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THE DOCTRINE OF REVELATION
IN AFRICAN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY



by
Anthony B. Parker

THE DOCTRINE OF REVELATION
IN AFRICAN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

An Abstract of a Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Graduate School
Abilene Christian University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

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by
Anthony B. Parker
February 1992

ABSTRACT

This thesis addresses the doctrine of revelation as it relates to the field of African Christian theology. Given the need for contextual theologies, it examines both general and special revelation as these doctrines have been understood and applied by a variety of African theologians. Specific areas of application include the use of the Bible and the attitude toward African traditional religions.

Chapter one introduces the subject of African theology, defines terms, and outlines the procedure for the study. Chapter two deals broadly with the sources of African Christian theology. The Bible is the principal source for all Christian theology but historical and cultural forces also shape contextual theologies.

Chapter three looks specifically at the Bible as a source for African theology. The chapter examines the hermeneutical approaches of African theologians and concludes that most take an inadequate or inconsistent approach to Scripture. The chapter proposes a coherent approach to Scripture which would enrich African theology.

Chapter four examines the role of African tradition and history as a source for African Christian theology. African theologians often appeal to the doctrine of natural revelation as a theological foundation for traditional

religious practices. Although natural revelation makes possible a knowledge of God apart from Scripture, a biblical perspective acknowledges that humanity is accountable for its failure to live according to that revelation. Natural revelation does not disclose a solution to humanity's alienation from God; it is not salvific.

In chapter five a continuum is constructed to illustrate the variety of positions held regarding the relationship between African traditional religions and Christianity. The continuum ranges from radical discontinuity to radical continuity, with a variety of mediating positions designated as partial continuity. The reality of natural revelation makes continuity possible, but the limitations of natural revelation produce a degree of discontinuity. The positions taken regarding the degree of continuity have a direct bearing on the proclamation of the gospel in Africa. Building on the work of several African theologians, the thesis concludes with the recommendation that faithful proclamation best takes place through contextualization of the biblical message, adaptation of appropriate cultural practices, and eventual indigenization of the newly planted churches.

THE DOCTRINE OF REVELATION
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A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Graduate School
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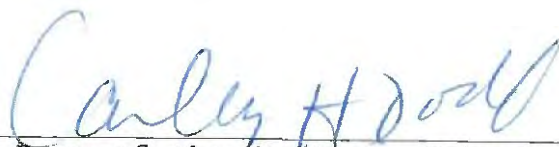
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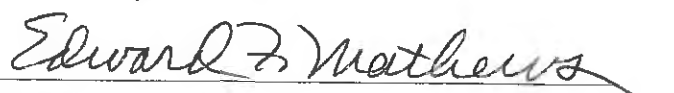
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Thesis Committee



Chair





DEDICATION

To

Andrew, Nancy, Tod, and Sondra

With Whom I Have

Prayed, Prepared, and Planned

For God's Mission in Africa

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The Christian doctrine of revelation is the cornerstone on which all other teachings of the church rest. Not even God, who is himself the center of biblical theology, can be adequately discussed without some prior understanding of his self-disclosure. The traditional Western formulations of the doctrines of God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, the church, salvation, ethics, etc. are based on the presupposition that God has, to some extent, revealed himself and his will to humanity.

Christianity can no longer be described as a Western religion. According to David Barrett's estimates for 1991, the majority of the followers of the Christian religion now reside outside of Europe, North America, and the former Soviet Union--regions which have historically been Christian strongholds. Today, over fifty-seven percent of the world's church members live in Africa, East Asia, Latin America, Oceania, and South Asia. More followers of the Christian religion live on the continent of Africa than on any other continent in the world--over fourteen percent of the world's adherents to Christianity are African (Barrett 1991, 25).

As Christianity spreads beyond Western culture and as Western culture itself changes, new expressions of the

classical Christian doctrines which will communicate biblical truths faithfully are necessary. As Christianity encounters other religions, both the proclaimers of the message and its new adherents must answer these questions: Can traditional beliefs contribute to these restatements of Christian doctrine? If they can, what place do they have in the theological process?

The Consultation of African Theologians which met at Ibadan, Nigeria, in 1965 gave their answer to the first question.

We believe that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Creator of heaven and earth, Lord of history, has been dealing with mankind at all times and in all parts of the world. It is with this conviction that we study the rich heritage of our African peoples, and we have evidence that they know of him and worship him. We recognize the radical quality of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ; and yet it is because of this revelation we can discern what is truly of God in our pre-Christian heritage: this knowledge of God is not totally discontinuous with our people's previous traditional knowledge of him. (Fasholé-Luke 1976, 140)

This carefully worded statement is by no means the last word on the subject. Since it was issued, much debate has transpired among African Christian theologians concerning the doctrine of revelation. The purpose of this thesis is to examine the presuppositions underlying this debate and the arguments framing it and to come to a more biblical understanding of the Christian doctrine of revelation in an African context.

Presuppositions

All theologies, as human products, are bound to err in some points. All must be evaluated in light of Scripture. In this thesis, I hold to a high but not a flat view of Scripture. Scripture is not a collection of propositional truths of equal weight. This approach requires that Scripture be accepted on its own terms, acknowledging that God worked through men in a variety of ways to bring the Scriptures together.

I begin with the presupposition that the Scriptures are the beginning point and authority for all Christian theology. Good theology must build upon good exegesis. Biblical theology derives its categories from Scripture and reports the biblical teaching concerning the given category. Building on the foundation of exegesis and biblical theology, the formal and informal theologians who teach God's word must consider both Christian tradition and the contemporary situation in arranging and presenting the biblical teachings. The absolute content of Christian thought comes from Scripture, but the categories of Scripture can be communicated only in a cultural context, taking into account the categories of that culture. Almost inevitably, however, these cultural categories will be transformed by a Biblical worldview.

As I evaluate the doctrine of revelation in African Christian theology, my presupposition that the Bible is God's definitive revelation will greatly influence my judg-

ments. I am particularly interested in the faithfulness of African theology to the teachings of the Bible. Without an awareness of and sensitivity to the cultural heritage of those hearing the gospel, the message becomes irrelevant. Without a relentless dedication to the truth of Scripture, syncretism results. Both extremes must be avoided with equal earnestness.

Major Contributors to this Study

This study attempts to assimilate the views of many African theologians, to present them fairly, and to respond to them in a way consistent with the presuppositions stated above. Among those theologians consulted, several deserve special mention because of the degree to which they have influenced both me and other writers. I have returned often to the writings of John Mbiti, Bolaji Idowu, John Pobee, Kwesi Dickson, Byang Kato, Tite Tiénou, Tokunboh Adeyemo, and a variety of papers presented at the Pan-African Conference of Third World Theologians.

John Mbiti is probably the most well-known contemporary African theologian. Mbiti is one of the Akamba people of Kenya. He was born in 1931 to parents who converted to Christianity near the time of his birth. He attended Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda, from 1950-1953. While there, he received a vision of a light that "confronted" him. He interpreted this vision as a call to ministry. After receiving his B.A. from the University of London, of which Makerere was a branch, Mbiti received his Th.B. from

Barrington College in Rhode Island in 1957. Following two years teaching at the Teacher's Training College in Kangundo, Kenya, Mbiti attended Cambridge University. He received his Ph. D. from there in 1963 after writing a dissertation entitled "Christian Eschatology in Relation to Evangelisation of Tribal Africa."

Mbiti taught theology, New Testament, and African Traditional Religion at Makerere University from 1964-1974. During these years he achieved international acclaim as an African theologian. He left Uganda in 1974 to direct the World Council of Churches' Ecumenical Institute in Bossey, Switzerland, until 1980. At that time he returned to parish ministry. Though still an Anglican priest, he serves the Evangelical Reformed Church of the Canton of Bern and teaches part-time at the University of Bern (Burleson 1986, 45-54).

E. Bolaji Idowu is another influential African theologian. In 1962, he published *Olódùmare--God in Yoruba Belief*. In this complex description of the traditional religion of the Yoruba, Idowu argues that the pantheon of gods among this West African people does not represent polytheism, but "diffused monotheism." The God who is above all of these gods, Olódùmare, is the one God and father of Jesus Christ, known by many names throughout the earth. In 1973, Idowu published *African Traditional Religion--A Definition*. Idowu was born in 1913 and is a member of the Yoruba tribe. He is archbishop and patriarch of the Method-

ist Church in Nigeria and professor of religious studies at the University of Ibadan.

Kwesi Dickson is a Ghanaian brought up by Methodist African parents. Dickson studied at Oxford in the 1950s, where he received his B. Litt. Since that time, he has taught at the University of Ghana (Legon) and at Union Theological Seminary in New York.

John Pobee also teaches at the University of Ghana (Legon). He has studied in Africa, England, Germany, and in the United States. He was named the Olaus Petri Scholar at the University of Uppsala in 1983. He serves as the associate director of the World Council of Churches' committee on theological education.

The involvement of the preceding scholars in the larger ecumenical movement points to a common approach toward African theology, though the work of each must be allowed to stand on its own. In 1977, a fellowship of like-minded theologians gathered in Accra, Ghana, for the Pan-African Conference of Third World Theologians. The papers presented at this conference are reported in *African Theology en Route*, and I have drawn significantly from them. Although these scholars may differ on specific issues, they share a common approach. The "Final Communiqué" issued by the Pan-African Conference is helpful in understanding the mainstream thinking of this group of theologians.

Byang Kato stands on the other side of the theological spectrum. Born in Nigeria in 1936, Kato was raised

in a traditional African family. Kato received his Bachelor of Divinity degree from the University of London in 1966. Upon his return to Nigeria, he was elected general secretary of the Evangelical Churches of West Africa. Kato later attended Dallas Theological Seminary, where he received his S.T.M. and Th.D. degrees. In 1973 he was appointed the general secretary of the Association of Evangelicals of Africa and Madagascar and in 1974 became the vice-president of World Evangelical Fellowship. That same year he spoke at the Lausanne Conference on World Evangelization. In 1975 he published *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*, a piercing critique of African theology, with particular criticism of John Mbiti. Tragically, Kato drowned in December 1975 while on holiday in Kenya.

In many ways, Tite Tiénoú has taken up the mantle left behind by Kato. He was born in Mali in 1949, and received his primary and secondary education in Mali, Burkina Faso (then Upper Volta), and Côte d'Ivoire. Tiénoú attended Nyack College in New York, where he received his undergraduate degree in theology in 1971. After pastoral work in Burkina Faso, Tiénoú received the *Matrise en Theologie* in 1976 from the *Faculté de Theologie Evangelique* in Veux-sur-Seine, France.

Tiénoú returned to Burkina Faso and founded Maranatha Institute, a Bible school of the Christian Missionary Alliance. He became involved in the Association of Evangelicals of Africa and Madagascar, the Lausanne Commit-

tee for World Evangelization, and the World Evangelical Fellowship. In 1984, Tiénoú received his Ph.D. from Fuller Theological Seminary. His dissertation was entitled, "The Problem of Methodology in African Theology." In this work, he examines the methodologies of four African theologians--Mbiti, Tshibangu, Pobee, and Sanon--and proposes an alternative methodology. Tiénoú is currently Associate Professor of Theology and Missiology at Alliance Theological Seminary in Nyack, New York.

Tokunboh Adeyemo shares the evangelical perspective of Kato and Tiénoú. A convert from Islam, Adeyemo studied at the Sudan Interior Mission Theological Seminary in Igbaja, Nigeria, and at Talbot Seminary in the United States. After completing his M.Div. and M.Th. in May 1976, he completed his doctoral work at Dallas Theological Seminary in December 1977. His M.Div. thesis at Talbot forms the basis for his book *Salvation in African Tradition*.

In addition to the writings of these authors, two doctoral dissertations have provided valuable information for this thesis. Gwinyai H. Muzorewa's 1984 Ph.D. dissertation "African Theology: Its Origin and Development" examines the roles of African traditional religions, the missionary, African Independent Churches, and the political milieu in Africa in the development of African Theology (Muzorewa 1984).

Blake W. Burleson focused on the most influential African theologian in his 1986 Ph.D. dissertation at Baylor

University, "John Mbiti: The Dialogue of an African Theologian With African Traditional Religion." Burleson examines the dialogical nature of Mbiti's theology, which merges the historical biblical view of revelation with the non-historical traditional African view of revelation (Burleson 1986).

Definitions and Parameters

African Christian Theology

Anselm defined theology as "faith seeking understanding." As such, it is human reflection upon God and his revelation. Christian theology, however, is not reduced to absolute relativism because it presupposes a definitive revelation in Scripture.

Not all reflection about God and his revelation, and hence not all theology, is Christian. The continent of Africa is greatly influenced by three religious traditions-- African traditional religions, Islam, and Christianity. All three of these have a legitimate place in the discussion of African theology. In this thesis I will limit my discussion to theological reflection which seeks to express Christian faith against a background of African traditional religions.

Much African theology "is nothing else than the theology of African Traditional Religions and, as such, it has nothing to do directly with Christian faith" (Daidanso 1983, 70). Kwesi Dickson argues that "'African Theology' is misleading in the Christian context in which it is used since it properly characterizes the articulation of African

traditional religious thought, and not Christian thought" (Dickson 1984, 121).

These remarks may reflect the feeling that Christianity is still perceived as a foreign religion in Africa. Even so, most authors use "African theology" in a Christian sense. John Mbiti, though he has written prolifically on the theology of African traditional religions, does not hesitate to use "the term 'African theology' . . . to mean theological reflection and expression by African Christians" (Mbiti 1980b, 119). Pobee defines "African theology" as "the attempt to couch essential Christianity into African categories and thought forms" (Pobee 1979, 18). Bengt Sundkler, one of the earliest authors on the subject, maintains that "Theology, in essence, is to understand the fact of Christ; theology in Africa has to interpret this Christ in terms that are relevant and essential to African existence" (Sundkler 1962, 99).

Because the traditional African worldview is thoroughly religious, an understanding of the theology of African traditional religions is prerequisite to African Christian theology. These "African categories and thought forms," of which Pobee speaks, are related to traditional religious beliefs. Any faithful presentation of the gospel in Africa must involve an understanding of those beliefs.

Some question the need for African theology. Christian truth is universal truth. Why, then, the need for

African, or Asian, or American theology? Mbiti, however, has observed that:

Christianity is a universal and cosmic faith. It was universalized on Calvary and cosmicized on the first Easter Day. Our duty is to localize this universality and cosmicity. . . . It belongs to the very nature of Christianity to be subject to localization, otherwise its universality and cosmicity become meaningless. (Mbiti 1970b, 431)

Because Christian truth is universal truth, it can be expressed in every culture. Its presentation in each culture must be in terms relevant to that culture. There is Theology, the fulness of which is understood only in the mind of God, and there are theologies--cultural expressions of Theology. African theology should not attempt to formulate doctrines that are uniquely true for Africa but should formulate expressions of universal truth in terms relevant to African culture.

Revelation

The doctrine of revelation is an appropriate place to begin a discussion of African Christian theology. All other aspects of theology are influenced by what one believes about revelation. Pobee notes that revelation "is the primary source of faith because religion is, by and large, as much a man's search for God as a man's response to God's self-disclosure." He defines revelation as "the disclosure of divinity to man in acts, in deeds, and in historical events" (1979, 32). Pobee, while emphasizing natural revelation, does not mention God's revelation in words nor does he acknowledge that man's search for God is

fruitless without God's self-disclosure. Geoffrey Bromiley, writing from a Western perspective, defines revelation as "that which believers know about God from God's own supernatural impartation, specifically in Scripture and church dogma" (Bromiley 1988, 169). Just as Pobee seems to neglect spoken and written revelation, Bromiley minimizes natural revelation.

In this thesis *revelation* will be defined as God's disclosure of himself and his will. Beginning with the presupposition that God's definitive revelation is found in the Bible, I will examine the use of Scripture in African Christian theology and assess whether authentic revelation is reflected in African traditional religions.

Diversity in Africa and in African Theology

Thus far I have spoken of African Christian theology as though it were a unified system of thought. This, however, is not the case because, as Pobee notes, "*Homo Africanus* is a multiheaded hydra, in much the same way as *homo sapiens* is a mutiheaded hydra" (Pobee 1979, 18). There is great variety on the African continent. The major differences are ethnic, socio-political, and economic. Each of these differences will affect local theologies.

Within a single region, there are differences of cosmology and worldview. The Kipsigis, Kisii, and Luo peoples border one another in western Kenya. To the Kipsigis, all spirits are ancestral spirits. The rites

performed at birth and at death emphasize a cyclical view of life. Among the Kisii and Luo, however, non-human spirits play a much greater role in the people's worldview. Ancestors are not emphasized, while witchcraft and sorcery are more dominant than among the Kipsigis (Van Rheenen 1989).

Westernization has influenced African cultures in a variety of ways. It has had its greatest impact in the urban centers, where traditional and Western cultures clash most observably. As for socio-political variety, Islam dominates in the north, the countries of East and West Africa struggle for selfhood in the aftermath of colonialism, and the people of South Africa wrestle with the injustices of apartheid.

The pluralism of African society has contributed to a multiplicity of theological approaches. Variations occur because of the contexts in which theologies are formulated and because African theologians differ in their view of the nature and proper use of Scripture. This thesis will survey the work of East and West African theologians. It will not include Christian theology in an Islamic context nor will it deal extensively with liberation theology, which is prevalent in South Africa.

Diversity in African theology also occurs as a result of denominational and theological differences between the theologians involved. Many were converted to Christianity by missionaries and some were reared on mission compounds. The denominational allegiances of these mission-

aries have, to a large degree, shaped the church in Africa. This can be seen in the call of the All African Lutheran Consultation (October 5-14, 1978) for a new approach to theological education which will "eschew confessionalism/denominationalism." Regarding this call, Kwesi Dickson notes:

The reference to "confessionalism/denominationalism" is of interest as reflecting a sense of frustration arising from the Churches in Africa being bound--initially in consequence of their mission-Church status, and now apparently by their own choice--by historical circumstances having to do with the West. (Dickson 1984, 206)

The theological differences among the African theologians can be illustrated by noting three different attitudes toward African traditional religions. Mbiti sees traditional religions as preparation for the gospel. They are not entirely compatible with Christianity, and Christianity must "judge and save" the traditional approaches to God (Mbiti 1970b, 432-439). Bolaji Idowu places African traditional religion and Christianity in a progression of revelation. To him, the God who loved the world so much that he sent his Son is "*Olódùmaré*, God as known and experienced in Yoruba pre-Christian tradition." Byang Kato in his 1975 work *Theological Pitfalls in Africa* "postulated a radical discontinuity between the pre-Christian tradition and Christian belief" (Bediako 1989, 62). These differing beliefs result in divergent approaches toward African traditional religions and their revelatory value.

