguished the philosophical tradition from pagan polytheism in Justin's eyes was the presence, on the one hand, of some specifically Christian truth given by the Logos and, on the other, of individuals who were ready to take a stand against religious error—figures such as Socrates and Plato. As Bediako sees it, Clement went yet further than Justin and saw the philosophical tradition as the Greek preparation for the coming of the gospel, parallel to the role of the OT for Israel.

In a similar way Bediako generally applauds the positive evaluation of African traditional religion put forward by Mbiti, Idowu, and Mulago. He contrasts their approach with that of the missionaries who brought the gospel to Africa but, he says, deprived themselves of the means of recognizing the

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[8] Ibid. 237.

[9] Celsus wrote a philosophical critique of Christianity towards the end of the first century, entitled *The True Doctrine*.

[10] Okot P'Bitek, *African Religions in Western Scholarship* (Nairobi: East African Literature Bureau, 1970).

[11] Bediako, *Theology and Identity* 2.

[12] So also Walls: "the most urgent problem facing African Christians today." ("The Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator of Culture" 14.)

universal nature and activity of Christ, and so failed effectively to root it in African soil. [13]

> Because of the modern missionary misapprehension on this specific point of universality, fundamental questions on the possible positive meaning of Christ for the pre-Christian religious past could hardly surface or be taken with sufficient seriousness in the missionary era. The New Testament, on the other hand, shows an awareness of the problem, and significantly, approaches a solution . . . on the basis of the universality of Jesus Christ. [14]

Bediako's argument is full of interesting material, thoroughly researched and documented, and provocative. The résumé above gives only the slimmest notion of its breadth and learning. It is indeed a *tour de force*, one of the most substantial scholarly contributions to an issue that is central for African Christianity, and which deserves the courtesy of serious reflection and careful probing and response. The purpose of the present article is to attempt a limited contribution to the ongoing discussion of the critical issues that Bediako has identified.

II. AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION AND CHRISTIAN FAITH

Clearly a central concern for Bediako's thesis is the pursuit of continuity between African traditional religion and the Christian faith. This leads him into the whole area of theology of religions, in which the relationship between Christianity and other religions is currently the focus of lively debate. A classificatory system which attempts to distinguish the principal responses taken by Christian writers to this issue, and one which has been widely adopted—albeit with modifications and reservations—identifies three major positions. [15] Briefly, *exclusivist* approaches argue that salvation and/or truth is found only through an explicit knowledge and confession of Christ; *inclusivist* approaches argue that salvation/truth is found only in Christ but may be mediated through non-Christian religions or philosophies apart from any explicit knowledge of him; and *pluralist* approaches see Christ as simply one means of salvation and truth among many others.

Within this framework Bediako's approach to African traditional religion tends towards inclusivism, parallel to his understanding of the approaches of Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria toward Greek philosophy. The gospel is saving truth, but that truth was known partially—and savingly— in the pre-Christian worship of African traditional religion. This seems to be the point, for example, of Bediako's discussion of an Ashanti chief, Korinchi, who was sympathetic to missionary criticism of human sacrifice and other traditional customs, but was brutally executed by his king before anything

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[13] Bediako, *Theology and Identity* 245.

[14] Ibid. 247.

[15] Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions* (London: SCM, 1993). A similar approach is found in J. Andrew Kirk, *What is Mission? Theological Explorations* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1999), where he classifies differing approaches in terms of particularity, generality, and universality, categories essentially similar to Race's.

apparently came of his contact with the gospel. Bediako asks whether one might not see Korinchi in the same terms as Justin Martyr saw Socrates, and he quotes Erasmus to similar effect: "It may be that the Spirit of Christ goes farther and wider than we think. And there are many in the fellowship of the Saints, who are not in our catalogue."[16] Similarly, he approves the attempts of Mbiti and Idowu to establish that the God proclaimed by the missionaries was already worshipped in traditional religion.

Nevertheless, despite his claim that "the New Testament . . . approaches a solution" to the question of pre-Christian religions "on the basis of the universality of Jesus Christ," Bediako does not attempt to define the nature of that NT solution. He does refer briefly to Paul's sermon at Athens (Acts 17:22–31) to substantiate his approach: "The apostle who grasped most firmly the significance of Christ for the whole universe, and who strenuously preached Jesus to Jews as the fulfillment of the promises of the Old Testament, proclaimed with equal conviction that Jesus was to Gentiles also the fulfiller of their deepest religious and spiritual aspirations."[17]

He alludes in a footnote to Rom 2:11ff. in support of his claim that the NT was aware of the problem of the "possible positive meaning of Christ for the pre-Christian religious past."[18] And he mentions more than once the universality of Christ. However, his focus really lies elsewhere, and the very full discussion he offers of the positions of Justin and Clement demonstrates that his approach has an esteemed ancestry in the theology of the early church.

Nevertheless, there are strong grounds, biblical and philosophical, and with an equally long pedigree, for resisting an approach of this nature.[19] Of the biblical arguments he uses, Paul's address to the Athenians gives little support to the notion of "the universal nature and activity of Christ among the 'heathen.'"[20] In terms of the discourse, knowledge of God among the Athenians may have been theoretically possible, but

> there is little or no hope that this hypothetical possibility will be or has been translated into an acceptable relationship with God. It is hard to imagine a stronger contrast between the God who is in control of all (Acts 17:24–26) and the ironic pathetic state of the human predicament as here described (Acts 17:27): blindly and unsuccessfully groping for someone who stands so close and who desires to be found.[21]

Paul's statement in Rom 2:11–16 has been much discussed, but must surely be understood in the context of the climax of this section of the argument as a whole, in which the "law," whether written on hearts or in texts, is unable to bring righteousness (Rom 3:20). As Cranfield says, it would

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[16] Bediako, *Theology and Identity* 247.

[17] Ibid. 245.

[18] Ibid. 247. It is not entirely clear quite how Bediako wants to use the text to support his case.

[19] For a substantial critique of inclusivism see, for example, Harold Netland, *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991).

[20] Bediako, *Theology and Identity* 245.