Limitations

This study must admit to certain limitations. Mbiti has noted that there are three main areas of African theology today: written, oral, and symbolic (Mbiti 1980b, 119). My research will be limited to written theological reflection. This places the subject matter of this study on the academic side of the academic-popular continuum. Many of the works I will review were written by theologians who "at the most crucial stage of their theological formation . . . were far from any African church context, having to satisfy instead a western supervisor who had possibly never set foot on the continent" (Hastings 1984, 371). Because many of these theologians have been influenced by Western perspectives, their thoughts regarding the doctrine of revelation often form along lines already drawn in the West.

Perhaps a more severe limitation is the restriction of documentary research to those works published in, or translated into, English. Not only are there several academic works published in French which will not be accessible, but any works published in Western languages involve a reconstruction of African thought. Concerning his own work, *Toward an African Theology*, Pobee notes:

Ideally, African theologies should be in the vernacular. Language is more than syntax and morphology; it is a vehicle for assuming the weight of a culture. Therefore, this attempt to construct an African theology in the English language is the second best, even if it is convenient if it should secure (*sic*) as wide a circulation as possible. (Pobee 1979, 23)

Procedure

Chapter two will look at the issue of sources for African Christian theology. African authors almost unanimously consent that the Bible has priority in theology (Sundkler 1962, 104-105; Fashole-Luke 1976, 141; Pobee 1979, 20; Mbiti 1980b, 122). There is less consensus, however, over the nature of the revelation in the Scriptures and over the interaction between that revelation and what Adrian Hastings has called the "second sources" of African theology (Hastings 1984, 364-369). Chapter two will examine the role which each of these sources plays in shaping theology in Africa.

In chapter three I will focus on the use of the Bible in African Christian theology. I will examine and critique the approaches of representative African theologians, suggest guidelines for reading and interpreting Scripture, and make recommendations concerning the use of the Bible in future African theologies.

The fourth chapter will examine the possibility and nature of revelation in African History and Tradition. The classical categories of special and general revelation will be used and discussed with regard to traditional African beliefs concerning deity. While some see a direct revelation of God in African traditional religions, many African theologians relate the traditional African understanding of God to general revelation. Such a relationship has been suggested by John Pobee who, maintains that:

. . . on the basis of the understanding of revelation in the New Testament itself, speaking of general revelation and the special revelation, we are unable to write off completely the general or natural revelation found in traditional African society, in its diverse forms of philosophy, popular deity, polytheistic ideas, and the divine worship through images and whatever its imperfections (*sic*). (1979, 74)

This statement immediately raises the question of whether authentic natural revelation involves "imperfections."

Pobee evidently believes that it does. He writes that, "In that progression from natural revelation to special revelation, some elements of the old revelation may have to be discarded" (1979, 78). These assertions point to the need for a fresh treatment of the biblical doctrine of natural revelation.

This examination of the doctrine of revelation in African Christian theology will enable me to draw some conclusions regarding the relationship between Christianity and African traditional religions. This is the purpose of the fifth chapter. Earlier I noted the variety of attitudes held by African scholars. The positions held may be described as views of radical discontinuity, partial continuity, or full continuity.

In a similar analysis, John Mbiti has described four attitudes toward African traditional religions. A few, he says, feel that African religiosity is demonic and should not be allowed to enter the life of the Christians or the church. Those who hold this position see radical discontinuity between traditional religions and Christianity.

Others regard African religion as having prepared the ground for the ready and rapid acceptance of the Christian faith. This is a position that maintains that there is partial continuity. The majority, Mbiti claims, are at the practical and pastoral levels where Christians live with the realities of both the Christian faith and their traditional religiosity. Many different views are included here, some arguing for partial continuity and others for full continuity. Still others wish to revive and retain African religion in the place of any other religion. This is not an option for Christian theology and is not treated in this thesis (Mbiti 1980b, 122).

Contribution Made by this Study

The primary contribution of this study will be toward my preparation to work as a missionary in Africa. It will help me develop a biblical view of the revelatory value, if any, of traditional religions. It will also help me become sensitive to those to whom I proclaim the gospel by familiarizing me with the attitudes of Africans toward both the Scriptures and their traditional religious heritage.

Mbiti points to the broader task toward which this thesis will contribute.

I have not yet seen a serious and exhaustive academic work done on this relationship between the Christian faith and African traditional religiosity. There are innumerable reports and consultations; and there are books and articles by African scholars on African religion itself--many of which are valuable and relevant. But the theological examination of this interreligious

relationship has yet to be done. It is to be hoped that the Scriptures will play their full role in that exposition. So far there is little use of the Bible in the debate. (1980b, 122)

Mbiti himself contributed to this discussion in his 1986 work *Bible and Theology in African Christianity*. Though an exhaustive work would be voluminous, this thesis will constitute a serious treatment of the subject. It is an initial attempt to answer Mbiti's call for a greater use of the Bible in the theological evaluation of African traditional religions. Such an evaluation will contribute to faithful discrimination between critical contextualization and syncretism.

This thesis is also written with the conviction that others who proclaim Christ in cross-cultural situations will benefit from such a study. It is written with the hope that it will help others, as well as me, proclaim the message of Christ clearly and faithfully.

CHAPTER 2

THE SOURCES FOR AFRICAN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

Because theology is human reflection upon God and his revelation, its sources are both human and divine. Some African scholars explicitly outline the sources which contribute to their theologies. E. W. Fasholé-Luke discusses four sources for African theology -- the Bible, African traditional religions, the theological heritage of the western churches, and the African independent churches (1976, 141-144). Kwesi Dickson speaks of relating the Scriptures, experience, and tradition in his effort to arrive at an African theology. He sees "the Scriptures in the centre, with the other two revolving around it, these two being channels which must not be confused with the source of the flow" (1984, 28). John Pobee lists experience, revelation, scripture, tradition, culture, and reason as the "formative factors in theology" (1979, 32). Tite Tiénou advocates a theological methodology which sees the ecclesiastical context, the traditional cultural and religious context, and biblical revelation as the major components of African Christian theologies (1984a, 128).

To Pobee, revelation functions independently of scripture and tradition, although they are "next door" to it. He understands revelation as "the disclosure of divini-

ty to man in acts, in deeds, and in historical events." Revelation is the primary source of faith. Scripture and tradition, on the other hand, are culture-ridden, though the Scriptures are to serve as the "plumbline" of theology (Pobee 1979, 32-33). Such a trichotomy, however, loses its value when one realizes that all revelation is culture-ridden. God is above culture, but man is not. All revelation occurs in terms of culture.

I will examine three sources for African Christian theology--the Bible, the Western church, and African culture. The examination of African culture will look specifically at African traditional religions and the contemporary social and political situation as they function as sources for African theology. These categories embrace the sources outlined by African theologians.

The Bible

African theologians are united in their claim that the Bible is the primary source for African Christian theology. The Final Communiqué of the 1979 Pan African Conference of Third World Theologians explicitly stated, "The Bible is the basic source of African theology, because it is the primary witness to God's revelation in Jesus Christ. No theology can retain its Christian identity apart from Scripture" (1979, 192). John Mbiti has said, "As long as African theology keeps close to the Scriptures, it will remain relevant to the life of the church in Africa and it will have lasting links with the theology of the church univer-

sal" (1980a, 122). I have already referred to Pobee's description of the Scriptures as the plumbline of theology. He further describes the Bible as "the foundation document of the Church" (1979, 20).

Though there is apparent agreement that the Bible serves as the primary source of African theology, there is much diversity as to the nature and use of the Scriptures in theology. This area will be developed in chapter three. We will also notice that not all theologians who claim that the Bible is central treat it as such when they produce theologies.

At least one author has raised questions regarding the adequacy of the present canon for African theology. Kwesi Dickson notes that "there may well be other sources of the life and work of Christ deemed unworthy of being canonised by the early Church which could be found more satisfying spiritually in the light of the African's religio-cultural and other circumstances" (1984, 183). As we shall continue to see, the "primacy of Scripture" is understood differently among African theologians and does not guarantee consensus.

The Western Church

Because the classical expressions of Christian doctrine were formulated in Western contexts, the Western church has profoundly influenced the shape of African theology. This has occurred because the gospel was brought to central and southern Africa by missionaries from Western

backgrounds. In a very real sense, African Christian theology began when the Christian message was received by the first generation of African Christians (Muzorewa 1984, 58).

These early missionaries had denominational ties, and these ties have influenced the formative thinkers in African theology.

Most of the [African] scholars mentioned . . . are Anglicans, Methodists, and Presbyterians. Several of them, including Mbiti and Idowu, have been ordained. The priests and ministers, in particular, have had the double role of serving the church as well as academic scholarship. After being appointed professors in Kampala and Ibadan respectively, both Mbiti and Idowu accepted high positions in the service of the church. While Mbiti went to Switzerland to work for the World Council of Churches, Idowu became President, later Patriarch, of the Methodist Church in Nigeria. (Westerlund 1985, 44)

This connection with the Western church is considered valuable by many. Harry Sawyerr recognized that "if Christianity is to be identified with the culture of African peoples, it is imperative that the Church in African keeps its place in the family of the universal church" (1968, 67). The Pan African Conference reported,

The Christian heritage is also important for African theology. This is the heritage of the life and history of the church since the time of our Lord, with a long tradition of scholarship, liturgies, experiences, etc. African Christianity is a part of worldwide Christianity. (1979, 193)

The training of African church leaders and theologians in the West or by Western methods has also influenced African theology. This, along with the whole phenomenon of Western influence, has produced negative as well as positive results. Muzorewa notes,

Most of our theologians may be classified as first generation theologians. Many African theologians were trained overseas during a time when 'African theology' was not on the 'map.' This phenomenon has two sides to it. On the one hand, it broadens the theological perspectives of such theologians. On the other hand, it fails to prepare them to do what would most be profitable to the church in Africa, namely produce an indigenous theology. They are confronted with the problem of doing African theology using western theological and philosophical thought-forms. (1984, 7,8)

African theologians are quick to point out the need to re-cast the gospel in African, rather than Western, language and forms. Muzorewa argues that "African theologians must re-interpret the gospel because the way in which it was taught by most missionaries and some conservative Westernized Africans no longer speaks effectively to the African" (1984, 170). In the dialogue between Christianity and traditional African religious beliefs, Pobee maintains that "the issue is not simply Christianity versus indigenous beliefs, but Christianity-cum-European culture on the one hand and indigenous African beliefs on the other" (1979, 56).

Two examples illustrate the negative impact of Western theology on African Christianity. First, Western influences have contributed to legalism in Africa. The predilection of African Christians toward the Old Testament has often been noted. The outlook of traditional Africa more closely resembles the ancient Canaanite worldview than that of Graeco-Roman culture. African traditional religions place a great deal of emphasis on practice, rather than belief (Pobee 1979, 55). As a consequence, Africans gener-

ally find the legal sections of the Old Testament much more interesting than do Westerners. Early missionaries found great receptivity to their message in Africa, partly because Africans are predisposed toward legalism and the missionaries did not take this into consideration. Some, indeed, came with legalistic messages. This legalism has become widespread throughout Africa, and the gospel is often received as law rather than as grace (Dickson 1979, 96).

A second example is the influence of the doctrine of natural theology as formulated by Thomas Aquinas on West African Catholic scholars. In the view of many,

Thomism is not simply a philosophy among philosophies, but the "revealed" philosophy. Therefore, all peoples who are unaffected by false doctrines . . . can attain true knowledge of the world through their profane insight, and, ultimately, through God. (Westerlund 1985, 76)

This has led to a high view of traditional African spirituality.

African scholars generally recognize the value and dangers of their Western heritage. In commenting on the merit of both Catholic and Reformed traditions, Kwesi Dickson observes,

In the first place, tradition can be a good thing, for it guards against subjectivism. . . . But--and secondly--tradition could be the death of tradition if it is not put into proper perspective. To cling tenaciously to tradition in an unimaginative way, in the sense of the past being made into an unimpeachable norm for the present, is to prevent tradition from *growing* and speaking in authentic accents. For--and thirdly--the development of doctrine and the production of confessions is a dynamic process; the Church must always confess its faith or make doctrinal statements in the language of today. . . .

Fourthly, . . . it is not often realised how tradition, in the form of creeds, unconsciously influences the interpretation of the Bible, and thus prevents what may be described as a "relevant reading" of the Bible (1984, 26,27)

Unfortunately, the missionary expansion of the church into Africa occurred at the same time as and in some ways was connected to colonialism with all of its Westernizing influences. It was not uncommon for clergymen to serve in a dual role as colonial officials. The ecclesiastical hierarchy established during the colonial period continues to influence the church in post-independence Africa. Though we will examine the influence of colonialism and independence on African theology later in this chapter, the statement of the Pan African Conference is relevant here.

Nevertheless, we must recognize the persistence of the domination that resulted from colonialism. This domination also exists in the churches. The organizational model imported from the West is still proposed and accepted. The life of our churches has been dominated by a theology developed with a methodology, a worldview, and a conception of humanity using western categories. (1979, 192)

The church in Africa can never erase and must continue to build upon her Western heritage. It is important that the Biblical tradition and the Western Christian tradition be supplemented by the newly emerging African Christian tradition so that African Christianity may be both authentically African and authentically Christian. Only in this way will African Christianity take its place in the world Christian community.

If the existing body of Christian theology is important for African theology, why formulate new theological concepts for the church in Africa? But, if

existing Christian concepts are really relevant to the African Christians, why, then, has Christianity remained more or less alien to the African church?

It is this dilemma that has caused some African theologians to re-read, re-interpret, and reformulate the faith in language that is meaningful to the people. I suggest that the faith that results, if it is based on the Scriptures, could bring new insights to other parts of Christendom. (Muzorewa 1984, 172)

African Culture

Since culture shapes our humanity, it plays an important role in theological formulation. Two aspects of African culture, in particular, exert a strong influence. First, the role of African traditional religions must be acknowledged as a formative element of African culture and, hence, of African theology. Second, the current social and political situation in Africa is also making an impact on the theologies being produced there.

To speak of African culture, in the singular, may be misleading. There is diversity among African cultures; to speak of a single culture is an oversimplification. My use of "African culture" may be compared to the conventional use of the term "Western culture." There is diversity between the British and the French, and even between New Zealanders and Australians. Yet people of western European heritage share common elements of thought and custom which, though not identical, are similar enough to warrant a collective reference. In the same way, though there are important differences between the Kalenjin and the Kikuyu of Kenya and

between the Mossi and Bobo of Burkina Faso, they share a common "Africanness" which I am calling African culture.

African Traditional Religions

The importance of African traditional religions as a source for African Christian theology was stressed by the 1979 Pan African Conference.

The God of history speaks to all peoples in particular ways. In Africa the traditional religions are a major source for the study of the African experience of God. The beliefs and practices of the traditional religions can enrich Christian theology and spirituality. (1979, 193)

African traditional religions reflect the deeply spiritual mind-set of traditional African cultures. African theology must acknowledge the spiritual roots of the African people (Muzorewa 1984, 85).

The use of the adjective "traditional" in describing African religions may also cause confusion. In this context, it does not refer to unsophisticated or antiquated beliefs. African traditional religions are very much alive. They continue to dominate many African cultures and are still present in cultures where Christianity and Islam are confessed. Bolaji Idowu notes,

It is well known that in strictly personal matters relating to the passages of life and the crises of life, African Traditional Religion is regarded as the final succor by most Africans. . . . In matters concerning providence, healing, and general well-being, therefore, most Africans still look to "their own religion" as "the way." (1973, 206)

Although a present reality, African traditional religions are built upon a heritage of evolving beliefs and

practices from the past. To Idowu, then, "'traditional religion' as used for indigenous religion in Africa is religion as it actually is today. But religion as it is today is meaningless unless its basic past is related to the present" (1973, 105). Pobee suggests that indigenous beliefs be examined both in terms of their history and in light of "African-man's religiousness in the flux and turmoil of the modern world" (1979, 55).

The contents of traditional beliefs, their "creeds" so to speak, are difficult to formulate. There are no succinct statements of faith, neither can one point to a central founder (Dickson 1984, 34). The indigenous beliefs of any particular culture are best deduced by close examination of the "proverbs, myths, songs, lyrics, rites, customs, and such, which are the primary sources of an African ethos" (Pobee 1979, 54). Even within a cultural group, inconsistencies occur. Of the Yoruba of Nigeria, Idowu notes,

It will be observed, upon critical analysis, that there are groups of these oral traditions which must be pieced together as facets of one central doctrine. Failure to recognize this fact from the beginning may result in confusing, partial truths. On the other hand, there are several of them which appear to be mutually contradictory or inconsistent. . . . The truth is that the Yoruba are only being honest about the facts of their experiences and are often involved, like other peoples, in the problem of interpretation. They know that life is full of paradoxes and contradictions and do not seek cleverly to blink at the truth. (1962, 6)

Just as it is both possible and impossible to speak of "African culture," so problems are met in speaking of

"African traditional religion" in the singular. Some African scholars emphasize the common characteristics of African religions. Idowu believes that the concept of God, particularly the factor of his "character," makes it possible to speak of *the* religion of Africa (1973, 103). Bishop T. Tshibangu has attempted to list certain values common to the indigenous religions of Africa.