[21] Conrad Gempf, "Athens, Paul at," *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters* (ed. G. F. Hawthorne *et al*.; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1993) 51–54, esp. p. 52.

hardly be compatible with Paul's argument here to suppose that "some pagan Gentiles do in fact, on the basis of the natural moral law, fulfill God's law's demands and so merit his favour."[22] And while the NT affirms Christ's universal role in upholding the cosmos (Col 1:17; Heb 1:3), Bediako tends simply to assume that his "universality" has significant implications for African traditional religion. He may be relying, as Justin Martyr did, on John 1:9, "The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world,"[23] but he only specifically refers to the verse in a footnote. However that may be, and in the light of two millennia of Christian reflection, it is a long step from this single enigmatic text to a positive evaluation of non-Christian religion, including African traditional religion. To the extent that one might look for a substantial biblical foundation for Bediako's argument, as opposed to one based on the arguments of second century theologians, this must be judged one of the more vulnerable points in his case.

Furthermore, Bediako's application of the approach of Justin and Clement to African traditional religion raises particular issues that might be more adequately addressed. Thus, first, while he accepts the validity of Justin's double tradition argument, and criticizes African theologians for saying little about the negative in African tradition,[24] at the same time he fails to do so himself. Nevertheless, the issue must be a critical one for his argument. The claim that African Christianity finds its identity by being rooted in the African religious past is presumably based on the assumption that there was a "positive" tradition in which Christ was somehow at work and that it was a significant one. This remains, however, at the level of assumption in Bediako's presentation, and necessarily so as long as the "negative" tradition is not identified and its role and importance within African traditional religion remain unevaluated. In fact, the comparison with pre-Christian Greek religion is fragile at this point. Justin himself did not appeal to the Greek philosophical tradition as a whole, but to Platonism rather than the other schools and specifically to Socrates. It is here that he identified a critique of Greek religion. This does not seem to be demonstrably true of African traditional religion. Certainly African tradition, like every other tradition, contains a number of elements, but that is far from saying that there are antithetical traditions, positive and negative. Bediako may wish to identify some of these elements of African traditional religion as positive and others as negative, but again that does not establish the presence of distinct and alternative traditions. Positive and negative, supposing there were elements which can be categorized in such terms, appear rather to have been part of a single tradition (or of single *traditions*, if one distinguishes the discrete religious traditions of each ethnic group).

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[22] C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975) 155. Cranfield argues that the reference is in fact to Gentile *Christians*.

[23] Biblical quotations come from the New International Version.

[24] Bediako, *Theology and Identity* 436–37.

This leads to a second point. Bediako apparently agrees with Mbiti and Idowu in identifying monotheistic worship as an essential point of continuity

between Christianity and African traditional religion.[25] Mbiti's *Concepts of God in Africa* and Idowu's *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*[26] both seemingly set out to indicate an identity between the God of the Christian Scriptures and the God worshipped in African tradition. Thus they suggest that before the coming of the gospel Africans were already worshipping the one God of creation: the missionaries did not bring knowledge of him because he was already known. Such an approach raises several issues.

Granted that many streams of African traditional religion acknowledge the existence of a creator God, one issue is the extent to which the attributes of Olodumare or those of the Supreme Beings of the 250 or so ethnic groups surveyed in Mbiti's work actually correspond to those of the God of Christianity. The fact that adherents of African traditional religion may have worshipped a single supreme being does not mean that the one they worshipped can be simply identified with the God and Father of Jesus Christ.[27] Indeed, for some African peoples the very issue of a supreme being may have been problematic; according to P'Bitek, admittedly a highly controversial writer but himself a Luo, "the idea of a high God among the Central Luo was a creation of the missionaries."[28]

A second issue is that of change within African religion. Like all religious traditions those of African peoples have been in a state of constant flux, both influencing one another and adapting to changing circumstances.[29] A key consideration here is the impact of Christianity and Islam on traditional conceptions of God which, while impossible to determine in the absence of written texts, may have been very significant.[30]

Third, a focus of long-standing debate has been the question whether African peoples actually worshipped God as such. Bediako refers at times to an article by P. J. Ryan, "'Arise, O God!' The Problem of 'Gods' in West Africa," in which the author seeks to demonstrate that the supreme being was indeed the object of worship in the traditional religions of West Africa.[31] However, the issue is not an easy one. Ryan's study relates to West African religion which had certain distinctive forms not always found elsewhere in

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[25] Ibid. 2–3.

[26] J. S. Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa* (London: SPCK, 1970); E. Bolaji Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* (London: Longmans, 1962).

[27] F. Peter Cotterell, *The Eleventh Commandment* (Leicester: InterVarsity, 1981) 143.

[28] Okot P'Bitek, *Religion of the Central Luo* (Nairobi: Central Literature Bureau, 1971) 50.

[29] A. W. Southall, *Alur Society* (Cambridge: Heffer, 1953) 250–64. N. S. Booth, "God and the Gods in West Africa," in *African Religions: a Symposium* (ed. N. S. Booth; New York: Nok, 1977) 159–81.

[30] E. W. Smith, ed., *African Ideas of God: a Symposium* (London: Edinburgh House Press, 1950) 2–3.

[31] P. J. Ryan, "'Arise, O God!' The Problem of 'Gods' in West Africa," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 11 (1980) 161–71.

Africa,[32] but even there the evidence is not so clear-cut. It does seem that, notwithstanding perhaps some notable exceptions, although most African peoples may have conceived of a creator God, they took him to be remote and largely uninvolved in their daily affairs, and rarely if ever addressed worship to him: "there are no cults nor temples nor formal acts of liturgy specifically directed to God."[33] African mythologies confirm this impression with numerous stories which seek to explain the distance between humanity and its Creator. The focus of religious life was rather on lesser spirit beings; as Hastings has explained, there is "a dependence upon lesser spiritual causalities because there is no adequate recognition that the great power of the one God could really be concerned with this or that side of one's own small life."[34]

Fourth, there is the problem of the apologetic motives of scholars involved in the debate. This is no original point; it is generally accepted that there are no objective findings in any area of research, including even the natural sciences. However, P'Bitek and Westerlund have drawn particular attention, though from very different vantage points, to the way in which political and religious factors have influenced the academic study of African traditional religion by both Western and African scholars, including Mbiti and Idowu.[35] Certainly their writings are driven by conscious and deliberate apologetic intent, and one might question whether Bediako has sufficiently attended to this factor when making use of their conclusions.

Finally, Bediako's methodology bypasses the central issue of religious definition and focus. Like any other religious tradition, African traditional religion comprises many individual elements, which are variously combined according to the particular practice of each ethnic group. Belief in a supreme being may have been one such element for most, if not all, African peoples, but it is not the only one nor is it necessarily central for any of them. The point is to determine where the center of religious belief and activity actually lies. This is crucial if one wishes to identify continuity at some fundamental level between Christianity and African traditional religion. Andrew Walls makes a similar point as follows:

> *The elements of religious life are not the same as the structure of religious life.* Most obviously, the tradition of a people may include a Being who, when that people come into contact with a God-centred religious tradition, will be invested with all the characteristics of the Supreme Being; or the tradition may in some other way recognize the ultimate unity of the transcendent world, a single

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[32] H. K. Schneider, *The Africans, an Ethnological Account* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1981).

[33] Tokunboh Adeyemo, *Salvation in African Tradition* (Nairobi: Evangel Publishing House, 1979) 37; cf. E. G. Parrinder, *African Traditional Religion* (London: Sheldon, 1974) 38–39.

[34] A. Hastings, *African Christianity* (London and Dublin: Geoffrey Chapman, 1976) 74; cf. F. Peter Cotterell, "An Indigenous Church in Southern Ethiopia," *Bulletin of the Society for African Church History* 3 (1969–70) 68–104, esp. p. 90.

[35] P'Bitek, *African Religions in Western Scholarship*, and D. Westerlund, *African Religions in African Scholarship: A Preliminary Study of the Religious and Political Background* (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wicksell International, 1985).

principle underlying life. And yet that recognition may impinge very little on the life of most members of the community, though ritual acts and words may be of regular occurrence. It may be there in the margins of daily life; it may be locked in the specialist knowledge of the experts in tradition.[36]

It should be noted, first, that Walls reinforces a point already made above, that the impact of a "God-centered religious tradition"—such as Islam or Christianity—can significantly change a people's perception of their own tradition. But he is also saying that elements of religious belief—including belief in a supreme being—may be present within a tradition, but have in practice little bearing on the everyday reality that most or all people within the tradition actually experience. In principle it may be considered logical that where belief in one supreme creator God exists it should dominate every feature of the religious landscape. However, in practice that may not be the case at all. So, the point being argued here is that religions have a center or focus which defines them *for their adherents*. The key issue, therefore, is to identify what people actually do in terms of religious activity, what or who concerns them most, where the center of gravity lies.

When raising the question for African traditional religion there are a number of possible responses. One would be to assert the centrality of the supreme being, which is the direction Idowu and Mbiti appear to take, but which on the available evidence may be considered problematic. A more defensible position would be to identify the veneration of ancestors as the focus of religious devotion for many peoples.[37] According to a recent article, "When trying to focus African thinking and feeling and to characterize the cultural and religious identity of the African people, one can do this with one phrase: Living together with the ancestors."[38] However, another, perhaps more comprehensive approach would be to focus on the anthropocentricity of African traditional religion, which has been emphasized by such writers as Charles Nyamiti as well as Mbiti, and to argue that African tradition is centrally concerned with human life and wellbeing by whatever means that may be achieved. Accordingly, Nyamiti has defined African traditional religion in the following terms: "African religious behaviour is centred mainly on man's life in this world, with the consequence that religion is chiefly functional, or a means to serve people to acquire earthly goods (life, health,

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[36] Andrew F. Walls, "Primal Religious Traditions in Today's World," in *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996) 119–39, esp. p. 122. Italics original.

[37] Bediako gives his approach to the role of the ancestors in Kwame Bediako *Christianity in Africa: the Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh and Maryknoll, NY: Edinburgh University Press and Orbis, 1995). He argues that ancestor veneration is not about worship, although in some traditions it did become idolatrous. Rather it is about living with the dead. He suggests that a Christian theology of the ancestors would mean interpreting the past so as to show that present experience and knowledge of the grace of God in the gospel have been anticipated in the response to the Transcendent reflected in the past lives of African people. There is, therefore, again the stress on continuity.

[38] J. Triebel, "Living Together with the Ancestors: Ancestor Veneration in Africa as a Challenge for Missiology," *Missiology* 30 (2002) 187–97, esp. p. 187.

fecundity, wealth, power and the like) and to maintain social cohesion and order."[39]

From this perspective God is certainly not a central focus of religion for his own sake, and rarely a focus of attention at all as he is conceived to have little practical influence on the welfare of his human creatures. On the other hand, such an approach leaves ample room for the ancestors who are seen as a source of life and well-being, as well as a very significant potential factor in cases of suffering and disaster. Moreover, to assure their own continuance and welfare, ancestors are themselves vitally concerned that their descendants keep remembering them and making the appropriate offerings.

The anthropocentric understanding is, moreover, thoroughly consistent with the obviously central concern in African tradition to identify and neutralize those powers and beings which are believed to bring misfortune to humanity—death, illness, infertility, drought, accident, and so on. It therefore coincides with an observation made by Evans-Pritchard many years ago. For the religion of any particular African people, he wrote, "the test of what is the dominant motif is usually, perhaps always, to what a people attribute dangers and sickness and other misfortunes and what steps they take to avoid or eliminate them."[40] This, in turn, explains the obvious and pivotal importance of divination among the rites of African traditional religion, as a means both of identifying mystic sources of harm (including the maleficent spirits, witches, and sorcerers who are believed to attack and destroy human life and prosperity), and of prescribing the appropriate remedies and responses. The diviner "holds the code which allows the decipherment of the various messages intended for man, the society in which he lives, and all else related to his destiny."[41] And, significantly, despite the disappearance of visible expressions of African traditional religion throughout the continent in the face of the advance of Islam and Christianity, divination continues to flourish in African life, even in modern African cities. Its very tenacity suggests its crucial role in the traditional worldview, as also the continuing centrality of the existential and mundane human concerns for which it existed.

To establish with sufficient plausibility the continuity between Christianity and African traditional religion required by his overall approach, Bediako would need to demonstrate more effectively the presence within African traditional religion of a "positive tradition" that can convincingly be put forward as its basis. He seems to regard the presence of a creator God and worship of him as evidence of just such continuity, but it is at least questionable whether such existed to any appreciable extent and he does not really attempt to demonstrate that it did. Certainly the focus or genius of

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[39] Charles Nyamiti, "The Doctrine of God," in *A Reader in African Christian Theology* (ed. J. Parratt; London: SPCK, 1987) 58–66, esp. p. 60. Cf. J. S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1969) 5; P'Bitek, *African Religions in Western Scholarship* 62–63.