Described in summary form, they are bound up with (a) cultic veneration of the ancestors; (b) firm belief in the existence and power of mystical forces that operate in the universe and on human beings and that give direction to the destiny of both; (c) a vitalist philosophy which finds particular expression in the realm of marriage, and certain rules that flow from that; (d) an intensely felt sense of solidarity between the members of a family, a community and, today, a nation. (1979, 76,77)

My research indicates that this is a legitimate summary. There is, however, reason for caution. Pobee warns that "in view of the diversity we can properly speak only of *an* African religion or *an* African world view, even if there may be similarities here and there--e.g., animism, concepts of ghosts and spirits, polytheism, magic" (1979, 44). Tiénou has pointed out the danger of applying an element of one people's worldview to the whole continent, as Mbiti did with the Kamba concept of time (1984a, 90; cf. Mbiti 1971).

While it is possible to make certain generalizations concerning African worldview, culture, and religion, caution must be exercised when incorporating these understandings into a theological presentation. Generalization can help

the outsider develop categories for understanding particular cultures or religious beliefs. The theologian, however, must examine closely the context within which he is operating. He must ensure that particular views are actually held by those to whom he is writing or speaking.

Our purpose here is not to develop a systematic description of African beliefs. An examination of one area, the traditional concept of God in Africa, will illustrate and enlighten our understanding of African traditional religions. Both Mbiti (1970a) and Idowu (1962) have structured theocentric descriptions of African religion. David Westerlund lists seven other scholars who have followed this pattern (1985, 34 n. 65).

There are two primary questions addressed in these discussions. First, is the God of African belief the Father of Jesus Christ? Second, what is the relationship between personal spiritual powers and God?

Muzorewa believes that his task as an African theologian is to interpret concepts of God so that "African believers feel a natural closeness to the one God, the only Supreme Being known in African traditional religion" (1984, 30). Idowu has pointed out the danger of failing to identify the God of the Bible with the God of African traditional belief.

There is no doubt that the urgent predicament of the Church in Africa today is that of the apparent foreignness of Christianity. And this, as we have pointed out, has resulted from the erroneous notion with which evangelism was bedeviled from the start. By a miscarriage of purpose the Church has succeeded

in preaching to, and in teaching, Africans about a strange God of the white man. But what has happened to the god as known to their forbears--the God who is the foundation of their traditional beliefs? He remains with them. *And so we have left them with two Gods in their hands and thus made of them peoples of ambivalent spiritual lives.* This impedes the progress of evangelism; it also results in a very dangerous kind of polytheism. (1969a, 13; italics mine)

The names for God in African languages show that the traditional understanding of God corresponds, in many ways, to a biblical one.

Their names of God reveal a deep set of visions and insights about Him as Creator, Father (Mother) of all, Giver of Children, Giver of Rain, the Glorious (Shining) One, He Who is there now as from ancient times (Tetekwaframua), the First, the Architect and Originator (Bore-Bore), the Wise One, Watcher of everything, the Great Eye (Liisoddene), Deliverer of those in trouble (Luvhunabaumba), the Besetting One (Shikakunamo), etc. (Mbiti 1989, 4)

In most, if not all, traditional African cultures there are personal spiritual powers other than God, which may be classified as either ancestors, spirits, or divinities/gods. In West Africa, these are generally seen as intermediaries between man and God. Because they are intermediaries, man appeals to them to bring blessings or to ward off disaster. In East Africa, spiritual beings are generally more distant from God. They are seldom organized into well-defined pantheons, as in West Africa, and are usually manipulated by magic instead of worshiped as sovereign.

In daily life, God is rarely referred to except in highly stylized, traditional expressions. Nevertheless, in

"orthodox" belief, he is the source and authority behind all powers.

I do not know of any place in Africa where the ultimacy is not accorded to God. That is why, because this is very true of the Yoruba, I conclude that the religion can only be adequately described as monotheistic. I modify this monotheism by the adjective "diffused," because here we have a monotheism in which there exist other powers which derive from Deity such being and authority that they can be treated, for practical purposes, almost as ends in themselves. The descriptive phrase "implicit monotheism" will serve as well as "diffused monotheism." (Idowu 1973, 135,136; cf. 1962, 202ff)¹

As we have mentioned, generalizations concerning any particular theme of African traditional religions are dangerous. Traditional religions, however, shape the worldview of almost every African and are an important source for African theology.

The Contemporary Social and Political Situation

While African traditional religion is by far the single most important factor shaping African culture, other forces are at work as well. Uniquely modern issues face the continent. Ngindu Mushete suggested in 1979 that a specifically African theology "would attempt to reply to the questions raised by African society and its contemporary development" (30). That same year, the Final Communiqué of the Pan African Conference of Third World Theologians noted, "The struggles for the transformation of socio-economic systems, the struggles against racism, sexism, and other

¹Idowu's view of "diffused monotheism" will be discussed more fully in chapter 4.

forms of cultural oppression, are all to be taken seriously as sources for theology" (193). Again in 1979, John Mbiti added African culture and African history to his list of formative factors in African theology (1979b, 68). Since that time, African theologians have been particularly aware of the role of the contemporary political and social scene in shaping African theologies.

Independence

Mbiti divides African history into three phases. First, there were the times before European occupation in the nineteenth century. Second, there was the phase of colonial rule during which Christian missions penetrated Africa. Mbiti sees this stage as preparatory for the third, that of independent nationhood (1979b, 68). On March 20, 1990, the last colony of Africa, Namibia, celebrated her first day of independence.

A new dynamic is emerging in independent Africa. Once again political changes, often painful, are taking place on the continent. The first post-colonial governments have, for the most part, been single-party and, practically speaking, single-man governments. The winds of change are again sweeping across the African political scene as people cry out for more representative forms of government. These changes will affect African thinking and, hence, African theology.

Modernity

Though the countries of Africa are officially independent, the vestiges of colonialism remain. Kwesi Dickson has made the striking observation that "often there is independence only in the sense that government is manned by Africans" (1984, 81). He lists the money economy, Western education, and urbanization as continuing effects of colonialism (1984, 84). Africans are increasingly influenced, not only by the Western church, but also by secular Western culture.

This does not mean that traditional values are dead. Western individualism, for example, has not replaced the African sense of community. In cities, though families, clans, and tribes are scattered, many societies and groups have emerged which are "surrogates for traditional groupings" (Dickson 1984, 84,85). Although scattered, traditional ethnic groupings maintain their identity in many urban settings.

Concerning the Bobo of Burkina Faso, Tiénoú has noted an inversion of values between Bobo of traditional mentality and those of modern mentality. In traditional thinking, values are prioritized in the following order: God and religion, spiritual and moral values, family, health, knowledge, power, and money. According to Tiénoú's research, the priority of these values is exactly reversed among Bobo of modern mentality. He is quick to note, however, that

Bobo of a modern mentality are not totally secular in outlook. They simply relegate concerns for spiritual and moral values and for God and religion to positions of less importance. Their spiritual and moral values as well as their ideas of God are determined, to a great extent, by traditional concepts. In that sense Bobo, even when they are influenced by modernity, must still be understood against the background of their people's traditional worldview and religion. (Tiéno 1984a, 171,172)

Though there are secularizing influences in African culture, secularism has not pervaded the worldview in most of Africa to the degree that it has in the West.

Nationalism

The newly formed nations of Africa which have emerged out of colonialism have struggled to establish stability and identity. Nationalist struggles shape African theology. To Muzorewa, "African nationalism is, in fact, one of the forerunners of African theology, especially in its emphasis on culture, human dignity, liberation and solidarity" (1984, 91). This can be seen by observing that national unity is one of the stated objectives of several Departments of Religious Studies of African universities (Westerlund 1985, 89).

These political concerns have influenced African theology in at least three ways. First, they have contributed to the African predilection for the Old Testament. The oppression-salvation theme arouses the interest of those who have experienced the denial of political rights (Dickson 1979, 98).

Second, political concerns in African theology have contributed to the production of theologies which emphasize unity rather than confrontation. Specifically, similarities between traditional beliefs, Islam, and Christianity are stressed while the differences are suppressed in the interest of "social solidarity and national integration" (Westerlund 1985, 58,89).

Third, there has been a much greater concern with the "Africanness" of a particular theology than with the integration of that theology into the teaching of the universal church. Dickson speaks of the "selfhood" for which the African church is aiming. He believes that this cannot come about until national selfhood is achieved (1984, 85).

Summary

We have seen that African culture is shaped by contemporary as well as by traditional issues. Secularism and nationalism are formative factors in African culture. African theology, if it is to be relevant to African culture, must take into account and address these issues.

In this chapter we have introduced the Bible, the Western church, and African culture as forces which shape African theology. We looked at two aspects of African culture, African traditional religions and the contemporary social and political scene. The remainder of this thesis will focus on two of these formative elements, the Bible and African traditional religions.

CHAPTER 3

THE USE OF THE BIBLE IN AFRICAN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

African theologians universally agree that the Bible is the primary source for African Christian theology. Consistent with Christian experience throughout the world and throughout the ages, differences have arisen among African theologians concerning the nature and proper use of Scripture.

In this chapter I will examine three approaches toward Scripture taken by African theologians: (1) mnemonic hermeneutics, (2) ambivalence toward Scripture, and (3) African evangelical positions. I will propose an appropriate theological approach toward Scripture and conclude with some proposed directions for the use of the Bible in future African Christian theologies.

Approaches Taken by African Theologians

Mnemonic Hermeneutics:

Intuitional Approaches to Scripture in African Theology

Theological Debate over Mnemonic Hermeneutics

The 1962 edition of Bengt Sundkler's *The Christian Ministry in Africa* is an early work on pastoral theology for Africa. Sundkler was a Lutheran missionary, not an African,

but he attempts to define the perspective from which Africans interpret Scripture (1962, 99-126).

Sundkler cites a sermon delivered at an Easter service by Zulu preacher Michael Mzobe. Sundkler notes:

Here is a width of vision that takes in the whole history of Redemption and displays the whole drama of the Bible, from the Beginning to the consummation; this is living African theology, born in the act of preaching. . . . Easter is clearly related, as everything must be in the theology of Mzobe, to the *Initium*, the Origin, to that which was in the Beginning. History is, to him, a *remembrance* of that which was in the Beginning. (1962, 103)

Sundkler notes parallels between African myths and the Old Testament accounts of creation, Cain and Abel, the flood, and the exodus. He quotes another African church leader as saying, "We recognize *our own history* in the Pentateuch" (1962, 104; italics mine). This common identification with the biblical world causes Sundkler to suggest:

The Old Testament in the African setting is not just a book of reference. It becomes a source of remembrance. The African preacher feels that Genesis belongs to him and his Church or rather vice versa--that he and his African Church belong to those things which were in the beginning. (1962, 104).

According to Sundkler, the African receives the biblical message because he is, in reality, remembering what was there, half-forgotten, all the time (1962, 105).

Harry Sawyerr has taken issue with Sundkler's "theology of remembrance." He suggests:

When Dr. Sundkler asserts that the Old Testament becomes to the African a "source of remembrance," we must ask, Remembrance of what? . . . If the Hebrew concept of history as the unfolding of the gracious

purpose of God is to be passed on to African Christians, their myths do not provide a basis on which to build. This "mnemic theology" is in our judgment fraught with great dangers. (1963, 268)

Tite Tiéno expresses similar concerns.

Mnemic hermeneutics, then, is hermeneutics which takes elements from Scripture without understanding them in their total context and applies them in another context as if the first context (or horizon) was of little relevance and importance in the task of interpretation. In that case, one's cultural and personal presuppositions actually determine the results of hermeneutics. (1984, 180)

Each culture is uniquely defined by its own set of attitudes, values, and belief systems. At the heart of each culture is a worldview which serves as an internal lens through which the external phenomena of the world are viewed. All interpreters approach Scripture as participants in culture and as heirs of cultural worldviews. Scripture, however, must first be interpreted in terms of the worldview of the biblical author and his audience.

Sundkler's mnemic theology takes little or no account of worldview, of the historical and cultural distance that separates biblical writers from today's readers. In this view the first impression one gets from an uncritical reading results in a faithful and relevant interpretation. To Sundkler, the correspondence between the African world and the world of the Old Testament is so great that the African reader instinctively identifies with the biblical world and interprets Scripture faithfully.

Sawyer disagrees. He believes that the Hebrew view of history as "the unfolding of the gracious purpose of God"

differs sharply from the point of view reflected in African myths which "associate contemporary events with an archetype which took place *in illo tempore*" (1968, 50). There is a uniqueness in the revelation to the Jews that is unparalleled in Africa. This revelation is given in terms of Jewish, not African, culture. The Jewish concepts, in turn, provide the basis for Christian concepts. Sawyerr argues,

Indeed, it seems to us imperative to recognize the role of the major Hebrew and Jewish religious concepts as expressed chiefly in the Old Testament. Gentile Christianity without a Hebrew basis seems to us very empty. (1968, 33)

Two illustrations from Sawyerr's writings illustrate the difference between biblical and traditional African ideas. The first relates to the transcendence and imminence of God. To the Hebrews, God is "the God of Miracle, who comes in to help his devotees in times of emergency." He is the God who comes near. But, paradoxically, the God of the Hebrews is also far off. African peoples almost inevitably view God as far off and seldom embrace this paradoxical view of God's presence (Sawyerr 1968, 50).

Sawyerr's second contrast is between African and biblical covenants.

Significantly enough, African tribesmen live in a covenant relationship. The clan is held together by various forms of covenant relationships chief of which is that built around the puberty *rites de passage*. . . .

However important the various covenant relations are in Africa, nowhere are they associated with the initial action of the Supreme God as in the case of the Hebrews. (1968, 52)

These and other differences between the African and biblical worldviews suggest that proclaimers of the biblical message in Africa must know *both* worlds. Mnemic hermeneutics, used by itself, becomes nothing more than an intuitional approach to Scripture.

Mnemic Hermeneutics in Some Independent Churches

Though many have noted the importance of African independent churches in the emergence of African theology, most applaud their indigenous character while failing to evaluate the theologies espoused biblically (Daneel 1984, 64,65).

Although he advocates mnemic hermeneutics, Sundkler does not like the intuitional approach taken by some Zionist churches of South Africa. He notes the uncritical and manipulative use made of Scripture by the prophets in these churches. Illiterate preachers may memorize Scripture citations which they use as proof-texts for their particular interpretations of the gospel. Social and political concerns often influence the interpretation of Scripture.

Pathetic is the continuously recurrent choice of John 14:2 as a text: "In my Father's house are many mansions, if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you." It is pathetic because in the South Africa of racial discrimination this verse is by the Zulus taken as a charter and a guarantee that there will be, possibly, a separate mansion for them. (Sundkler 1961, 276)

The Old Testament is of primary concern to these churches. Moses is the central figure in the Bible, and the Old Testament is generally accepted when there appears to be

a conflict with the New. In Sundkler's estimation, the Old Testament is interpreted by the standard of Bantu heritage. Passages which stand in judgment of Bantu tradition are interpreted as distortions of the true Bible which the white man is said to have hidden from the African (1961, 277,278).

Sundkler has little respect for the use of Scripture in Zionist churches. The phenomenon to which he objects, however, is the practical result of his own mnemonic hermeneutic, an "uncritical approach" (Fasholé-Luke 1976, 141) to Scripture which is common in some African churches.

Ambivalence Toward Scripture in African Theology

As observed in Chapter 2, African theologians universally ascribe primacy to Scripture as a source for theology. The approach taken toward Scripture, however, more often than not reflects a degree of ambivalence regarding the exact nature of Scripture.

These approaches are not uniform. Some speak highly of Scripture, but seldom use it in a positive way in constructing their theologies. Others overtly state their neo-orthodox assumptions, but rely heavily on Scripture in theological discussions. This ambivalent approach to Scripture justifies the collective reference. The individual approaches, however, deserve separate attention.

Harry Sawyerr: A Paradoxical Approach

Sawyerr's views which have been presented thus far would place him on the conservative side of the theological

spectrum. On one level, Sawyerr shows a high regard for biblical revelation, particularly for the Old Testament as fulfilled by Jesus Christ. He attempts to reconstruct Paul's *kerygma* to Gentile Christians based on Acts 17 and 1 Thessalonians (1968, 34-38):

We may therefore deduce from St. Paul that the Christian evangelist in Africa must start on the basis of the primitive *kerygma* which embodies certain fundamental concepts, known only in the Old Testament, but adapting these to fit closely with the more important new data based on the death and resurrection. (1968, 39)

Although Sawyerr expresses his concern that African theology be based on Scripture, he cannot be categorized as a conservative. Sawyerr takes a strong stand against "biblical fundamentalism." Fundamentalism, he claims, ignores the revelation of God *through science* by insisting that the Bible is "infallibly authoritative." Fundamentalism, for example, accepts the first three chapters of Genesis as literally true, even in light of modern geological and astronomical discoveries. Such an approach, Sawyerr believes, will never convince the growing number of young intellectuals in Africa (Sawyerr 1968, 69-71). Sawyerr places scientific respectability over Scripture. Faith in science rather than Scripture is, in the end, a shortsighted approach (see page 71).

The raw material of Sawyerr's theology is not limited to Scripture. In his discussion of purgatory, he offers Luke 12:58f as a passage which, in his view, suggests that

"the sinner can expiate his sin in Sheol and so escape Gehenna." Luke 12:57-59 reads,

And why do you not judge for yourselves what is right? As you go with your accuser before the magistrate, make an effort to settle with him on the way, lest he drag you to the judge, and the judge hand you over to the officer, and the officer put you in prison. I tell you, you will never get out till you have paid the very last copper.

In this passage Jesus shows the practical wisdom of settling disputes without legal confrontation. He says nothing about payment for sins through purgation. Sawyerr also cites Catholic tradition and "the basic logic inherent in the concept" in defense of this doctrine (1968, 110).

Sawyerr's insistence that the biblical worldview assume priority in biblical interpretation demands close attention to context. Sawyerr has special interests, however, which lead him to disregard the context. Sawyerr's position on purgatory is part of a larger universalistic tendency. His intense universalistic hope, especially in regard to the ancestors (1968, 110), overrides his high regard for Scripture in the construction of his theology.

John Pobee: *Religionsgeschichtliche*

The effects of Western training on African theologians can be seen clearly in John Pobee, who recommends the *religionsgeschichtliche Methode* as the best approach toward Scripture. Pobee adopts G. E. Ladd's definition of this method.