[40] E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956) 315.

[41] D. Zahan, *The Religion, Spirituality and Thought of Traditional Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979) 81.

African traditional religion can very plausibly be understood in quite different terms, as suggested above. Bediako tends in fact to assume what needs to be proved.[42] But even if some African peoples did worship a supreme being, would that of itself suffice to establish the overall case he sets out to make? The question brings us to the subject of the next section.

III. CHRISTIAN CONVERSION

A fundamental issue raised by Bediako's thesis is that of the nature of conversion to Christian faith. In seeing a significant degree of continuity between the pre-Christian and Christian experience of African believers his argument suggests that conversion should be understood more in terms of fulfillment than of antithesis. In other words, by responding to the gospel the new believer is completing or realizing what he or she already knew and worshipped previously in some obscure and misty way: Jesus Christ comes to complete pre-Christian religious experience, not to negate it. This is particularly in line with the thinking of Clement of Alexandria. Clement regarded the Greek philosophical tradition as a *propaidia* for the gospel, parallel to the role of the OT for the Jews. Thus, according to him, before the incarnation all knowledge of God, whether in Greek philosophy or in the Hebrew Scriptures, was partial and incomplete, awaiting its fulfillment in Christ. So, just as the OT prepared Jews for the coming of Jesus Christ, Socrates and Plato in the manner of OT prophets prepared Greeks too, and, pursuing the analogy further, in the same way did African traditional religion prepare Africans.

Clement's argument has had enormous influence through the centuries, and clearly has potential relevance to the issue of identity that Bediako is raising. But is the argument valid? Can conversion be understood in these terms? In response there is, first, the question of the relevance of Clement's theory even in the Greek context itself. As we have noted, Bediako refers to the notion of a double Greek tradition, which he finds in Clement and Justin Martyr. But to what extent was any part of the philosophical tradition the religious background out of which Christian believers actually came? Did early converts belong to the intellectual milieu in which the "positive" tradition might have been dominant? In short, in practical reality was there any continuity? Among early Gentile converts to Christianity plainly a number were God-fearers, Gentiles who were attracted by the Jewish faith and had attached themselves to the synagogue though without becoming proselytes and converting to Judaism. The record of Acts indicates that many such people responded to the gospel, and it could be argued that in their case the knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures acquired through synagogue worship constituted a preparation for the gospel. However, the NT also suggests that very many Christian converts came from a polytheistic

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[42] Which is, ironically, similar to the criticism he levels against Byang Kato, that his attitude towards African traditional religion was based on "outdated assumptions" (Bediako, *Theology and Identity* 414).

background, the "negative" tradition. The demonstration that occurred in Ephesus, directed against the preaching of Paul, makes sense only on the assumption that very significant numbers of worshippers of the goddess Diana were becoming Christians (Acts 19:23–41). The issue that Paul debates in 1 Cor 8:1–11:1, probably that of the consumption of sacrificial food "at the cultic meals in pagan temples,"[43] also presupposes a polytheistic background for the Gentile believers at Corinth, as do the debate and decision of the Council at Jerusalem (Acts 15:20, 29). The Thessalonians turned from idols (1 Thess 1:9), and so did the Galatians (Gal 4:8), and the parting shot of John's first epistle implies a concern that the intended recipients might return to them (1 John 5:21). Indeed, even at Athens when speaking to the Areopagus, Paul's message seems to be addressed to polytheists rather than to Platonic monotheists. He quotes Greek poets but makes no attempt to build an argument from Socrates or Plato. Why not? Part of the response must be that the Socratic philosophical tradition was insignificant as a religious background for the vast majority of those to whom he preached, as also for most believers converted from a Gentile background.

Nor is there much of a case for supposing that the situation changed significantly in the following centuries. The monotheistic Platonism which the arguments of Justin and Clement tended to legitimize can only with difficulty be seen as the pre-Christian religious context of the large numbers of Christians who came from the poor and marginalized of Greco-Roman society, and there is scarcely more reason to think that those from the higher social strata identified with it either. The gods of tradition and the newer mystery cults dominated the religious horizon. In such circumstances the Socratic tradition cannot be seen as a preparation for the gospel in anything but a purely theoretical and academic way, except perhaps for a small minority. If it eventually came to find a central place in Christian theology, it was because of the way in which the fourth-century Fathers appropriated all that they deemed true in Greek thought and synthesized it with Christian revelation. But it was never a substantial source of identity in the pre-Christian past. Justin and Clement were concerned to counter the sneers of such as Celsus, and their arguments should be seen as an early example of the contextualization of the gospel in the interests of "cultured despisers." They constitute an apologetic maneuver to demonstrate the intellectual credibility of the Christian faith, but one which, like Schleiermacher's later approach, may have had the unhappy side effect of eroding its unique distinctiveness.

Second, and somewhat related to the preceding point, the fact that beliefs consistent with Christian faith are present in religions other than Christianity—which is what one might expect if God does not leave himself without a witness (Acts 14:17; Rom 1:19–20)—does not mean that the religions in question thereby become "preparations" for the gospel in the sense of predisposing their adherents to respond positively to it. Of course,

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[43] G. D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 359.

it is possible to argue that any religion by raising issues of ultimate concern, "the fundamental questions,"[44] helps create an environment, indeed a vocabulary, in which comprehension of the Christian message is possible. However, this is far from saying that it prepares its followers to accept it. Marxists may know the language of economics but it does not prepare them to become capitalists, except in the very broad sense that they have acquired the vocabulary in which they can debate the issues and change their minds if they wish to do so. In fact, by indoctrinating their adherents into an alternative total belief structure, non-Christian religions by their very nature and existence tend rather to constitute a barrier to conversion, a rival paradigm into which practitioners are enculturated from birth. So Tertullian argued for the existence of a common human consciousness of God, but declared that it was confused by human philosophy. "The fact is that religions do not prepare their adherents for the revelation of Christ."[45] Moreover, such an understanding is in line with the polemic against other religions that runs through the whole of the Bible, and which at no point recognizes a distinction between positive and negative traditions in other faiths. Paul's attitude to the non-Christian religions and philosophy of his day seems to be quite categorical: "the world through its wisdom did not know him" (1 Cor 1:21).