This method represents the most thorough-going application of a naturalistic historicism to the

study of the Bible. It assumes that biblical religion, in both the Old and New Testaments passed through stages of growth and evolution like all ancient religions, and in this evolution was heavily influenced through its interaction with its environment. This method involves the consistent application of the principle of analogy to biblical religion: the history and development of biblical religion must be analogous to the history and development of other ancient religions.⁶ (Pobee 1979, 20)

⁶G. E. Ladd, *The New Testament and Criticism* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1967), p. 196.

Pobee qualifies his use of this method. Though *religions-geschichtliche* "refuses to be interested in the truth of the Bible or in revelation," students of African theology are concerned with these matters. African theology must deal with Christianity's claim to "a finality of revelation" (1979, 20).

In dealing with this claim of finality, Pobee does not build his theology on the historical truth of the biblical revelation. "We do not see anything sacrosanct about the Adam myth itself, so we can use the traditional [African] phraseology and enrich it with the Adam mythology." He believes that "in the more sophisticated sections of the society, some demythologization will be necessary" (1979, 115-116). Pobee desires to make Christianity acceptable to all segments of society.

An unhistorical interpretation of the creation account, however, leaves humankind without answers concerning its origin and without a *real* basis for worshiping God as Creator. If African myths can be substituted for biblical explanations, there is no uniqueness in biblical revela-

tion. Further, there is no objective basis for deciding that chapters 1-3 are unhistorical and that chapter 4 is historical.

At the same time, Pobee claims that the Bible is, in some sense, normative. He views the Nicene Creed as an expression of faith in fourth century thought forms. The task today "is to get behind the Creed to the biblical faith. And whatever we evolve should be tested against the plumb line of biblical faith" (1979, 82).

In Pobee we again see an ambivalent attitude toward Scripture. Beginning with a thoroughgoing historicism, Pobee is prepared to substitute African myths for biblical ones. He wants to demythologize Scripture and leave African myths intact. But at the same time, he calls for a biblical Christology. Pobee tries to embrace the African and biblical worldviews and the naturalistic method of interpretation; he has failed to see the inevitable clash between them.

Kwesi Dickson: The Search for Relevance

Kwesi Dickson outlines "two unavoidable guidelines" for the study of the Bible. First, he claims that exegetes must know the biblical story "*as it is.*" Second, they must come to Scripture with questions that are relevant to their circumstances (Dickson 1984, 142).

Dickson laments the fact that the first part of this process has been neglected, that African life and thought

have been emphasized at the expense of biblical revelation. He warns of the danger of faulty methodology; that is, appealing to African life and thought first rather than giving "biblical teaching pride of place in this quest" (Dickson 1974, 204 cited in Gehman 1987, 44). When he addresses Western theology, Dickson sees the same danger. "Certain Western formulations of the significance of the cross," he warns, "may not be in full accord with biblical teaching" (1984, 199).

Paradoxically, Dickson believes that the West has overemphasized Scripture. The "Biblicism" reflected in the Westminster confession, for example, "is simply not helpful, for indeed the Bible does contain certain inaccuracies and various other kinds of infelicities, as biblical criticism has shown. . . . It is an attitude that constricts the circle of theological vision" (Dickson 1984, 16).

The portion of the Confession which Dickson calls "Biblicism" states,

The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture; unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit or traditions of men. (Dickson 1984, 16; cf. Leith 1982, 195)

Dickson does not demonstrate that any "inaccuracies" or "infelicities" which he finds in Scripture impugn this claim.

Dickson discusses the particularity of Scripture. It is a "*particular* witness to the revelation of God made through *particular* events" (1984, 20). The language that Dickson chooses here is important. To Dickson, the Scriptures are not themselves revelation but a particular witness to revelation. As such, revelation is not limited to Scripture; there may be other revelations and other witnesses. His concern for a broader revelation leads Dickson to ask, "Are not the peoples of Africa to be reckoned among those whose fathers have been the avenue of God's self-disclosure?" (1984, 144).

Dickson emphasizes the African predilection for the Old Testament (1979, 106). This attraction to the Old Testament which aroused suspicion on the part of those who brought Christianity to Africa (Dickson 1984, 87) has three causes. First, the Old Testament holds a political appeal for Africans because of its concern for the oppressed and disadvantaged (Dickson 1979, 98; 1984, 148). Second, the legalistic approach taken by early missionaries to Africa contributed to the preference. This reflects the traditional African emphasis on ritual (Dickson 1979, 96; 1984, 151,152). Third, in ancient Israel, as in Africa, religion pervades life (Dickson 1984, 154). Just as the Israelites took their faith with them into Babylon, Africans take their religion with them wherever they go (Dickson 1979, 98).

Having observed this attraction for the Old Testament, Dickson sounds a somber warning. "Predilection for

the Old Testament . . . must not be equated with a correct understanding of its meaning" (1979, 98). This being the case, Dickson's own fondness for and interpretation of the Old Testament must be examined.

Dickson's desire to find revelation in African tradition leads him to look to the Old Testament for evidence of revelation outside of God's covenant relationship with Israel. He sees two positions toward other nations (the *goyim*), which exist in tension, reflected in the Old Testament. For the most part, he admits, an intolerant attitude pervades Israel's life and thought. There is, however, "a tradition which . . . was nevertheless striking for its rejection of an exclusivist attitude toward the *goyim*" (1979, 99). Dickson's favorite example is that of Melchizadek.

Melchizadek was the priest of the Most High God, which is probably a reference to the Baal of Heaven known in Phoenecia and elsewhere; he blesses Abraham in the words: "Blessed be Abram by God Most High, maker of heaven and earth." It is clear that Melchizadek comes close to the belief in the one God of the whole earth such as Israel held. That is not the only interesting element in the story. Abraham gave Melchizadek "a tenth of everything," which implies recognition of Melchizadek's sovereign right. As von Rad observed, "such a positive, tolerant evaluation of a Canaanite cult outside Israel is unparalleled in the Old Testament."¹³ (Dickson 1979, 100,101)

¹³Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis*, 2nd ed. (London: SCM, 1963), ad loc.

God's activity cannot be limited to a particular race. Dickson makes an unjustified assumption, however, in associ-

ating Melchizadek, who lived long before Israel inhabited the land, with a Canaanite cult.

Dickson is also attracted to the prophet Malachi. Malachi 1:11 says, "'My name will be great among the nations, from the rising to the setting of the sun. In every place incense and pure offerings will be brought to my name, because my name will be great among the nations,' says the Lord Almighty." Dickson comments,

This passage, taken together with some earlier verses in the same chapter, *almost* amounts to saying that if God is involved in the history of human beings (1:2f) whom God has created, then God is involved in human religions. This *would be* a revolutionary idea (1979, 101; italics mine)

In his enthusiasm for a universal revelation, Dickson fails to pay attention to the original message of the text. Israel's disgraceful failure to worship threatened her own unique relationship to Yahweh. The passage says nothing about God's involvement in "human religions."

Dickson also draws attention to aspects of Israel's religion which resemble traditional practices in Africa. He notes that various cult practices in connection with the dead were forbidden (Deut. 14:1; Lev. 21:1f), and that the medium of Endor's contact with Saul illustrates the futility of contacting the dead. Nevertheless, he sees a common ground between ancient Israel and traditional Africa regarding attitudes toward the dead (Dickson 1984, 174). While the practices to which he refers may point to continuity between the African and Old Testament thought worlds, they

do not demonstrate revelation in African tradition. Almost all of these practices were forbidden in Israel, proving, if anything, that African traditional religion more closely resembles Canaanite pagan religion.

Dickson's view of scripture as a witness to revelation, and not as revelation itself, leads him to attempt to verify revelation outside of Israel. He appeals to Scripture, however, as his source for authoritative information concerning such revelations. He makes comparisons with Israel to legitimize traditional practices in Africa. Dickson is also in two minds regarding Scripture. To him, Scripture is not the exclusive source of revelation, but it stands as the authority by which other claims to revelation must be judged.

John Mbiti: The Problem of Understanding

In many ways, John Mbiti is as much a theologian of African traditional religions as he is a Christian theologian (cf. Mbiti 1969; 1970a; 1975a; 1975b; 1978a). Yet among those theologians whom I am classifying as ambivalent toward Scripture, Mbiti gives the greatest attention to the Bible as a source for theology. Mbiti notes, "Very few African theologians are putting their attention on biblical theology" (1976, 165). Though a great deal of attention is being given to Scripture in African oral theology, little is being written about it. Regarding the development of African theology, Mbiti writes,

Biblical theology must be the basis of any theological reflection, otherwise we shall lose our perspectives and may not claim the outcome to be Christian theology. (1971, 189)

The work in which this citation is found, Mbiti's *New Testament Eschatology in an African Background* (1971), gives evidence of this concern. The ten pages of Scripture index at the end of the book demonstrate his extensive use of the Bible (1971, 206-215). In many respects, Mbiti takes the content of Scripture seriously. According to Efiog S. Utuk's analysis, "Mbiti presupposes the Creation myth, the Exodus-Covenant event, and the whole historical and religious existence of the Israelites" (1986, 3). Utuk insists,

Despite the fact that Mbiti is, in general, sympathetic to primal religions, it would be unfair to characterize his theology of encounter as unbiblical as some of his critics have done. The point is that time and again Mbiti, in fact, sounds like a thoroughgoing biblicist. The Bible remains the measuring rod for him, the formative criteria with which he judges primal religions and, of course, Christianity. (Utuk 1986, 11)

Mbiti values the Bible because of its ecumenical significance. It "links Christians of all ages and places and provides us with an essentially neutral and ecumenical authority for the profession of our faith" (1986, 13). The Bible gives continuity to African Christianity during its formative period (1986, 20).

Mbiti is largely silent concerning the origin of Scripture. He does not state the source of the Bible's authority, although in one place, he refers to the Bible as the "Word of God" which "gives the kind of light which is

needed in the search for meaningful Christian answers" (1986, 60). Yet while the Bible is the Word of God, it is also, in contrast to Western advisors, the "human advisor" in African theology (1986, 61). Mbiti does not explain what he means by "Word of God" or "human advisor."

Mbiti emphasizes the high degree to which Africans identify with the biblical world, especially when the Bible is translated into African languages (1986, 162).

Whatever differences there may be in detail, Africans feel that their own lives are described in the Bible, they as human beings are affirmed in it and that they belong to the world of the Bible. (Mbiti 1986, 26,27)

Yet Mbiti warns,

Nothing can substitute for the Bible. However much African cultural-religious background may be close to the biblical world, we have to guard against . . . sentiments that see any final revelation of God in the African religious heritage. (Mbiti 1986, 59)

Mbiti's most significant theological work, *New Testament Eschatology* (1971), does not consistently apply this principle. In this work Mbiti points out the distance between the biblical and African worldviews. In the end he opts for allowing the African, rather than the biblical, worldview to control African theology.

In *New Testament Eschatology*, Mbiti attempts to demonstrate the inadequacy of the missionaries' presentation of eschatology in Africa, specifically by the Africa Inland Mission, among his tribe, the Akamba people of Kenya. Mbiti builds his case upon his interpretation of the Akamba con-

cept of time, which instead of being linear and abstract, is marked by the passing of particular events. The Akamba language, Kikamba, according to Mbiti, is extremely limited in its ability to refer to the future, and is able only to refer to events taking place no more than six months in the future (Mbiti 1971, 26). Hence, "Since there is no indefinite future in Akamba thinking, there is also no concept of the end of the world" (Mbiti 1971, 31).

Mbiti's analysis has been criticized (Moreau 1986, 36-48; Gehman 1987, 62-71). For the purpose of this thesis, the precision of his interpretation is not so important as his theological method given that interpretation. Mbiti notes several examples of "materialistic language" in eschatology (e.g. Gehenna, fire, treasure, city, country, etc.) (1971, 64-90). The use of these, he believes, is inappropriate for teaching eschatology among the Akamba.

These eschatological symbols are certainly a vivid and rich method of conveying what otherwise is beyond physical realities. But the symbols are vehicles of theological meaning, and this is what the Akamba have failed to grasp on the conceptual level. Instead, they have come out with a purely materialistic image of eschatological realities, which in turn create a false spirituality in their Christian living. (1971, 183)

For the Akamba, other biblical approaches, such as a theology of the sacraments and teaching concerning the spirit world, are more appropriate vehicles for teaching concerning eschatology (Mbiti 1971, 183,184).

Mbiti is wrestling with the question of whether it is possible for African languages to sustain theological

concepts from the New Testament. His answer is both "yes" and "no" (1971, 183). Much of his struggle concerning eschatology stems from a partially distorted presentation by the Africa Inland Mission (Mbiti 1971, 51-61). But Mbiti himself must be questioned when he says both that, "The End is a teleological End according to New Testament Theology," (1971, 185) and that "there cannot be a teleology in Akamba (or African) concepts of 'Eschatology'" (1971, 181). Mbiti understands that teleology is part of biblical eschatology, but it cannot be a part of African theology because it is not part of traditional African thought. This is inconsistent with his insistence that biblical theology guide all theological reflection (1971, 189). In 1986 Mbiti wrote, "African languages are assimilating biblical concepts" (90). Mbiti did not take this possibility into consideration in 1971 and to my knowledge has not modified his position concerning eschatology. Mbiti allows his understanding of African culture to determine which aspects of biblical theology can or cannot be taught. In the final analysis, culture, rather than biblical revelation, controls his theology.

In his discussion of the doctrine of salvation (1986, 134-175), Mbiti also struggles with bringing the African and the biblical worlds together. Mbiti demonstrates that African traditional religion deals with this-worldly concerns. If salvation is to be meaningful in Africa, it must be understood as a present reality. This

present reality has both physical and spiritual dimensions (1986, 156-157). Although Mbiti emphasizes the "already" dimension of salvation, he does not totally neglect the "not yet." "Both emphases," he says, "have a place in the New Testament, and it is to the credit of African Christians that we see these two strands of salvation at work, simultaneously" (1986, 169).

To this point, Mbiti's concern to bring the biblical and African thought worlds together can be appreciated. However, in interpreting Philippians 2:8-11, Mbiti concludes that salvation must extend to spiritual, as well as the human, beings (Mbiti 1986, 165). Mbiti shows no evidence of arriving at this conclusion through careful exegesis. Paul's greatest concern in Philippians 2:10 is to relate a cosmic acknowledgement of Jesus' lordship. In dealing with the subject of spiritual beings other than God, Mbiti accepts the intuitional application of an African worldview to Scriptures which discuss biblical cosmology (1986, 74). His greatest concern is to apply salvation to every aspect of *African* reality. In spite of his high regard for Scripture, Mbiti allows culture to control theology.

Jesse Mugambi: Conflicting Hermeneutical Models

Jesse Mugambi has constructed a dichotomy differentiating between those who view the Bible as an *instruction manual* and those who view it as a *library*. Those who use the instruction manual model see God "literally" speaking in

the Bible, and take the words of the Bible "at their face value." Interpretation of the manual involves applying specific verses to specific situations in the life of the interpreter. This, Mugambi believes, leads to taking verses out of their contexts (1989, 32). Mugambi rightly criticizes this method of intuitional interpretation.

According to Mugambi, those who use the library model do not view the Bible as the "literal" Word of God but as a book which "contains a record of certain of certain people's encounter with God, and that this record, taken as a whole, provides to the others a clue to a particular religious view of human relationship, between man and man, and between man and God." Those who interpret the Bible as a library isolate the themes which run throughout the Bible and apply the insights gained from this study to specific situations. Those who take this approach, Mugambi believes, are "more appreciative of the richness of the literary quality of this basic Christian book, and of its richness as a source to illuminate the religious dimension of human life" (1989, 33). Though he accepts the centrality of the Bible to the Christian faith, Mugambi accepts wide divergence in interpretation, believing that such differences "are indicative of the profound depth of teaching contained in the Bible" (1989, 6).

Mugambi's model of the Bible as a library is useful, but he draws a false dichotomy. He unjustifiably associates "instruction manual interpretation" with an evangelical view

of Scripture. One who sees the Bible as "literally" the Word of God does not necessarily use it as an instruction manual. The Bible is indeed a library, with a rich variety of forms which demand different methods of interpretation. Different parts of the Bible serve as revelation in different ways but each is, in its own way, the Word of God.

Alongside his emphasis on biblical themes, Mugambi pays close attention to particular passages of Scripture. In fact, he encourages Africans not to run away from difficulties in handling the text but to accept "the challenge to go and find out more" (1989, 102). In his chapter on "Christian Baptism and the Naming of Persons" (1989, 92-100), Mugambi addresses the convention, widely practiced in many African denominations, of giving a child or convert to Christianity a "Christian name" at baptism. This name is expected to be used in order to identify the person as a Christian. After examining specific biblical references, he concludes,

On the basis of the scriptural references where baptism is reported, whether as practiced by John, Jesus or the Apostles, it can be concluded that this ritual did not involve the giving or acquisition of new names. ... It seems, therefore, that the association of baptism with the giving of new names to converts has more to do with acculturation (imposed or voluntary) than with Christian sacramental theology. (1989, 96)

In this example, Mugambi's practice does not conform to his theory. Though he treats Scripture as a library, Mugambi himself takes the words spoken in the Bible "at their face value," supposedly a characteristic of the in-

struction manual model. Mugambi has attempted to link an evangelical view of revelation to an unsatisfactory hermeneutical method and to link a neo-orthodox view of Scripture to a more appropriate method. The hermeneutical methods, however, are not inherently linked to these particular views of Scripture.

Evangelicalism in Africa

The use of a category so common to Western theology may not be the most appropriate in discussing African theology. The views of an increasing number of African theologians, however, coincide with those of many Western evangelicals.

Byang Kato: Reaction to Mbiti

Byang Kato's contribution to African theology was primarily negative. This is illustrated by the title of his M.A. thesis, *Limitations of Natural Revelation* (1971) and of his only complete book, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa* (1975). Kato's untimely death prevented a more positive contribution.

In *Theological Pitfalls*, Kato reacts to the views and interpretations of John Mbiti. Kato criticizes Mbiti's "extreme spiritualization of what has been the normal understanding of orthodox Christianity" (1975, 78). By "extreme spiritualization" he means Mbiti's symbolic interpretation of eschatological figures (Kato 1975, 78, 83,84; cf. Mbiti 1971, 62-90). Kato sees himself among those "who take the

Bible as the infallible Word of God" (1975, 82). He commends "normal, grammatico-historical interpretation" as the only method which will free one from extreme subjectivism (1975, 78).

Kato, however, fails to refute Mbiti's interpretation through careful exegesis. Instead, he quotes conservative, Western scholars such as Carl F. H. Henry, F. F. Bruce, and J. Oliver Buswell Jr. to "beautifully sum up the orthodox position" (Kato 1975, 81,82,85,88). He endorses the grammatico-historical method because "Dr. Bernard Ramm *assigns* the literal method of interpretation to the Protestant" (Kato 1975, 78; italics mine).

Kato also bases his position on the presupposition that inspiration necessarily implies strict inerrancy.

Facts given in the inspired, inerrant Bible, are, therefore, completely reliable. . . . Any quotation from any part of the Bible, Genesis to Revelation, is to be done by this author with the presupposition that we have the historically factual inerrant accounts in the Bible about God and the universe. (1971, 52)

Kato does not demonstrate that Scripture is or even claims to be inerrant. For him, strict inerrancy is necessarily implied in the affirmation of the Bible's inspiration.

In the Foreword to Kato's book, Billy Graham calls the work "a maiden effort by an African theologian" (Kato 1975, 6). In this maiden effort, which regrettably was his last, Kato is so hasty to refute dangerous trends in African theology that he fails to employ the very method which he commends.

Tite Tiénou: The Bible as Discourse

Tite Tiénou is particularly concerned with theological method and hermeneutics. The titles of his journal articles--"Biblical foundations for African theology," "Biblical foundations: An African study," "The problem of methodology in African Christian theology," and "The church in African theology: Description and analysis of hermeneutical presuppositions"--demonstrate this. These writings demonstrate Tiénou's desire to be explicit concerning presuppositions and methods.

Tiénou views the Bible as "the Word of God in that it is the historical witness to God's purposes in the world" (1984a, 175). That witness comes in a form which Tiénou calls "discourse." Tiénou's application of the word is unconventional but follows P. Ricoeur's use (Ricoeur 1981, 174). Tiénou's own definition, however, is easier to follow than Ricoeur's. "For when it is said that the Bible is discourse," states Tiénou, "it means that biblical revelation comes to us in the forms of both *oral* and *written* literature" (Tiénou 1984a, 174). Tiénou believes that much of Scripture, although written down, is not written literature in the modern sense. Instead, it preserves oral forms, including poetry, history, drama, and sermons, and may "reflect the so-called oral mind more than the literate one" (1984a, 175). Tiénou seeks to justify this hypothesis by citing R. Finegan's research which suggests the likelihood

of the co-existence of oral and written literature in newly literate cultures (Finegan 1981).

This view of Scripture as discourse, comprised of both oral and written literature, demands flexibility on the part of the interpreter. Different types of literature must be interpreted by different rules (Tiénoú 1984a, 175). This call for flexibility is found in an earlier work by Tiénoú.

First, we should deprogram our hermeneutics so that we don't only see in the Bible what our hermeneutical key tells us is there. This will help us reduce the effects of our preunderstandings. Secondly, we should read the Bible with the purpose of gaining new understanding. Thirdly, we should see how this affects our total context. (1982a, 447)

Tiénoú sets out his hermeneutical approach in these excerpts from his dissertation.

First, since the Bible is not technical religious literature, in the modern sense, it should not be interpreted as if the intention of the authors was to develop comprehensive and systematic religious treatises. Of particular importance to hermeneutics in this regard is that we should develop a positive attitude towards repetition in the Bible (particularly in the Gospels) and view it in a way similar to repetition in oral literature. . . .

Secondly, since the Bible has characteristics of both real and oral written literature, it should be interpreted by flexible rules. Sometimes rules for interpreting oral literature will be adequate, while at other times there will be a need to treat Scripture as written literature, particularly in the epistles. . . .

Thirdly, . . . there needs to be a deliberate effort at fostering multi-cultural hermeneutics. The unity of the world and of the human race does not mean monolithic "scientific" rules which can be imposed on all peoples on earth. The same is true in the area of hermeneutics.

Fourthly, in order to counteract the tendency to minimize the first horizon, that of Scripture, one needs to always keep *both horizons* [that of the Bible and that of the interpreter] in tension. Specifically, one should resist the temptation of

calling hermeneutics that which is application. Scripture must first be understood in its own situation before it is explained and applied in another situation. (Tiéno 1984a, 182-184)

This citation demonstrates Tiéno's overall approach to and respect for Scripture. Tiéno finds fault with the methodologies of other African theologians, particularly with mnemonic hermeneutics which, he says, confuse interpretation and application (1984a, 181; see page 40, 64). He also criticizes theologians such as Mbiti and Pobee, who "remain imprisoned in Western categories and presuppositions" (1984a, 110). Specifically, Pobee's dependence on the *religionsgeschichtliche Methode* (see page 45), "which is a product of certain historical developments in Europe, is of little interest" to Africans who would construct theologies in the vernacular (1984a, 105).

Daniel Wambutda: The Hermeneutical Circle

Daniel N. Wambutda has briefly outlined a hermeneutical circle which falls squarely along evangelical lines (1980, 29-39). Wambutda suggests a theological approach consisting of Part A--analysis of the social setting, Part B--examination of the biblical material, and Part C--*orthopraxis* (1980, 37). Wambutda says,

The biblical theology that emerges in Part B must metamorphose through the *sitz-im-leben* of Part A. The biblical formulation at this point must be the criterion for winnowing what *is* Christian and what *is not*, where the biblical theology will metamorphose into African *Christian* theology which is *orthopraxis*, and at the same time naturally retaining its universality. (1980, 37)

Wambutda's method is built upon the "fundamental assumption that the canon is the controlling force, the inspired inerrant Word of God . . ." (1980, 37). There are many similarities between Wambutda's method and the process outlined below.

Developing a Coherent Approach to Scripture

The Nature of Scripture

Chapter 1 outlined several presuppositions which I make concerning the nature of biblical revelation (see page 3). At this point it is necessary to examine the implications of those presuppositions for the use of the Bible in African theology. Richard Gehman has noted the importance of this task:

We have seen that Western missionaries confused their culture with the supracultural revelation of Scripture and unfortunately transported western forms of Christianity to Africa. This is to be lamented. But unless we can establish a biblical relationship between Scripture and culture for African Christian theology, we shall be the worse off. Culture will eat up God's revelation. . . . Though we may allege a certain primacy for the Bible, such claims are only cosmetic. (1987, 49)

The task is indeed demanding. It must begin with the fundamental yet difficult question "What is the Bible?" If we say that it is the "Word of God," what do we mean by that? If we ask, "What does the Bible say about itself?" "we must bear in mind that none of the biblical authors refer specifically to all the books of the Bible, although we may find statements in parts of the New Testament that refer generally to the books of the Old Testament" (Marshall 1986,

19) nor do they outline a method by which the Scriptures are to be interpreted (*contra* Larkin 1988, 305f; cf. Moore 1991).

Proceeding from the presuppositions stated, the purpose of this section is to clarify my own view and to propose directions for future study on that basis. Writers who have been formative in the development of this position are Allen (1990), Fee and Stuart (1982), Hasel (1978 and 1982), Marshall (1982), and Olbricht (1965).

A Canonical Approach

Scripture embraces the entire Protestant canon. God has limited his eternal and universally authoritative word to the canon of Scripture. This claim must remain, to some extent, a faith judgment. The "leap" of faith, however, is not blind. The Old Testament canon was more or less closed by the time of Jesus (Luke 24:27,44) and Paul was able to refer collectively to "all Scripture" (2 Tim. 3:16), by which he meant the Hebrew Scriptures. Some Christian writings were considered on a level with the Old Testament Scriptures (2 Peter 3:15-16) while the church rejected other books which claimed a similar authority.

This view includes the entire canon, but excludes non-canonical material. Such material may be instructive, but it is not authoritative. It also excludes authoritative guidance by "inherent logic" or Catholic tradition (see page 45; Sawyerr 1968, 110).

Even with authoritative revelation limited to the canon of Scripture, a wide variety of types of literature, and revelation, remain. Those who take seriously the genres through which Scripture comes to us must conclude that different portions of Scripture serve as revelation in different ways. A psalm is of a radically different nature than a prophetic oracle, a proverb is not the same as a legal code, and an epistle is different from an historical narrative. Scripture is indeed a library (Mugambi 1989, 33). To believe that "all Scripture is inspired of God" (2 Tim. 3:16) does not require believing that all Scripture comes to us through the same process, but to believe that, ultimately, God is responsible for all Scripture.

Scripture has been called the "raw material" with which the theologian does his work. This is an accurate analogy but requires qualification. Theologians cannot work with this raw material in whatever way they please. The material surrounding a nugget of biblical truth cannot be discarded. The meaning of that nugget is determined by its relationship to the surrounding material--how it functions in its context. Neither is the biblical theologian free to extract truths here and there from Scripture and, from those truths, construct arbitrary models of doctrine. If such were the case, just as industrialists are virtually unlimited in what they can construct from the raw materials of the earth, so theological engineers would be free to construct limitless conflicting models of doctrine.

Many have attempted to identify a central concept, theme, or motif for the testaments or the canon, but no single concept can adequately encompass the variety of revelation which we have in Scripture (Hasel 1978, 140-170; 1982, 117-143). A variety of motifs are found. Biblical theologies can be developed around any one of these, as long as theologians recognize that they do not, in a single presentation, have the complete picture.

Historical and Propositional Revelation

The debate concerning the nature of revelation has raged largely over whether revelation is historical or propositional. Has God revealed himself through "mighty acts" or through spoken words? This is part of the dichotomy which Mugambi has constructed (see page 57). According to Mugambi, the instruction manual model sees God "literally" speaking in the Bible, while the library model interprets the Bible as the record of other peoples' encounters with God (1989, 33).

Mugambi has failed to see that one need not choose between historical and propositional revelation but may embrace both. The Bible consists of both historical events and their interpretation, and there is no *a priori* reason why both cannot have a divine source. Sawyerr is right when he says that the Hebrew (and biblical) view of history is "the unfolding of the gracious purpose of God" (1968,5). That gracious purpose is made known both in deeds and words.

always occur in the sequence presented here. These activities may be outlined simply: God acts (or promises to act), God speaks (or man speaks for God), humanity listens (and watches), humanity responds.

We can see this process at work in the climactic events in the Bible. In the Old Testament, the exodus stands as the high point in God's redemptive work in Israel. In this story, through a series of powerful encounters, God reveals his awesome strength. He interprets these manifestations of his power as, among other things, his judgment on the gods of Egypt (Exodus 12:12). When the people experience the deliverance that results from these encounters, they sing a song acknowledging the incomparability of Yahweh (Exodus 15:11). Even those outside Israel who only hear of what has happened acknowledge that Yahweh "is greater than all other gods" (Exodus 18:9-11; Joshua 2:8-11). All of these components--the acts of God, his interpretation, human experience, and human interpretation--serve as revelation. In some cases, people in Scripture, such as Job's friends, misinterpret God's actions. The authoritative interpretation is that which is approved by the canonical author. When Kwesi Dickson claims that the Scriptures are a "*particular* witness to the revelation of God" (1984, 20), he fails to understand that the witness itself *is* revelation.

Contradiction, Historical Inaccuracy, and Paradox

Those who take a high view of Scripture cannot avoid difficulties within Scripture. Many assume that the nature of revelation is such that contradictions or inaccuracies are inconsistent with divine origin. Some, when they see difficulties, conclude that the Bible is only a human product, while others resort to extreme means to maintain the inerrancy of Scripture. The latter assume that any unexplained problem is the result of a deficiency in their knowledge rather than an actual error in Scripture.

This explanation certainly has its place. Modern science, history, archaeology, and other so-called "objective" fields are constantly arriving at different and debatable conclusions. Modern conclusions, which tomorrow are sure to be modified, cannot be a sure judge by which to evaluate God's revelation. Some African theologians appear too eager to sacrifice biblical revelation to the god of science. When confidence in Scripture is eroded on the basis of ever-changing modern science, believers are left without a historical, and hence without a *real*, basis for their faith.

At the same time, one should not construct a view of Scripture without examining whether that view is consistent with the contents of Scripture. "Not all who wrestle with the Bible's legitimate problems are 'relativists' and 'liberals'" (Moore 1991, 176). My purpose is not to compile a list of Bible difficulties, only to note that they do

exist. Marshall notes the minor discrepancies in the parallel accounts in the books of Kings and Chronicles, the different theological perspectives found in Leviticus, Proverbs, and Philippians, and the different pictures of Jesus in the gospels of Mark and John. He notes the historical difficulty which puts Jesus' birth before the death of Herod yet after the census of Quirinius (Marshall 1982, 16). Bible-believers must decide how they will deal with such problems.

I maintain that the difficulties found in Scripture are not of such a nature so as to prevent the Bible from achieving the purposes for which it is intended, both by its human authors and by God. We must take the Bible on its own terms instead of constructing a model of inspiration or inerrancy to which we force the Scripture to conform. The unity of all Scripture is seen in the affirmation of 2 Timothy 3:16, "All Scripture is *inspired of God* and is *useful* for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work." Those who accept the *inspired* character of Scripture by faith find that, in the tremendous and rich variety found in Scripture, its claim to be *useful* holds true throughout.

The Interpretation of Scripture

Positions taken concerning the nature of Scripture have a profound impact on the interpretation of Scripture.

If the revelation is both historical and propositional, then its interpretation must be based upon historical-grammatical-literary exegesis. *Exegesis* is the systematic explanation of the meaning which a text had for its original readers. Contemporary application must be undergirded by exegesis because "a text cannot mean what it never could have meant to its author or his readers" (Fee and Stuart 1982,60). Exegesis is *historical* because it is necessary to understand the circumstances in which revelation is given. Exegesis is *grammatical* because, in Scripture, God has revealed himself using human language. Exegesis is *literary* because the smaller grammatical units must be interpreted in light of their function in the larger work.

Exegesis is a dynamic process. What is learned at one stage may reflect on previous or future stages. In this sense, exegesis is never completed; one's conclusions must always be open to adjustment when new evidence comes to light. Some sequence can be seen, however, in what is necessary to comprehend the original intention of the author of the text. Textual criticism must be employed to determine the original text. Vocabulary, grammar, and the structure of the text must be analyzed. The interpreter must not render a passage so that it communicates something different from its original meaning. Each type of literature must be interpreted in terms of its use in the original culture and its claims concerning itself. Tiénou realizes this when he points to both oral and written discourse in Scripture

(1984a, 174). Tiénoú emphasizes the oral tradition lying, in his view, near the surface of the text. Some of the forms of Scripture reflect an oral tradition, but we should not forget that much of Scripture originated as written literature.

The context, consisting of the pericope, the book, the entire Bible, and the social and political world, will guide the interpretation of the passage. It will help students read the passage as the original readers did. Sawyerr's view of purgatory (see page 44) falls short here, as does Dickson's claim that the priesthood of Melchizedek reflects an approval of Baalism and a tolerant attitude toward Canaanite cults *outside* Israel (see page 50). The incident occurred before Yahweh established his covenant with Israel at Sinai.

The regard for context will also be an aid in *hermeneutics*, the task of interpretation. One can determine whether an injunction is intended to be normative by asking, "Are there other approaches to the same issue elsewhere in Scripture?" If there are, then the position advocated in this text may well be determined by the situation. The student should also ask, "Does the author go with or against cultural norms?" If he is going against culture, then it is even more likely that he is advocating a "supracultural" belief or behavior.

Other criteria may also be applied. For example, if an injunction is rooted in prior revelation (cf. 1 Tim.

2:11-14), it is more likely to have cross-cultural relevance. A direct command usually has greater normative value than an isolated example, though the larger context must determine how widely the command is to be applied. A text which communicates ethical rather than social concerns may have greater cross-cultural application (Mathews 1990).

The role of the passage in the history of the church should also be studied. To understand how those in other cultures and times have understood a passage will help students see possible areas where their own cultural presuppositions have colored their understanding of the text.

A canonical biblical theology seeks to discover the emphases of the Bible. These emphases include God's sovereignty, his uniqueness, his covenants, his steadfast love, his holiness, etc. This involves determining the particular emphases of a pericope, a larger narrative, a book, or an author. By determining the relative importance attached to these considerations one can begin to see the essential message of Scripture. Hence, not all propositions in Scripture are of equal weight.

Having understood the original intent of the text, the student attempts to "re-enter" his own cultural setting and to speak a word of God which is both faithful to the original intent of the text and relevant to his contemporary audience. We must strive to bring our own cultural worldview into line with a more biblical view. The responsibility of the interpreter is to see that the application of the

text to the present situation is in harmony with the original intention of the text.

All of this is not to say that the interpretation of Scripture must be reserved for the educated elite. Those with special training must, however, assume the responsibility of instructing those with less formal training how to be faithful interpreters. This will mean helping Christians to see how strange the world of the Bible really is (Allen 1990, 43-79). As Dickson noted, predilection for the Old Testament does not insure its accurate interpretation (1979, 88). To some extent, it becomes even more necessary to observe the differences between the biblical and cultural views because they are so easily overlooked.

The final aspect of interpretation is the appropriation of the faithfully understood and applied Word to the heart and life of the hearer. This is the second horizon to which Tiénoú refers. There is an existential aspect to revelation to the extent that God reveals his will to individual human beings as they apply the teaching of Scripture to their particular situations. The control on existential revelation must, however, remain in the objective revelation of Scripture.