Such a view might be refuted by denying that Christianity is indeed radically different from other religions, or at least from some of them—from a "positive tradition," for example. This is in fact the inevitable drift of Clement's argument, but it runs counter to the consistent NT insistence on the uniqueness of Christ. In his discussion of some African Christologies Parratt notes that it is precisely at this point that the idea of radical continuity between African traditional religion and Christianity fails: "the central aspect of the Christian faith has no real parallels or points of contact in African traditions."[46] For this very same reason, neither can it be argued that Greek philosophy, or African traditional religion, constitute a preparation for the gospel in the same way as the OT, since the OT stands in a unique relationship to Christ. There is a fundamental "Christocentric continuity from Adam to Christ."[47] Jesus Christ himself sought to explain this to his disciples by showing that the OT Scriptures contain a true revelation of his coming and work: "and beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself" (Luke 24:27). Paul similarly makes frequent reference to the prophets of the OT to emphasize the special relationship of promise-fulfillment: "the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures" (Rom 1:2). The OT revelation is understood to be organically united with Christ, the same revelation progressively, and at last climactically, unfolding, which explains why

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[44] F. Peter Cotterell, *Mission and Meaninglessness* (London: SPCK, 1990) 16.

[45] Ibid. 51.

[46] J. Parratt, *Reinventing Christianity: African Christian Theology Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) 198.

[47] D. Strange, *The Possibility of Salvation among the Unevangelised: An Analysis of Inclusivism in Recent Evangelical Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002) 171.

Paul could see Israel—the people created by that revelation—as the "olive tree" to which are added all those who come to faith in Christ from among the Gentile nations (Rom 11:17–25). African traditional religion may indeed be a response to some sort of universal revelation of God, but that does not mean that it is salvific or in any way a preparation for the gospel. It contains no promise and expects no fulfillment. Of course, none of this is intended to suggest that Bediako is unaware or unappreciative of these arguments, which are rooted in centuries of Christian reflection and debate.

The unique and extraordinary nature of the gospel of Jesus Christ found in the NT is easily lost sight of, and when that happens Christian faith is quickly assimilated to other religious beliefs. Moody made the point eighty years ago in his analysis of the thinking of the converts of the early centuries of the church: "The messages of the gospels and epistles were so strange to the world in which they were delivered that they were at once and universally misapprehended."[48] He goes on to quote Harnack to the same effect, and argues throughout that in the China of his own day, where he served as a missionary, the same process was taking place. Putting forward an argument that sees extensive continuity between Christ and African traditional religion—or any other non-Christian religion—runs the risk of understating the radical and unique nature of the gospel of Christ.

Third, the consequence of all this for the NT writers is that conversion itself is an act of radical transformation, and not simply the realization of a process already underway in the convert's pre-Christian religious experience. The ubiquitous demand on all would-be Christians throughout the NT is to repent, which implies fundamental change from a former Christless, sinful way of life, including abandonment of former religious allegiances. At times the latter is expressed explicitly, as when Paul records how the Thessalonians "turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God" (1 Thess 1:9), or calls on the population of Lystra "to turn from these worthless things" (Acts 14:15). Moreover, while not contesting the fundamental continuity between the OT and NT, repentance may equally stem from empty Jewish religiosity that puts confidence in descent from Abraham (Luke 3:8), and the summons was also addressed to those who worshipped in the Temple (Acts 3:26).

Consequently, the transformation produced in those who repent and trust in Christ is also a radical one. It means passing from death to life (Eph 2:1–6), from darkness to light (Acts 26:18; Eph 5:8), and from blindness to sight (2 Cor 4:4–6); it means that "once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy" (1 Pet 2:10); and it means that "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" (2 Cor 5:17). These are radical antitheses and intended to express the dramatic change that had taken place in the lives of those who had trusted in Jesus Christ. And so Paul tells the Ephesian believers that formerly they had been without hope and without God

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[48] Campbell N. Moody, *The Mind of the Early Converts* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1920) 1.

(Eph 2:12). He himself regarded even his own previous Jewish religious experience as "loss for the sake of Christ . . . rubbish, that I may gain Christ" (Phil 3:7–8): "according to his own testimony, Paul's coming to faith in Christ involved the surrender of the heritage and piety which he once treasured."[49] All of this language is difficult to harmonize with the conception of conversion apparently implied by Clement. In these terms it is hard to see pre-Christian religion and philosophy as sources of continuing identity for Christian believers.

Moreover, the radical NT understanding of conversion has been frequently confirmed by the experience of first generation converts from Paul onward. The concern to identify a continuity between Christianity and some dimension of the non-Christian religious past comes often from subsequent generations, for whom the traditional past was never an experiential reality (although this was not true of Justin who was converted from paganism himself). In consequence the immediate existential awareness of earlier generations by the radical transformation brought about in their lives in response to the gospel—and of the need for it—gradually diminishes.

IV. CONVERSION AND IDENTITY

What then becomes of the identity of Christian believers as the gospel is communicated in new cultures and churches are established? To some degree the issue arises in any context. The "pilgrim principle" to which Walls has drawn attention means an inevitable degree of cultural alienation for all believers.[50] By its very nature the gospel is counter-cultural, and where it is sincerely embraced local churches become alternative societies with a distinctive lifestyle, one that is governed by the values of the kingdom of God. If this is not the case then Christian faith simply degenerates into "cultural Christianity," conformed to the world around it, to which it gives some sort of supernatural sanction. Volf makes the point by pursuing the story of Abraham's departure from his own culture and people as a metaphor for the cultural implications of Christian faith and commitment.

> The courage to break his cultural and familial ties and abandon the gods of his ancestors (Joshua 24:2) out of allegiance to a God of all families and all cultures was the original Abrahamic revolution. . . . The narrative of Abraham's call underlines that stepping out of enmeshment in the network of inherited cultural relations is a correlate of faith in the one God. . . . To be a child of Abraham and Sarah and to respond to the call of their God means to make an exodus, to start a journey, to become a stranger (Genesis 23:4; 24:1–9). It is a mistake, I believe, to complain too much about Christianity being "alien" in a given culture.[51]

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[49] M. A. Seifrid, *Christ our Righteousness: Paul's Theology of Justification* (Leicester: Apollos, 2000) 13.

[50] Walls, "The Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator of Culture."

[51] Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: a Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996) 39.

It is for this very reason that Jesus Christ warned his disciples to expect trouble in the world (John 16:33); that Paul recognized suffering as the mark of apostleship (2 Cor 11:22–30); and that the beast wages war against the saints, those who do not bear the mark of his "number" (Rev 13:7). Although this is certainly not all there is to say on the subject, it is nonetheless from this basic perspective that the issue of identity has to be viewed.

However, Christians do not cease in any absolute sense to belong to the cultures in which they were brought up. So Walls refers also to the "indigenizing principle": God accepts people as cultural beings, and Christians continue to live as members of their own societies. Throughout the OT and the NT a positive value is placed on cultural and ethnic diversity; "the existence of ethnic identities is a direct result of the outworking of God's command to the original human beings to multiply and fill the earth."[52] This culminates with the vision of the new Jerusalem in which cultural diversity appears to continue, even perhaps to find its climactic expression (Rev 21:24). The goal is unity in diversity rather than uniformity, and cultural variety may forever characterize the recreated and glorified humanity. Consequently, there is a tension here between, on the one side, the separation from total cultural assimilation that conversion entails and, on the other, the fact that cultural identity cannot and will not cease to be an inalienable element of identity, and one vital to effective functioning in society.

Nevertheless, some resolution of the tension can be found in the fact that culture is never a static object but protean by nature, constantly subject to change under the impact of innumerable factors. In that religion plays a key role in shaping culture, religious change necessarily entails cultural change: "if the church *is* mission, it is by its very nature an agent of cultural change."[53] Significant modification to such a central feature must impact the whole organism. But religious change does not bring the structure crashing down, nor does conversion eliminate cultural identity. While there can be no doubt about the central place of religion in shaping culture, it is not totally determinative of it. Accordingly, changing religion will certainly, and progressively, reshape one's cultural universe, and impact, often significantly, the way in which one conforms to its values, norms, and patterns. However, conversion to Christ, radical though it is, does not erase cultural identity. It brings about a transformation in the Christian's relationship to his or her culture, not by wholesale negation but rather by transcendence and transformation. The patterns change so that there may likely be a degree of alienation from the mainstream of society, but the elements remain, albeit in new configurations.[54] Language, thought forms, social structures, and so on continue, but are increasingly infused by Christian values. Some elements are profoundly affirmed and enriched by the gospel, such as tra-

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[52] Dewi Hughes, *Castrating Culture* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2001) 65.

[53] Louis J. Luzbetak, *The Church and Cultures: New Perspectives in Missiological Anthropology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988) 300.

[54] A. Shorter, *Toward A Theology of Inculturation* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1988) 57.

ditional African ideals of generosity, hospitality, community, and person-centeredness. At the same time, in the light of the gospel some elements of any culture are categorically condemned and must be eliminated, while others are modified or reprioritized, and new elements are added.

So, although the gospel challenges cultures and should progressively bring the evil in them to light, it also enhances and enriches. Accordingly, while conversion to Christianity certainly implies substantial cultural change, it does not entail a loss of cultural identity: indeed, it may reaffirm and strengthen an identity that for one reason or another was under threat. It certainly gives significance and worth to those who suffer social or political marginalization, and has done so for countless groups throughout Christian history. In the modern Two-Thirds World, and indeed in parts of the West, this is still true, and for such people, sometimes culturally impoverished and anomic, the gospel is foundational to the reconstruction of a fragile and threatened cultural identity. This is consistent with Paul's pastoral counsel to the Christian slaves of Corinth (1 Cor 7:21–23): he "does not discount the oppression of their situation and advises them to become free if they can. But neither does he consider their social condition determinative of their true identity."[55]

A study of the experience of Bor Dinka during the war in Sudan highlights the way in which new Christian believers have categorically rejected their former beliefs in the *jak*, the unseen powers that they had previously venerated, but have adapted the traditional symbols of their culture to express their new faith.[56] So, while they formerly used forked poles as memorials of animal sacrifices to the *jak*, now "the cross is the ubiquitous symbol of hope"[57] and is found everywhere, just as the poles once were. In the face of massive social and economic change brought about by the devastating war with the north, traditional elements of culture are redefined around a new religious center, which reaffirms identity and brings new hope in the midst of disaster.

The same is true of northeastern Congo today, where civil war, foreign invasion, and the plundering of resources, brutal ethnic conflict and self-serving rebel faction fighting, have combined to tear apart the social and political fabric. It is the church and Christian faith that bring hope, a measure of cohesion, and identity to people close to being overwhelmed. Similarly, the coming of Christianity in the nineteenth century gave the Yoruba of Nigeria their name and their consciousness of being a single people, and furnished them with a literature and written history too.[58] The point is that retention or renewal of an ennobling cultural identity does not depend upon rehabilitating the former pre-Christian religion; identity is reaffirmed or recreated, and completed too, through the gospel.

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[55] Bernard Adeney, *Strange Virtues: Ethics in a Multicultural World* (Leicester: Apollos, 1995) 72.

[56] M. R. Nikkel, "The Cross of Bor Dinka Christians: a working Christology in face of displacement and death," *Studies in World Christianity* 1 (1995) 160–85.

[57] Ibid. 160.

[58] Hughes, *Castrating Culture* 107–9.

V. GOD AND IDENTITY

In what then does the Christian's identity consist? Where are its roots? Fundamentally, the answer is that they are found in the three-personed God of Christian faith. Elizondo points out that "the innermost identity of Jesus was his life of intimacy with God-Father" and that he offers "precisely this intimacy" to all others.[59] Thus, in a quite revolutionary way, he teaches his followers to address God as "Father" just as he did himself. Their new identity becomes the basis of their access into God's presence, for it is not just some honorific status that they have received but it is what they *are*—"children of God" *is* now their identity (1 John 3:1). Moreover, it is the Spirit who assures them of the reality of this identity: "the Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children" (Rom 8:16, cf. Gal 4:6).