Conclusion

Based on the ideas concerning Scripture espoused here, several recommendations for the use of the Bible in African theology need to be made. First, there is the need for an objective assessment of the similarities and differ-

ences between the biblical and African worldviews. Second, there is a need for a reevaluation of the roles which traditional African and modern secular worldviews should have in the formation of Christian theology. Third, African Christians must accept the responsibility of carefully studying the Scriptural text and context, rather than approaching the text intuitively. Many more African evangelists, who in most cases have already mastered several African and European languages, should give serious attention to the Hebrew and Greek texts. Finally, African Christians need to develop biblical theologies, considering the parts of Scripture in light of the whole, so that they may faithfully interpret and apply the parts and the whole.

CHAPTER 4

REVELATION IN AFRICAN TRADITION AND HISTORY

Africans are acutely aware of spiritual reality. Most believe in a supreme Creator. Traditionally, Africans arrived at this understanding apart from the revelation found in the Judeo-Christian Scriptures. This chapter examines the sources of that knowledge. How have the peoples of Africa come to know God? What have they done with that knowledge? Have they maintained a relationship with God and, if so, what is the nature of that relationship? What is the relationship between the revelation given to the African fathers and the revelation given through Jesus Christ? African theologians have wrestled with these questions. Some of their answers are discussed below.

Throughout this chapter I use the traditional categories of special and natural, or general, revelation. Though John Mbiti argues that these categories are inadequate (1980c, 818; see page 87), they serve as a convenient and necessary way of differentiating between revelation that is mediated through nature and available to all people regardless of historical circumstances (natural/general) and that which is mediated through specific acts of God and directed toward particular peoples (special).

Scholars all along the theological spectrum point toward natural revelation as the primary source of the traditional African knowledge of God. They differ on the degree to which this conveys legitimacy to African traditional religion.

The second part of this chapter examines the primary biblical texts that form the basis for the doctrine of natural revelation. The historical development of the doctrine, which has impacted African theology, is sketched in summary fashion. I have included this material because, while the views of African theologians broaden our perspectives, the teachings of Scripture place authoritative limits on our judgments. After examining the the theologians' perspectives and the Bible's teachings, conclusions will be drawn which will guide our study in chapter five.

Approaches Taken by African Theologians

Ecumenical Perspectives

E. Bolaji Idowu: God and Other gods

For E. Bolaji Idowu, universal revelation comes to all humanity through two channels--the created order and God's witness within the individual (Idowu 1973, 55-57). Idowu emphasizes the creation event, which forms the theological basis for revelation in African tradition. Through the presence and activity of the Spirit of God in creation, the Maker has left his indelible stamp upon the created order (Idowu 1973, 54). God reveals himself to the whole world, and Idowu contends that "each race has grasped some-

thing of this primary revelation according to its native capability" (1969a, 12; cf. 1973, 140). The revelation through creation is unlimited in scope. It is meant for all humanity. All worship is a response to God's self-disclosure (1973, 56,57; cf. 1962, 31).

Idowu wishes to demonstrate that the God of African tradition and the God of Christian faith are the same. He accuses Western scholars who might think otherwise of bigotry (1973, 61, 65). In order to make his case, Idowu responds to some popularly held misconceptions concerning the African understanding of God.

In reaction to the idea that Africans have no clear knowledge of God, Idowu argues that this cannot be uniquely said of Africans. The academic elite are responsible for the systematic statements about God in Western Christianity. Creedal statements make little difference in the lives of those who adhere to them. There is always, he says, a gap between prophetic insight and popular understanding of God. Because God reveals himself, he will not and cannot be fully known. All must concede their ultimate ignorance of the mysteries of God (1969b, 21; 1973, 143). Africans are not alone in their lack of a clear knowledge of God.

Idowu responds to the notion of an "African God" or "high god" by insisting that there is only one God (1973, 146). God in African thought is none other than the biblical Creator (1973, 68,69).

The [Yoruba] name Olódùmarè has always carried with it the idea of One with Whom many may enter into

covenant or communion in any place and at any time, one who is supreme, superlatively great, incomparable and unsurpassable in majesty, excellent in attributes, stable, unchanging, constant, reliable. (Idowu 1962, 36)

The conjecture that God is withdrawn is, according to Idowu, "an intellectualist abstraction" (1973, 63). Many characterize the African view as one of a God who was once near to humanity, but who has become offended and withdrawn. According to Idowu, the traditional African understanding is that *the sky*, God's dwelling place, withdrew from earth, but that this "does not necessarily mean the withdrawal of Deity from divine activity in connection with earth" (1973, 65,66).

Idowu seeks to reconcile the reality of the one God over all the earth with the reality of the many divinities of African traditional religion. In order to do this, he calls the African perspective "Diffused Monotheism." This, according to Idowu, "is a monotheism in which the good Deity delegates certain portions of His authority to certain divine functionaries who work as they are commissioned by Him" (Idowu 1962, 204). The gods are in part viewed as servants or representatives of the Creator.

Although Idowu wishes to designate African religion as monotheism, he acknowledges that the multiplication of divinities in Yoruba traditional religion is a departure from the original revelation. With time, a people's idea of God may either be enriched or may degenerate (1962, 32). The latter has happened in Africa. Idowu attributes this degra-

dition to the absence of prophets in Africa to call the people back to the primitive purity of their religion. In the absence of prophets, the priests found it politically advantageous to multiply cults so that today there are innumerable divinities (1962, 203).

The main shortcoming of the divinity system is that it very easily lends itself as a tool to priestcraft. This is one . . . factor which makes for an increase in the number of divinities because . . . priestcraft is quite capable of inventing spurious objects of worship. . . . *[T]he divinities have largely tended to become ends in themselves instead of the means to an end which they are meant to be.* Thus, even though Deity is an ever-present, immanent reality in African belief, Africans are often led to accept the half-way houses as permanent resting places, the means as the end, to the impoverishment of religion and degradation of human life. (Idowu 1973, 173; italics mine)

Idowu's position may then be summarized as follows. There is one God who has primarily revealed himself to all people through his created order. This is the God who is known to the peoples of Africa under a variety of names. Idowu tries to maintain two conflicting positions regarding the origin of the divinities. On the one hand, Idowu views the many divinities who inhabit the African world as servants of God. On the other hand, he claims that their numbers have proliferated through the multiplication of cults by the traditional priesthood--shamans, diviners, etc. He says the divinities are meant to serve as a means to an end but that African peoples are led to accept them as ends in themselves (Idowu 1973, 173). We must ask, "What end they are meant to serve?" and "How they are to serve that

end?" "Who means for them to serve that end?" "What leads African peoples to see the divinities as ends in themselves?" "How do these powers differ from rebellious angelic powers who seek to detract from worship due the Creator?" Idowu tries to explain African tradition religion using revelation apart from Scripture, but there remain a host of unanswered questions.

Kwesi Dickson: Revelation to the Fathers

We now return to Kwesi Dickson's very poignant question, raised in chapter 3: "Are not the peoples of Africa to be reckoned among those whose fathers have been the avenue of God's self-disclosure?" (Dickson 1984, 144). We noted Dickson's concern for universal revelation and the impact of this concern on his interpretation of Scripture. That same concern manifests itself in his view of African tradition.

Dickson acknowledges that much of the biblical record implies that God had an exclusive relationship with Israel, yet he claims that "at a deeper level the biblical attitude is more open and universalistic than exclusivistic--all peoples stand in a close relationship with God" (Dickson 1984, 19). Dickson aligns himself with what he calls "the protagonists of African theology," who, proceed "on the basis of the presupposition that there is one God of the whole earth, and that every religion is to a certain measure an embodiment of the drama of God meeting man" (Dickson 1984, 36). These African theologians are convicted

that "all religions enshrine an encounter between God and man" (Dickson 1984, 123).

Dickson's claims, even at this point, must be questioned. He does not defend this presupposition, except to cite a few biblical texts without sufficient attention to their contexts (see page 51). Dickson's position is difficult to critique because he does not sufficiently define his terms. For example, what does he by "the drama of God meeting man" or "an encounter between God and man"? What is involved in this drama or encounter? How far does it go in establishing a relationship between God and humanity?

Dickson also leaves unanswered his question regarding the self-disclosure of God to the African fathers. He attempts to locate an answer in Scripture, but as we observed in chapter three, this case is not persuasive. Others attempt to find evidence of a redemptive revelation in nature, but Dickson himself notes, "without the prerequisite of faith, Nature does not reveal God in a manner that brings solace and spiritual healing" (Dickson 1984, 165). Dickson inadequately argues his biblical case and finds no basis in the natural revelation for a redemptive relationship between God and humankind. He fails to show that the fathers of African tradition maintained a redemptive relationship with God.

John Pobee: The Sufficiency of Gentile Knowledge

John Pobee believes that there is revelation in African tradition. One needs to understand this revelation

by studying the "myths, proverbs, invocations, prayers, incantations, rituals, songs, dramas, and so on" of African traditional religion. The phenomenological approach is best for this study (1979, 21).

Pobee believes that "In that progression from natural revelation to special revelation, some elements of the old revelation may have to be discarded" (Pobee 1979, 78; see page 17). Special revelation corrects traditional religion which results from the natural revelation. Special revelation, however, occurs in African tradition. Pobee "supposes that some of the revelation of God in traditional religions" comes under the speaking of God to the "fathers," mentioned in Hebrews 1:1-2. He contends that "*polumerōs*, translated 'on many occasions,' . . . need not be confined to the revelation of God to men under the old covenant; it may extend to the religions other than the Judeo-Christian tradition" (Pobee 1979, 73,74).

The revelation to the fathers spoken of in Hebrews 1, however, came "by the prophets." In the New Testament "the prophets" refers to the spokesmen for God in Jewish history (cf. esp. Acts 3:21; Rom. 1:2; 1 Thess. 2:15; Heb. 11:32). The intention of the author of the book of Hebrews is to show the overshadowing of the revelation in Jewish history by the revelation in Jesus Christ. Hebrews 1:1 should not be used to speak of a revelation to other peoples, including the African fathers.

Pobee argues that Gentiles "have sufficient knowledge of the will of God" (1979, 76). They have sufficient knowledge of "what God wills or forbids" (1979, 76), sufficient knowledge to know good from evil (1979, 103), sufficient knowledge to come under divine justice (1979, 76), and sufficient knowledge to sense the power and deity of God (1979, 73). However, such knowledge does not keep humanity from idolatry (1979, 73). African traditional worship is "misguided" in some ways. The invention of idols represents an "attempt to name God" but "only God can name himself" (1979, 73). Idolatry is wrong because it confuses the creature with the Creator. The task, Pobee says, "is to distinguish what is the essence of 'pagan religion' and see how far it is consonant with the worship of God as the Christian understands it" (1979, 79). Pobee does not suggest a process by which the *essence* can be distinguished from the *practice* of pagan religion.

Although Pobee suggests that God has spoken directly to the African fathers, he devotes much more attention to the impact of natural revelation on the traditional knowledge of God. This natural revelation manifests itself "in its diverse forms of philosophy, popular piety, polytheistic ideas, and divine worship through images . . . whatever its imperfections" (Pobee 1979, 74). Pobee acknowledges the limitations of natural revelation. His understanding of natural revelation allows some of its elements to be "discarded" (1979, 78). How, though, can authentic revelation

ever be discarded, as if proven unreliable? The very nature of divine revelation demands that it be reliable, though not necessarily sufficient.

John Mbiti: *Heilsgeographie*

John Mbiti argues that the distinction between special and general revelation is "inadequate and unfreeing" because the lines between natural and special revelation are often blurred. "If they are two wavelengths," says Mbiti, "they make sense only when they move toward a convergence." In his explanation of this convergence Mbiti observes, "When this happens, then a passage such as Hebrews 1:1-3 rolls down like mighty waters, full of exciting possibilities" (1980c, 818). Apparently Mbiti, like Pobee, takes this passage to refer to revelation in African tradition (see pages 85f).

Much of the following information concerning Mbiti's views comes from Blake Burleson's dissertation "John Mbiti: The Dialogue of an African Theologian with African Traditional Religion" (1986). Burleson accessed unpublished papers and interviewed Mbiti privately in order to better understand his views. In an interview held at Bossey, Switzerland, Mbiti told Burleson,

I feel that God has made himself known to the African peoples in various ways--clearly through nature and through experiences in life, through participation in religious acts and especially sacrifices, in religious dancing, in acts of God's intervention (like in times of drought or threats in human life) people experiences (*sic*) the saving hand of God.
(Mbiti 1985)

Mbiti thus imagines an unspoken, though direct, revelation from God, not only through nature but through African traditional religion and specific saving acts. Such a revelation would be, at the same time, both *natural* and *special*.

Mbiti does not claim that the revelation given in African tradition is complete. In a paper presented at the Consultation on the Church and the Jewish People in Jerusalem in 1977, Mbiti distinguishes between African and biblical revelation. Revelation in African tradition, he says, is less direct. There are no theophanies, no special callings, and no prophets. "Revelation in Africa is received from a God who is apparently more removed" (Mbiti 1977b). The primary distinction is the revelation through Jesus Christ. According to Mbiti, "The *naming* of Jesus Christ is the main element that is being produced by the missionary movement" (1985).

Mbiti carefully refers to the *naming* of Jesus Christ rather than to his presence. Burleson highlights Mbiti's ambiguity on this point. In some instances Mbiti speaks of a "hidden Christ" in African tradition. "Without naming him African peoples have sensed the reality of Jesus Christ" (Mbiti 1985). Or have they? In his interview with Burleson, Mbiti was not willing to speak of a manifestation of Christ apart from the historical Jesus, though he did not limit God's revelation to this, or any, historical particularity.

This writer asked Mbiti the question: "Would you say that revelation is only in Jesus Christ but that sometimes those to whom he is revealed do not know his name?" Mbiti replied:

That is a difficult way to put it. [That is] in terms of exclusiveness. It is difficult to measure. In one sense we say Christ is always present with God. One would say yes-- wherever God is there Christ is. . . . Yet we can't get away from the fact that Jesus as we know him came in our time dimensions. He intervened in a physical, concrete, historical way. And, therefore, in so doing he made revelation a historical movement. Otherwise, revelation is something that is not easy to historicize but in Jesus revelation became historical.

Here one can see the reluctance of Mbiti to talk about the revelation of the Word outside the framework of the historical Jesus. Yet this is exactly what he has done in places where he has emphasized the eternal "presence of Christ in the world." (Burleson 1986, 86)

Mbiti coins the term *Heilsgeographie* to refer to the method of God's revelation in African tradition. He contrasts *Heilsgeographie* with *Heilsgeschichte*. Since there are no theophanies in African tradition, "nature, instead of history, becomes theophany" (Burleson 1986, 107). Christian theology, according to Mbiti, must pass from history into geography, by which he presumably means nature (Mbiti 1978c). African traditional religion, which according to Mbiti is non-historical, places no value on the movement of history. Since nature is repetitive, "each African knows the Creator in the same way that his grandfather knew the Creator" (Burleson 1986, 107,108).

Mbiti vacillates on this position, however. God's revelation in Africa is historical, he says, to the extent that Africans have lived in history and are "part of the

stream of God's history" (1985). Although in one context he minimizes *Heilsgeschichte*, in another he expands it so as to include Africa history.

When we identify the God of the Bible as the same God who is known through African religion (whatever its limitations), we must also take it that God has had a historical relationship with African peoples. God is not insensitive to the history of peoples other than Israel. Their history has a theological meaning. . . . In this case, what is called "salvation history" must widen its outreach in order to embrace the horizons of other peoples histories. . . . I feel that the issue of looking at African history in light of the biblical understanding of history is clearly called for. (Mbiti 1980c, 818)

Mbiti summarized his views in 1989. He believes that God has revealed himself to African peoples, and that the acknowledgement of God in African religion reflects this. The traditional understandings of God, however, have evolved differently among each African people. Nature is an "open," not a definitive, witness to God. Although Christianity and African religion both worship one and the same God, the Christian understanding of God is more complete because of the revelation through Jesus Christ. For example, the biblical revelation exposes gaps in the traditional African understanding of God in the teachings concerning eschatology and the kingdom of God (Mbiti 1989, 4). Mbiti's ambiguity concerning history and revelation leads one to question his attitude toward the uniqueness of biblical salvation history. Otherwise, his presuppositions concerning revelation are consistent with a biblical view.

Evangelical Perspectives

Byang Kato and Tokumboh Adeyemo: The Limitations of Natural Revelation

For Byang Kato, natural revelation is, by definition, non-saving revelation (1971, 2). Natural, or general, revelation suggests that there is a powerful, righteous, providential, and wise Creator who rules the created universe. Kato cites Psalms 8:3-4, 19:1, 29:3-4, 104:24, 148:13, and Romans 1:20 (1971, 54,55). Beyond this, people should recognize that this righteous God is the King and judge of the earth. His divinity should be known (1971, 59). Though this knowledge is not sufficient to save, people have the responsibility to "receive or reject the content of the revelation" (1971, 60). Unfortunately, "man has not allowed his mind to rest in the vacuum. He has crystallized his thinking, either by comforting himself with the idea that 'there is no God' or postulating a god that is no God" (1971, 25). According to Kato, this will always be the case in the absence of special revelation (1971, 40).

Kato believes that humanity's inevitable drift toward atheism and idolatry results from the curse placed upon humankind following Adam and Eve's sin in the garden (1971, 65). Kato describes the results of this sin in some detail.

Total depravity which came as a result of the original act of rebellion against God means that although there are still vestiges of God in the natural man, his whole outlook of the universe is so blurred that he cannot see the fingers of the true God. Any little good he can do amounts to the filthiest ob-

ject man can conceive of (Isa. 64:6). The direct line of communication between God and Adam was blocked in the garden. . . . This accounts for the limitations of natural revelation. Any faint reflection man has of God, he has translated it into the worship of a creature rather than the Creator. But the whole fault lies in man. (1971, 67)

Unlike many African theologians, Kato correctly recognizes the limitations of natural revelation. In some points, however, he has failed to work out his position consistently. For example, if people "*cannot* see the fingers of God in the world" (italics mine), how then does the "whole fault" lie with humanity? If humanity is *totally* depraved, how is it that we are able to see even a faint reflection of God? The difficulties may be largely semantic, but they may also reflect fundamental inconsistencies in the position that the limitations of natural revelation result from the Fall.