But it is Jesus Christ who is constitutive of the new identity. Gary Burge develops this theme in his study of the vine metaphor from John 15. Thus, he points out that in the OT "the land is at the heart of the Israelite faith," underlining the significance of the "unbreakable triad" of "God, Israel, and The Land."[60] The promise of the land and its subsequent possession became determinative of Israel's identity, and land consciousness was "a critical aspect of the culture that shaped the NT."[61] However, Burge argues that in Johannine theology Jesus Christ himself replaces the Land with all that it promised to Israel, and that this "spiritualization" of the land motif comes to particular expression through the use of the vine metaphor in John 15. "The crux of John 15 is that *Jesus is changing the place of rootedness for Israel*. . . . He offers what attachment to The Land once promised: rootedness and hope and life."[62]

Burge's purpose is to draw out the implications of this change for the land issue in modern Israel, but it has significance also for the identity of all Christians, whether Jews or Gentiles. It is particularly significant for those who feel they have lost vital elements of their former identity—the dispossessed of whatever sort, including those who have suffered political and intellectual colonization—providing a new and dynamic reorientation and focus. Identity is rooted in Christ himself rather than in any antecedent condition, whether material or spiritual. Kirk makes a similar point in discussing the issues of nationalism and kinship in the context of mission. Jesus understood his mission in terms of forming "an alternative community with remarkably different values. . . . In this new community allegiance to kinship and ethnic groups was not the main source of a person's identity."[63] And

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[59] V. Elizondo, "*Mestizaje* as a Locus of Theological Reflection," in *The Future of Liberation Theology: Essays in Honor of Gustavo Gutiérrez* (ed. M. Ellis; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989) 358–74, esp. p. 369.

[60] G. Burge, "Territorial Religion, Johannine Christology, and the Vineyard of John 15," in *Jesus of Nazareth: Lord and Christ: Essays on the Historical Jesus and New Testament Christology* (ed. J. B. Green and M. M. B. Turner; Carlisle: Paternoster, 1994) 384–96, esp. p. 384. Italics original.

[61] Ibid. 386.

[62] Ibid. 393–94.

[63] Kirk, *What is Mission?* 47.

Paul sums up all of this with his repeated affirmation that the believer's fundamental identity derives from being "in Christ," which relativizes while not obliterating all other cultural distinctives: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28; cf. Col 3:11).

And this has implications also for the relationship of new believers to their religious history and that of their people. By entering into the kingdom of God, they are identified now in relation to the history of *that* kingdom. They have become a part of God's salvation history. Thus, insofar as the identity of Gentile believers has a backward-looking orientation, it is found not in their own religious past, but in that of Israel, for they have been grafted into the history of God's self-revelation to the Jews: "you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root" (Rom 11:17). The church itself is therefore an enlarged Israel into which Gentiles are brought. This does not mean that Gentile believers must adopt Jewish culture, as Paul's response to the circumcision controversy makes clear, but it does radically transform the way in which they understand their religious identity as they become inheritors of the promises to Abraham (Rom 4:11). It is the OT rather than any other religious tradition which becomes the inherited spiritual past of those converted from non-Christian and non-Jewish backgrounds.

However, finding their identity in Christ in fact moves the orientation of their identity away from the past and toward the future; the center of gravity has shifted in a decisive way. The solution to the identity issue put forward by Mbiti and Idowu and followed by Bediako has a somewhat backward-looking orientation, which is consistent with African culture generally but less obviously compatible with the eschatological thinking of the NT. One of Mbiti's early works sought to show how African thought has been predominantly oriented towards the past and present rather than the future; its focus lies in *zamani* and *sasa*, and that alone creates problems in the understanding of NT eschatology.[64] This is how Yusufu Turaki defines the traditional African worldview as well: "the orientation is toward the glorious, perfect, primordial state of the past and less to the unknown, uncertain future."[65] It is deceased ancestors who legitimize the customs and practices of the present and punish breaches of the order they established.

New Testament theology is by contrast essentially forward-looking— awaiting the promised return of the Messiah and the coming salvation and judgment. More specifically, the identity of believers derives from the destination to which they are headed rather than from their present situation in this world, or the past from which they have come. They are pilgrims "looking for the city that is to come" (Heb 13:14), waiting for "an inheritance that

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[64] J. S. Mbiti, *New Testament Eschatology in an African Background: A Study of the Encounter between New Testament Theology and African Traditional Concepts* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971).

[65] Y. Turaki, *Christianity and African Gods: A Method in Theology* (South Africa: Potchefstroomse Universiteit, 1999) 111.

can never perish, spoil or fade" (1 Pet 1:4), and for their "adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies" (Rom 8:23); they are a "new creation" and "the old has gone" (2 Cor 5:17); and so Paul, forgetting what was behind, pressed forward "toward the goal, to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus" (Phil 3:14). The church itself is the eschatological community of God, the present anticipation on earth of the fulfillment to be realized in heaven, when the dwelling of God will be with men (Rev 21:3). From this perspective it becomes problematic for believers to be encouraged to seek the locus of their Christian identity in the past, and especially in the past of religious traditions from which they have been redeemed. The dynamic of the gospel is oriented in a decisive way toward the future and draws the people of God forward to where their new and ultimate identity is located.

VI. SOME PROVISIONAL CONCLUSIONS: MISSION, THEOLOGY, AND IDENTITY

A major feature of Bediako's analysis is his critique of the impact of the West, and specifically that of the Western missionary enterprise, on African culture and identity. There is much in his analysis that impels assent, and also requires regret for the mistakes of the past. He argues that among those who took the gospel to Africa there were some—indeed, perhaps many—who put the cultural identity of their hearers at risk by the pursuit of a Westernizing impulse often born out of a hubristic sense of their own cultural superiority. The point should be recognized, not least by those—Westerners and, increasingly, others—now engaged in cross-cultural mission. Byang Kato's famed cry, "Let African Christians be Christian Africans," was also an implicit condemnation of the failure of "mission Christianity" to engage seriously with African culture, and a summons to an identity that would be both authentically Christian and African at the same time. The cultural diversity of the world church is an immensely positive value, and offers vast potential enrichment to us all: "the church of Jesus Christ in Africa, as a result of the way God has dealt with us in our historical cultural context, has received particular gifts. We have insights to contribute to the world church that nobody else is fitted to do in the same way as we are."[66] What is vital, however, is so to maintain cultural identity that Christian integrity is not compromised.

At the same time, the case Bediako makes should not be overstated. On the one hand, Bonk has noted that "there was nothing idyllic about life in the Africa of early nineteenth century missionaries," and goes on briefly to describe the often gruesome realities that they encountered.[67] On the other,

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[66] Gottfried Osei-Mensah, *Wanted: Servant Leaders* (Achimota, Ghana: Africa Christian Press, 1990) 61.

[67] J. J. Bonk, *Missions and Money: Affluence as a Western Missionary Problem* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991) 24.

the gospel was planted in Africa largely through the labors of African evangelists, and the translation of the Christian Scriptures into African vernacular languages brought about a rapid and profound rooting of Christian faith in African soil. Sanneh points to the comparatively small numbers of Western missionaries who served in Africa and their concentration on mission stations, "isolated from the events they would have liked to control."[68] Consequently, he argues, "they failed to assert the kind of close supervision over local Christian life that official reports would like to believe was possible." He then goes on, "African agency in the dissemination of Christianity is a major category in the transmission of the religion. This suggests that even the historical process of transmission was properly got under way only after local adaptation had been fully initiated." In view of Sanneh's argument, claims that the missionary enterprise as such had a very significant and deleterious impact on African culture may need to be modified, at least to some degree.

Certainly the vast growth of the church in Africa during the twentieth century seems to prove that it has become a truly African religion. As has been the case for other oppressed or colonized peoples, conversion to Christ has for many, such as the Bor Dinka, been a crucial factor in rebuilding an authentic ethnic identity where that had been threatened, and this without any need to resort to the traditional religious past as a source of legitimation. In fact, the traditional African religious background is no longer the history of most African believers in any vital and experiential way; identity is more and more found to be centered in the gospel alone.

However, this does not mean that Bediako's concerns are unfounded. He alerts us to significant religious developments in modern Africa, especially to the movement of large numbers into revitalized forms of African traditional religion. In another work his discussion of the Ghanaian movement, Afrikania, founded by the former Catholic priest, Vincent Kwabena Damuah, highlights the issue and raises important questions for the church.[69] It is doubtless true that the adherents of such movements may see in them a more authentically African expression of religion than that offered by the Christian churches. At the same time, movements such as these cannot be seen as a simple return to tradition, but constitute rather a radical reformulation of it for modern—often urban—Africa.

Nor is the approach advocated in *Theology and Identity* necessarily an appropriate response to such a situation. On the one hand, the confession of Christ and of the cross has always been a scandal; in every century and every cultural context there are those who reject Christ in favor of one of the many alternatives on offer. On the other hand, radically contextualized African expressions of Christian faith—sometimes more or less syncretistic—are certainly not lacking. African Initiated Churches offer a range of syntheses between African culture and Christianity, and yet even these are

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[68] L. Sanneh, "The Horizontal and the Vertical in Mission: an African Perspective," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 7 (1983) 165–71, esp. p. 167.

[69] Bediako, *Christianity in Africa* 17–38.

clearly inadequate for those who want to exorcise all trace of Christian faith. If this is the case, it is hard to see how a theological synthesis of the sort proffered by Mbiti and Idowu would fare much better. By its nature it tends to be academic, adapted to the "cultural despisers" of the faith such as P'Bitek, Mazrui, and their successors, while lacking relevance for the majority of believers.

Theology should be the servant of the church, but has too often asked questions of largely academic interest, irrelevant to the real concerns of Christian believers. Against this, Tite Tiénou has pointed to the critical role of grassroots Christians in the genesis of truly indigenous theologies.[70] Such an emphasis helps to ensure that they are the theologies of the faith community and responsive to its concerns, rather than the product of the theological academy. Jean-Marc Ela has criticized the "blackness" (*négritude*) movement promoted by Senghor and others as a romanticization "permeated with the Western thought of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries"; he continues, "despite the mystique inspiring it, this theory has scarcely any real hold on the African masses."[71] It is, in his view, a movement of uprooted intellectuals "straddling the fence between European culture and African tradition." A similar critique has been suggested here in relation to the theology of Clement and Justin, and it may also be relevant to some of the African theologies we have been discussing. The rooting of Christian faith in Africa is vital to its long-term health on the continent, but the suggestion here is that the strategy advocated by Bediako is itself problematic, particularly in that the gospel is not well defended by what appears to be an attenuation of its unique and radical character. Further, it risks diverting theological energies away from questions that are of burning concern for the great mass of believers, such as fundamental fears of witches, sorcerers, and spirit attack which occupy the center ground of religious attention for very many. It is the apparent failure of the gospel to respond at this vital, existential level that may lead to defections to traditional or syncretistic religion: "no religion can be relevant to a people if it neglects any area of their total experience as perceived by them."[72]

Nor is any theology securely based if only very tenuously rooted in the Christian Scriptures. Moody criticized "the heterodoxy and secularity" of Clement, who "took no apparent pains to deduce his teaching from the New Testament, but was satisfied if his quotations from the philosophers could be confirmed and occasionally corrected by the gospels and epistles."[73] It must, of course, be recognized that Bediako's study is an exercise in comparative historical theology rather than in biblical theology; it would scarcely be just

[70] Tite Tiénou, "Forming Indigenous Theologies," in *Towards the Twenty-first Century in Christian Mission: Essays in Honor of Gerald H Anderson* (ed. J. M. Phillips and R. T. Coote; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 245–52.

[71] J.-M. Ela, *African Cry (*Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1986) 123.

[72] O. Imasogie, *Guidelines for Christian Theology in Africa* (Achimota, Ghana: Africa Christian Press, 1993) 81.

[73] Moody, *The Mind of the Early Converts* 238.

to criticize him for not discussing areas outside the parameters of his chosen field of study. Nevertheless, it would seem that he does intend to offer more than a detached comparison and appraisal of similar positions. A theological agenda drives the discussion, but the absence of a carefully stated biblical basis for the conclusions he draws inevitably raises questions as to their solidity.

Finally, a critical issue that demands serious consideration is that of the basic theological orientation that underlies any particular theological expression. Bevans contrasts a "creation-centered orientation" which "sees the world as sacramental," with a "redemption-centered" one, according to which "the world distorts God's reality and rebels against it."[74] While distinctions between differing views cannot simply be defined in such a rigid dichotomistic fashion, this is nonetheless a fundamental divide in theology. To a significant degree Bediako's approach in *Theology and Identity* might be taken as reflecting rather more the former, "creation-centered" stance. However, it is questionable whether his approach—accomplished and scholarly as it undoubtedly is—has a sufficient biblical foundation, and whether its theological response to the issue of identity concedes more than it should to the validity and worth of pre-Christian African religions; it appears to take less than adequate account of the radical state of human fallenness as it emerges in the Christian Scriptures. The resulting danger, albeit unintentional, is that the matchless and utterly revolutionary character of the gospel of Jesus Christ, which must lie at the heart of any authentically Christian theology, may not be grasped in its fullness, with inevitable consequences for mission within Africa and beyond.[75]

[74] S. B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999) 16.

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