In his book *Salvation in African Tradition* (1979), Dr. Tokunboh Adeyemo largely builds upon Kato's foundation. He discusses three sources of revelation apart from Scripture--the *Imago Dei*, the natural phenomena of creation, and God's "providence and preservation" of creation. Through these media, God has revealed himself to the peoples of Africa (1979, 19-24).

According to Adeyemo, there are strict limitations on the role of this revelation. Even with it, African peoples have only "seen dimly as through a mirror"; their knowledge of God is "indistinct." General revelation is valid for the purpose for which it was given, but it is not

redemptive. Its purpose is to be, "like the Mosaic Law, . . . a 'schoolmaster' commissioned with the task of pointing men and women to the existence of a holy and righteous God" (1979, 24). It functions as a "point of contact" in establishing a common ground between Christians and traditional worshipers (1979, 24). It is "the foundation upon which the superstructure of special revelation rests" (1979, 27).

In addition to the inherent limitations of general revelation, Adeyemo cites two factors which hinder humanity's ability to discern God's revelation. First, the effect of the fall of Adam upon all humanity distorts our perception of natural revelation. Second, "man is so constantly attacked by Satan that any faint reflection he has of God is translated into the worship of a creature rather than the Creator" (Adeyemo 1979, 26). Adeyemo's remarks imply that people are incapable of discerning the Creator because of the sin of Adam and the attacks of Satan. A biblical perspective, to be discussed below, demonstrates that people are held responsible for their failure to know the Creator because there is a willful rejection of the revelation.

Whatever the reasons, most people fail to apprehend the revelation made available to them, whether that revelation comes to them through the created order, through the internal witness within them, through God's mighty acts, or

even through God's special revelation given through his law (Romans 1-2).

The Thailand Report

As part of the larger Lausanne Committee on World Evangelization, twenty-five theologians met at Pattaya, Thailand, in 1980 to take part in a mini-consultation on reaching traditional religionists in Africa. The meeting was chaired by Tite Tiénou. Other African theologians present included Tokunboh Adeyemo and Daidanso Djongwe.

The consultation affirmed that although God has not left himself without witness, he has revealed himself in a unique way through Jesus Christ, "outside of whom there is no salvation" (Thailand Report 1980, 4). In addition to this special revelation, the consultation enumerated three additional avenues of God's more general revelation: nature, conscience, and history (Thailand Report 1980, 4). This list closely corresponds to the three modes of general revelation outlined independently by Adeyemo.

African traditional religion, the committee agreed, derives from God's general revelation. There was evidently some disagreement among the theologians as to the means by which the general revelation has come to the peoples of Africa. Some held that traditional religion results from God's general self-disclosure through the channels outlined above. This implies that though the revelation is from God, the resulting religion is the design of man. It is limited, non-redemptive, and corrupt (Thailand Report 1980, 4).

Others maintained that the root of traditional religion can be traced to a "direct revelation--however inadequate--of God to man in primeval times." The existence of stories in Africa about "creation, paradise, the fall, and judgement" may support this view (Thailand Report 1980, 4).

All of the theologians at the consultation agreed that many aspects of traditional religion are incompatible with the gospel. Traditional religion provides a point of contact for the message of God's ultimate revelation through Jesus, but "The sun has risen, and the candlelight has become redundant" (Thailand Report 1980, 4). The committee did not attempt to explain the gap that exists between the truths of general revelation and the incompatibility of African traditional religion with the gospel. Although the committee acknowledged the role of "powers," (1980, 17), it did not discuss the possible demonic or Satanic origin of traditional religious practices.

A Critical Evaluation

The Doctrine of Natural Revelation

The Biblical Basis

The doctrine of natural revelation suggests that there is some knowledge of God which humanity can attain by observing the natural universe, apart from a spoken or written word from God. The Psalms bear witness to this testimony to God in nature. Psalm 19 suggests that "The heavens," particularly the sun, "are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork" (Psalm 19:1-

6). Although the heavens have no audible voice, "their voice goes out through all the earth." Nature universally testifies to the glory of God. The second half of the psalm (vs. 7-14), which may have been added by a later author, proclaims God's revelation through his law, bearing witness to two modes of God's self-revelation. In Psalm 29 the "voice of the Lord" works powerfully in nature. His glory thunders, his voice breaks cedars, flashes forth flames of fire, and causes oaks to whirl. This should move the angelic beings to "ascribe to the Lord glory and strength" (Psalm 29:1-9).

While the Psalms reflect the human response to the revelation of God in nature, Yahweh's speech in the concluding chapters of the book of Job relates the divine position. Yahweh declares his sovereignty over his universe, and contrasts his creative and sustaining power with humanity's impotence and ignorance.

Nowhere in the Old Testament do the authors attempt to prove the existence of God. God's existence is always assumed. Only the fool says that there is no God (Psalm 14:1). Bertil Gärtner concludes,

Consequently, the only purpose served by the Old Testament to divine revelation in nature is to denote Yahweh as a living God, His power of intervening as compared to the lifelessness and impotence of other gods. Nature, history, the Creator's care of all His creatures and their absolute dependence on Him--all this is proof not of existence but of power, of character. (1955, 90)

The emphasis on the glory of the Lord suggests that those who discern that there is a Creator must stand in awe of him.

In the New Testament, three passages deal directly with the revelation of God in nature. Two of those passages involve Paul's missionary preaching in pagan contexts. In Acts 14:15-17 he addresses the folk religionists at Lystra, while in Acts 17:22-31 he addresses the philosophers at Athens. The audience of the book of Romans is a matter of debate. Though some aspects of Romans 1:18-32 may be applied to the Jews, Paul most likely had in mind the spiritual condition of Gentiles. In all of these discussions Paul draws on both his knowledge of local conditions and philosophy and his Jewish identity.

In Lystra, Barnabas and Paul were repulsed by the idea of having sacrifices made to them, and insisted that they too were mortals. They announced the good news that the Lystrans should turn from these *worthless things* to serve the *living God*, the Creator (Acts 14:15). God, in *past generations* allowed the nations to follow their own course, but even at that time witnessed to himself through nature, particularly through blessings of rain and harvests (Acts 14:17; italics mine). Paul's call to turn from the *worthless things*, (idols, cf. 1 Sam. 12:21; Jer. 16:19) implies that God no longer allows nations to follow their own course. The witness in nature that God gave to the past generations, attests that God is a doer of good

(Acts 14:17). Paul did not comment on the degree to which past generations had apprehended that revelation.

In Athens Paul was summoned to appear before the council who met on the hill of Aries. In Roman times, the council was the most important governmental body in Athens. Among its functions, it supervised education, controlling the many lecturers who visited Athens (Arndt and Gingrich 1979, 105).

Paul addressed this elite group respectfully by acknowledging that they were "quite religious" (*δεισι-δαιμονεστέρους*) "a carefully chosen word which contains no approbation of paganism" (Haenchen 1971, 521; cf. Arndt and Gingrich 1979, 173; Wright 1976, 85). He referred to an altar that he had observed to an unknown (*ἄγνωστον*) god. It was this unknown God whom the Athenians ignorantly (*ἄγνοοῦντες*) worshiped that Paul proclaimed to them. His assessment of their devotion was both positive and negative. They *worshipped* God, yet because they *did not know* him, they worshiped him alongside other gods (Haenchen 1971, 521). Paul concluded by saying that God overlooked the times of ignorance (*ἄγνοίας*), but now commands all men everywhere to repent. Paul declared an end to the time of unknowing. The use of the *ἄγνοο-* word group provides a framework for understanding Paul's speech. He addresses the ignorance of the Athenians and the ending of the era of ignorance.

The previously unknown God created the universe and all in it, yet he exists apart from his creation. He does

not dwell in temples, and he is not worshiped (or *served*, θεραπεύεται; cf. Graber and Müller 1971, 164) for his own benefit, as if he needs anything. Rather, he gives to humanity life, breath, and all things (Acts 17:24-25). Further, he is Creator of all races and Controller of national destinies (17:26). His work is on behalf of humanity, so that people might seek him, and perhaps, with some groping, find him, though he is not far away (17:27).

People, in their ignorance, make temples with their hands and assume that God needs their service. They have been created so that they might seek God. They, however, have not found him (Stonehouse 1957, 27) and the outcome of their search is uncertain (Haenchen 1971, 424; Owen 1959, 136). It is a groping with only a doubtful possibility of finding (Gärtner 1955, 159), in spite of God's nearness. This nearness is demonstrated by the fact that in him we live, move, and exist.

This is consistent with the testimony of pagan poets, such as Arastus (Parente 1949, 148) who said "We are his offspring." Because of this kinship, reason dictates that divinity is living, not like silver, gold, or stone. The time (χρόνος) of ignorance is past. This period was a "measurable interval of time" (Pinnock 1988, 852) for all humanity (τοῖς ἀνθρώποις πάντα πανταχοῦ). God no longer overlooks ignorance (ἀγνοίας), but commands universal repentance. This repentance is imperative for all humankind

because God will judge all of the world by the man whom he has raised from the dead.

Paul's purpose in the Areopagus sermon was to declare a previously unknown God, because this God would no longer tolerate ignorance. Humanity is culpable for its ignorance, which can lead only to judgment (Stonehouse 1957, 22). People should have known that God cannot be served by idols, yet they did not. Repentance is mandatory for all.

In Acts 17 Paul² dealt with what people should understand about God based on their kinship with him. In writing the church at Rome he took a different approach. In Romans 1 he addressed people's knowledge of God based upon their observation of creation. Whereas in Acts 17 Paul addressed human ignorance, in Romans 1 he deals with human sinfulness in spite of a degree of knowledge.

Romans 1:18 announces the revelation of God's wrath. Verses 18 through 32 are a justification of that wrath. It is directed against humankind, who suppresses the truth in unrighteousness. What is known about God is known only because God has *made known* his invisible qualities, his eternal power and divine nature. They can be discerned through reason from the creation. Humanity is, therefore, without excuse. From this perspective, the problem is *not ignorance*, but *suppression* of knowledge. In spite of knowl-

²Though the exact words recorded in Acts may reflect Luke's reconstruction, this discussion assumes that the the basic content is Pauline.

edge, people do not glorify or give thanks to God, but become worthless in their thoughts and their hearts are darkened. Their self-perceived wisdom is in fact folly, for they change the glory of God into the likeness of human beings, birds, four-footed creatures, and reptiles.

God's wrath is seen in that he gives such people, who exchange the truth of God for a lie, over to their own lusts. This "giving over" leads to shameful behavior--the worship of the creature rather than the Creator, "the fundamental sin in all Jewish literature" (Gärtner 1955, 140), and sexual perversion.

Acts 17:22-31 censures humanity because of its ignorance, resulting in idolatry, and Romans 1:18-32 indicts humanity because of its suppression of knowledge, which also results in idolatry. From either perspective, humankind stands before God guilty, facing judgment, and in need of repentance. In both cases, "the natural revelation is in some measure of only negative significance" (Gärtner 1955, 80). A positive prospect is seen however in Romans 2:14-16. Some Gentiles, without the law, *by nature* (φύσει) do the things of the law (2:14). Φύσει can be interpreted as *instinctively* or as *by following the natural order* (Arndt and Gingrich 1979, 869). These who do not have the law are a law to themselves. On the basis of that law, testified to by their conscience, they will be either accused or even excused. *Or even* (ἢ καί) implies that Paul expects the accusation (Dunn 1988, 98). Although those without the written

ic concern in the apocryphal Wisdom of Solomon, chapter 13. Written in Greek by an Alexandrian Jew during the first century B.C., this text in some ways resembles Paul's Areopagus speech. The author claims that those who are ignorant of God "were unable from the good things that are seen to know the one who exists." Those who deify natural powers should "know how much better than these is their Lord, for the author of beauty created them." Yet "these people are little to be blamed" because of the great beauty of creation. "But miserable," the author claims, "are those who give the name 'gods' to the works of human hands . . ." (Wisdom 13: 1-10). Deification of nature, though shortsighted, is understandable, but idolatry is unexcusable.

Later Christian writers have reflected on the New Testament teaching as well as upon Greek, Jewish, and contemporary philosophical perspectives. They have sought to clarify questions regarding human nature and humanity's knowledge of God apart from the biblical revelation. The reader is referred to *General Revelation: Historical Views and Contemporary Issues* by Bruce Demarest (1982) for an exhaustive, yet refreshingly clear, discussion of this history. Only a summary is possible here.

For Augustine of Hippo, common grace enables individuals to sense, from the the data displayed in nature and history, the eternal truths regarding God's existence, character, and moral demands. Many redemptive truths, however, lie outside a person's ability to perceive through reason

alone, and the Holy Spirit provides this information through Scripture (Demarest 1982, 28,29).

In the eleventh century, Anselm developed what later came to be known as the ontological argument for the existence of God. He also attempted to construct detailed assertions from reason alone concerning God's nature, but, and Demarest understates the case, "it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Anselm's theology underlay his speculative philosophy" (Demarest 1982, 33).

Thomas Aquinas, working within an Aristotelian framework, argued in the thirteenth century for a rational base for the knowledge of God. Thomas rejected Anselm's ontological argument and posited rational induction from sensible experience. In his *Summa Theologica* Aquinas affirmed "Five Ways" of proving God's existence. These Five Ways are the arguments for the existence of a Prime Unmoved Mover, a First Cause, a Necessary Being, Absolute Perfection, and a Divine Designer (Demarest 1982, 36,37). Using the process of negation, Thomas argued that God is not restricted by human limitations. By the method of analogy, he saw in God the superlative expression of humanity's virtues.

Much can be known, not only of God's existence, but also of his character, without special revelation. But reason is only one kind of knowledge. Faith leads to a different kind of knowledge. "In the Thomistic scheme, faith completes understanding" (Demarest 1982, 20). God is

the author of both kinds of knowledge, and hence they cannot prove contradictory.

The views of Aquinas are especially important for African theology. Thomas's authoritative role in the Catholic church means that he exerts a powerful influence over Catholic theology. Some African scholars regard Thomism as the "revealed" philosophy (Westerlund 1985, 75,76).

Thomas's insistence on humanity's ability to find God without special revelation has led many African theologians, Protestant and Catholic alike, to look for a relationship with God in African tradition which, though not arising from biblical revelation, is consistent with it.

The doctrine of natural revelation has continued to exert an influence on Christian thought into the twentieth century (Demarest 1982, 20-22). The Reformers reacted against Thomas by stressing the debilitating effects of sin on the ability to reason. Enlightenment theologians, however, saw virtually unlimited potential in human reason. Again the pendulum swung with nineteenth century Romanticism. Sensing the validity of Kant's critique of Aquinas, the school of Schleiermacher sought to construct a theology based on feeling and mystical experience rather than upon the absolute power of reason.

In the mid-twentieth century Karl Barth sought to reclaim divine transcendence by arguing that God can be known only as he makes himself known. People do not apprehend God, but God apprehends people. Hence, Barth minimized

the role of natural revelation. Recent scholarship, both in Protestant and Catholic circles, has emphasized the existential element of humanity's search for God. This stream of thought concerning natural revelation forms part of the context for theologizing in Africa.

Evaluating Revelation in African Tradition and History

In this chapter I have attempted to understand the views of revelation in African tradition and history, to question those views when unjustified assumptions are made, and to present a biblical and historical perspective on revelation which comes to humanity apart from Scripture. We, no doubt, shall raise many questions about this revelation which cannot be answered. We may, however, draw certain conclusions from the available evidence.

First, we may affirm that the peoples of Africa, together with all humanity, have received a revelation from God apart from the Judeo-Christian Scriptures. That revelation comes (1) through nature, which draws attention to God's awesomeness and to his continual care for creation; (2) through the inner witness within the human spirit, which points to God's moral nature; and (3) through God's intervention in historical events, particularly when people cry out to him in times of distress.

We cannot *a priori* dismiss the possibility that God has revealed himself in mighty acts and spoken word in Africa. There is some biblical evidence of priests and

prophets of God who were active outside of Israel, e.g. Melchizadek and Balaam. The question for today's theologians, however, is to what degree African traditional religions reflect and preserve that revelation. Some of our further conclusions will address this issue, and it will be more fully examined in chapter five.

Second, African peoples have sought to know more about the supernatural than could be known through revelation in nature. Their prominent religiosity points to their groping after God. African traditional religions are so diverse that it is impossible to generalize as to what degree African peoples have known the nature of the Creator.

Third, the peoples of Africa have joined with all humanity in worshiping created things rather than the Creator, thus falling into the sin of idolatry. In many instances the wonders of nature--mountains, trees, and rivers--or spirits thought to animate them, have been the objects of worship. At other times African peoples have worshiped personal spiritual powers. Respect for ancestors, and fear of their power, has led to veneration, which is often indistinguishable from worship.

We may not be able to understand the nature of other divinities fully, but only a secular bias would allow us to dismiss them as purely human inventions. African peoples have interacted with these powers for years and know their reality. Idowu has attempted to bring these powers under the rubric of "diffused monotheism," to accept somehow their

existence in a divine hierarchy while at the same time affirming monotheism. Traditional Africans probably never thought of such a category. What must be remembered, and what the peoples of Africa lost sight of, is that created powers cannot be compared to the Creator, and must not be worshiped.

Scripture affirms that all spiritual powers, "whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers--all things," have been created through and for Jesus Christ (Col. 1:15). Yet Christ's triumph over these "rulers and authorities" (Col. 2:15) implies that somehow they did not fulfill the purpose for which they were created.³ Psalm 82:1-4 implies that these created powers (the gods) were intended to maintain justice, to protect the defenseless.

Israel, however, abandoned the worship of Yahweh for worship of other powers. They scoffed at and were unmindful of their Rock. Apparently these powers accepted this worship, for they are called *strange gods* and *demons* (Deut.

³The Song of Moses (Deut. 32) may imply that an intended function of these powers was the sustenance of non-Israelite nations. According to Deuteronomy 32:8-9, "When the Most High apportioned the nations, when he divided humankind, he fixed the boundaries of the peoples *according to the number of the gods*; the Lord's [Yahweh's] own portion was his people, Jacob his allotted share." The italicized words, which could be literally rendered "according to the number of the sons of God," reflect the reading of one of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Septuagint, and the Targums. The Masoretic text reads "according to the number of the sons of Israel." If the variant is adopted, and it does seem to have greater transcriptional probability, this text implies that other created beings were to exercise some of the functions over the nations that Yahweh exercised over Israel. The Song of Moses continues to emphasize Yahweh's role in sustaining (v. 10) and guiding (v. 12) Israel. Perhaps it was these functions that other spiritual beings were intended to fill for the Gentile nations.

32:16-17). They did not exercise their appointed roles, but acted as if they, rather than Yahweh, were the true owners of the nations (Psalm 82:6-8). Israel and all nations must recognize that the gods cannot compare with Yahweh and that he alone is worthy of worship (Psalm 86:8-10). Idowu may be right in saying that the gods were created by God to exercise certain functions, but he is wrong when he says that God's divinity is diffused through these powers. They do not compare with Yahweh, and worship of these powers is a rejection of Yahweh's sovereignty.⁴

Almost all African theologians fail to deal with the condemnation of man which results from natural revelation. A fourth conclusion which we must consider is that the primary function of the teaching concerning natural revelation in the New Testament is negative; it justifies God's judgment of all humanity. As we have seen (page 99), Paul calls for repentance in Acts 17 because God will judge the world; in Romans 1 he indicts all humankind for their worship of creation rather than the Creator, whose power and divinity could be discerned in Creation. The failure of most African theologians to discuss the negative function of natural revelation accentuates the need for a greater emphasis on biblical theology in Africa, in which the categories and emphases are determined by the text of Scripture rather

⁴Gailyn Van Rheenen (1991, ch. 5) surveys more completely the uniqueness of Yahweh in the polytheistic environment of the Old and New Testaments.

than by the context of the theologian. Biblical theology must precede contextual theologies.

Although the negative function of natural revelation is emphasized in Scripture, there is a positive function. Paul calls attention to those who, without a direct revelation, act consistently with God's nature because "what the law requires is written on their hearts." This, however, affirms humanity's accountability, by demonstrating its potential for obedience. Gentiles are still more likely to be accused rather than excused when God judges all (Rom. 2:14-17).

Paul's teaching in Romans, however, does not focus only on the Gentiles who lack special revelation. The Jews, who had the law, stand condemned for violating that law. "'No human being will be justified in his sight' by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin" (Rom. 3:20). Like natural revelation, direct or special revelation serves to point to humanity's lostness. Revelation, whatever its form, does not guarantee salvation. The many metaphors for the restoration of man to God--justification, redemption, sacrifice, etc.--are focused, not on revealed information, but on a revealed person, Jesus Christ (Rom. 3:21-26). The exclusive claims of Christianity are not based on an exclusive revelation, but on the historical particularity of the incarnation, atonement, and formation of the community of the redeemed, the church.

This once-for-all-ness leads Christians to be concerned with communicating the biblical message to followers of other religions, including African traditional religions. The final chapter is devoted to this task.

CHAPTER 5
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGIONS
AND CHRISTIANITY

In chapters three and four I discussed diverse views concerning the use of Scripture in African theology and concerning the role of natural revelation in Africa's religious heritage. In this chapter I will sketch some of the practical implications of each of these views for the proclamation of the gospel in Africa.

In chapter three I concluded that biblical interpreters must seek to understand the message of Scripture in light of its historical-grammatical-literary context. The alternative is to superimpose their preexisting worldviews onto the text uncritically so that the intended message is not heard. Even those who believe in the full authority of Scripture fall into this trap when they read Scripture uncritically. They see their own assumptions affirmed, however pagan or secular, because the words of Scripture are heard in the modern, rather than the original, context. In the African situation, this means that, when Scripture is read uncritically, traditional assumptions go unchallenged. Those who do not understand Scripture to be authoritative are free to choose which elements of traditional religion will be retained and which will be rejected.

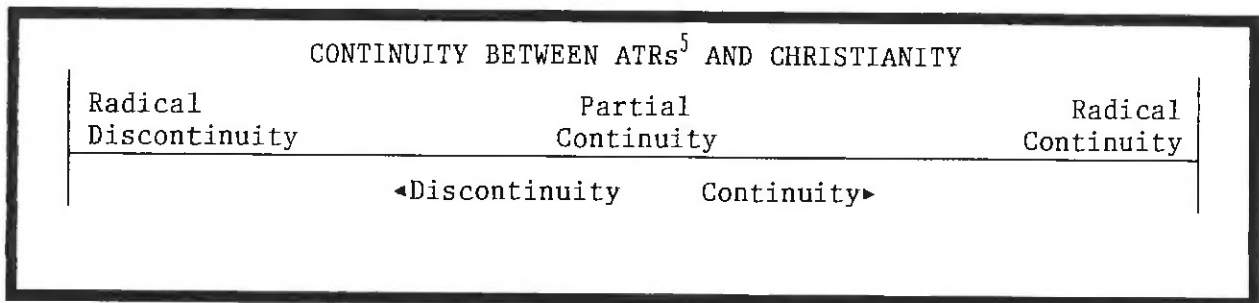
In chapter four we looked at ideas concerning revelation--particularly the role of natural revelation--in African tradition and culture. Natural revelation introduces the potential for all to come to awareness of God, and because of that potential, humankind is held accountable, indeed condemned, for its failure to honor God. Most African theologians, we noted, fail to consider the condemnation that results from natural revelation. Instead, the doctrine is used to legitimize alternative approaches to God, including African traditional religions.

Because natural revelation gives humanity an awareness of divinity some degree of *continuity* between African traditional religions and Christianity is possible. Since at least 1975, the relationship between Christianity and African traditional religion has been discussed in terms of degrees of continuity between the two systems (Kibicho 1978; Dickson 1977). One's view of continuity largely determines the degree to which one sees a sufficient revelation apart from Jesus Christ. This chapter examines the ways in which views of continuity impact proclamation of the gospel. One's view of continuity will determine whether one's primary approach toward African traditional religion is one of accomodation or confrontation.

Continuity may be defined as the degree to which one is able to move from being a follower of African traditional religion to being a follower of the Christian religion without shifting one's basic religious orientation. From the perspective of continuity, followers of African tradi-

tional religion feel little disorientation when they become Christians. Traditional religion, viewed this way, is a reflection of the divine. Those who view traditional religion from the perspective of discontinuity see a reflection of human fallenness and, sometimes, a reflection of the demonic.

These degrees of continuity may be represented on a continuum.



The approaches taken by African theologians can be seen as degrees along the continuum. The continuum can also function as a useful tool for those in the process of formulating their own views. A qualification is necessary, however. Theologians may define an *acceptable range* along the continuum in order to describe their positions. African theologians do not tie themselves to one point on the line. John Mbiti, for example, sees radical continuity on the level of Creator God, but acknowledges a degree of discontinuity in other areas. The continuum, then, is intended to aid the categorizing of possible positions, but it necessarily involves a simplification of the positions taken. Nevertheless, there is a need for greater intentionality in the

⁵ATRs=African traditonal religions.

theological process. By locating their own positions along the continuum, theologians can work out approaches to proclamation which are consistent with their views of continuity.

Approaches Taken by African Theologians

Radical Discontinuity

A view of *radical discontinuity* perceives no positive relationship between African traditional religion and Christian faith. In its extreme form, this view claims that traditional religion reflects only human presumptuousness or demonic influence. Its source is something or someone other than God.

Byang Kato comes closest to this extreme position. In his opinion, a small degree of continuity exists because all people are made in the image of God and have received general revelation. According to Kato, however, general revelation "cannot be read correctly" because of humanity's total depravity (1975, 123, 182). The implication appears to be that humankind is incapable of arriving at a valid knowledge of God from general revelation. An understanding of African culture is important to the proclamation of the gospel but,

The New Testament writers and the early church evangelists did not consider it worthwhile to spend too much of their energy in the study of non-Christian religions. All non-Christians belong to one and the same group--unsaved. The sinful nature needs no study analysis as its outworking is clearly manifested in daily life. (Kato 1975, 183)

Other African theologians have identified three groups who, they claim, maintain this extreme point of view. First, E. Bolaji Idowu attributes this position to some *European theologians*. Karl Barth, he says, was convicted that "'all other religions are sin,' the work of God-less man, or humanistic attempts at raising men to divine level" (Idowu 1969a, 10). Second, Samuel Kibicho of the University of Nairobi attributes this position to *missionary Christianity*. He says that this position "has been accepted unquestioningly as the 'orthodox' view, as is the case of what goes for Christian theology which in truth is only Euro-American theology" (Kibicho 1978, 371). Third, Jesse Mugambi points out that *first generation converts* in Africa often see great discontinuity between Christianity and their old religious system. Christianity is understood in contrast with African culture (Mugambi 1989, 9).

If a comprehensive study were made of the positions of each of these three groups, I doubt that any of them, with the possible exception of a few European theologians, would embrace a view of radical discontinuity. The position belongs more to the era of colonialism when some ethnocentric missionaries were convinced that they, by using the scientific method, had deduced absolute, objective truth from Scripture. These colonialists sought to impose their understanding, along with Western structures, on the African people without appreciating African culture (Hiebert 1991, 264-267).

The groups are mentioned here for two reasons. First, they represent the left side of the continuum, where greater emphasis is placed on discontinuity than on continuity. Second, they are *perceived* by others as embracing radical discontinuity. Whether or not this perception is accurate, it influences African theologians. African theology, like much Western theology, is often reactionary. Positions are taken and lines are drawn according to perceptions, not always according to reality. Africans who perceive that European theologians, missionaries, or first-generation converts hold to a view of radical discontinuity and are not themselves willing to embrace that position, may flee to the other end of the continuum (Westerlund 1985, 45,46) without giving thoughtful attention to a more balanced approach.

The view of radical discontinuity must be rejected in light of the biblical doctrine of natural revelation (see page 107). God has revealed himself to all people in the created cosmos, and at times those who do not possess written revelation actually conform more closely to the will of God than those who do possess it (Rom. 2:12-16). If, as Kato claims, people *cannot* "read" natural revelation accurately, Paul's argument--that humanity is under judgment because they have not worshiped the God revealed in nature--is meaningless. Though African traditional religion has not developed consistently with the demands of natural revelation, it has reflected humanity's groping for God. African ideas about God are in part consistent with a biblical

understanding of the Creator. The extreme position of radical discontinuity is untenable.

Radical Continuity

At the other end of the continuum is the view of *radical continuity*. The intermediate view of *partial continuity* will be better understood as a range of mediating positions between the two extremes. David Westerlund has provided a suitable definition for radical continuity.

In the most extreme theology of radical continuity all religions are but various paths leading to the same goal. According to this relativist position, non-Christians have what they need for their salvation, and Christian missionary-work is not only unnecessary but may also be destructive. (1985, 51)

The idea that all religions lead to the same goal is graphically illustrated on the cover of *Orita*, a theological journal from Ibadan University in Nigeria. The cover design shows three roads, labeled "Islam," "Christianity," and "African Traditional Religion" leading to a common junction. Tokunboh Adeyemo gives his critique of the journal.

Orita is a Yoruba word for "a road junction."
 . . . While Islam, on the right of the fork, is representative of the East, Christianity, on the left of the fork, is representative of the West, African Traditional Religion forms the pillar holding the two in balance in the middle. Since the three roads meet at the same place in essence, it seems not to make any difference which one the worshipper takes. The statement of purpose talks of interpreting and understanding "African Traditional Religion, Christianity, and Islam, separately and insofar as there has been a cross-fertilization between them." As will be naturally expected, the contents of the Journal are highly compromising,

intermingling the elements of the religions. (1979, 82)⁶

Over against the position of the missionaries, Samuel Kibicho of the University of Nairobi has argued that radical continuity exists between African traditional religion and Christianity. He rejects a position of partial continuity as "a relic of the old prejudiced, evolutionary view of African religion" (1978, 371, 380). Because Kibicho believes that traditional Africans manifest the "fruits of the Spirit" (*sic*) to a greater degree than Christians, he concludes that "pre-Christian African communities were more God fearing, and therefore had a better existential saving knowledge of God, than the colonial Christian societies to which the white missionaries belonged" (Westerlund 1985, 55; cf. Kibicho 1981, 33ff).

Kibicho's study concentrates on the continuity between the Christian and the Kikuyu conceptions of God (1978, 370ff). According to Westerlund, "In the theology of continuity it is, above all, God who represents the continuity." His role is accentuated, elements of traditional religion which are not consistent with biblical faith are minimized, and terms from traditional Christian theology, such as *omnipotence*, *omniscience*, and *omnipresence*, are

⁶The inside cover of *Orita* says that the design "seeks to represent the coming together of Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion *in the journal*" (italics mine). Adeyemo's interpretation may not be intended by the editors. In my opinion, however, Adeyemo follows the most obvious interpretation, and the editors are probably aware that this message is conveyed to most readers.

adopted to describe the traditional African understanding of God (Westerlund 1985, 46,47).

Both Idowu and Mbiti emphasize the radical continuity between the Christian and traditional African views of God.⁷ Idowu's description of the African system of divinities as "diffused monotheism," represents this approach (1973, 135-136). Mbiti says that he has "no doubt whatsoever that God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is the same God who for thousands of years has been known and worshiped in various ways within the religious life of African peoples" (1979b, 68). In his earlier works, Mbiti compared African concepts of God with those of the Old Testament. As a result of his studies, he could no longer conclude that God revealed himself only to the Old Testament fathers. He says,

The more I peered into African religious insights about God, the more I felt utterly unable to use the word 'only' in this case. In its place there emerged the word 'also.' This was an extremely liberating word in my thinking. (Mbiti 1980c, 817)

Though Mbiti does not hold to this same radical continuity on every issue, he does not hesitate to affirm the identification of the God of African tradition with the God of Christian faith.

The danger in Mbiti's position is that, in his later writings, he generalizes concerning African concepts of God.

⁷Though both Idowu and Mbiti argue strongly for this continuity, Idowu's position is apparently more extreme than Mbiti's. Both react to Taylor's book *The Primal Vision*. Mbiti sees Taylor as sympathetic and insufficiently critical. Idowu views Taylor's work as "a brilliant diagnosis" (Westerlund 1985, 54; cf. Mbiti 1969, 12; Idowu 1968, 45).

As Mbiti demonstrated in *Concepts of God in Africa* (1970a), there are many understandings of the Creator among African peoples, some of which reflect a knowledge of the One who is called Yahweh, while others do not. Only a deeper understanding of a particular people's understanding of the Creator, and a comparison of that view with Scripture, can determine whether that god is to be identified with Yahweh. In general, however, we may affirm continuity on the level of Creator God, but not on the level of gods, spirits, and ancestors. Creator God, unfortunately, is usually perceived as distant and hence other powers receive greater attention in daily life.

Some theologians, however, see African ideas concerning ancestors as continuous with Christian ideas regarding angels or departed saints (Muzorewa 1984, 36; Enzeanya 1969, 45; cf. Westerlund 1985, 34-35, 47). To Gabriel Setiloane the Messiah-*Christos* is parallel to the *Bongaka*, "an African traditional doctor, often derogatively called 'witch doctor' or 'jujuman,'" who is believed to be possessed with divinity (1979, 64).

Though some areas of continuity certainly exist, radical continuity must be rejected along with radical discontinuity. Theologians who argue for radical continuity concerning the doctrine of God consistently fail to deal with biblical injunctions against idolatry, the corrupting nature of demonic influences, or the New Testament teaching concerning humanity's failure to come to a saving knowledge of God through natural revelation (see chapter 4). The pre-

existence of the divine *Logos*, who became incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth, negates any comparison with African traditional doctors. Complete continuity is not consistent with biblical Christianity. We are led to a position of partial continuity, but even here we find several possible approaches along the continuum.

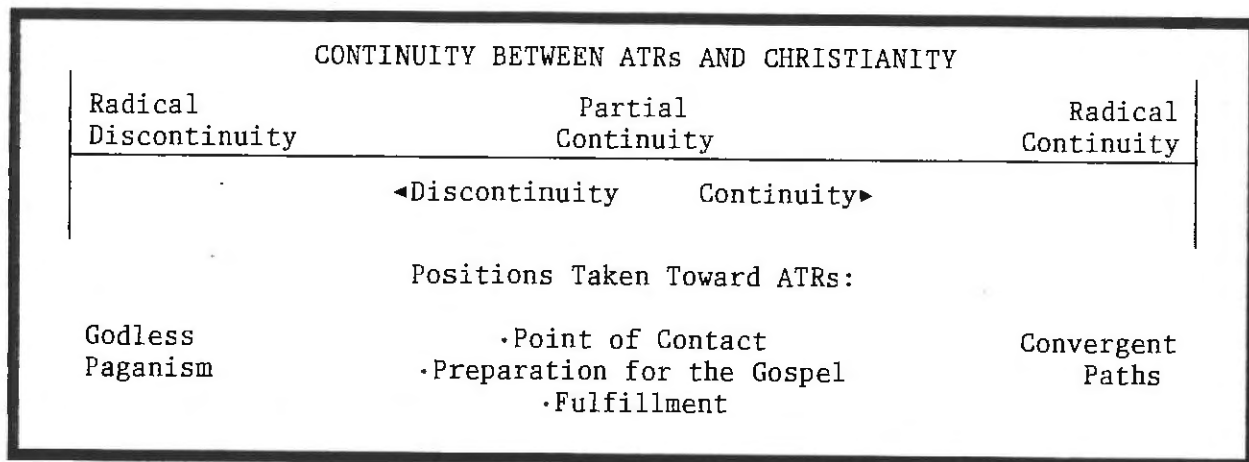
Partial Continuity

Given that there is partial continuity between African traditional religions and Christianity, how is that continuity best defined? How far along the continuum should one go in order to develop an approach that is both biblically faithful and culturally relevant? While evangelists will have to make the final decision based on the unique dynamics of their circumstances, this presentation of the available options should aid in the decision.

Deusdedit Nkurunziza illustrates the view of partial continuity in his study of the *Bantu Philosophy of Life in the Light of the Christian Message* (1989). Nkurunziza examines "Fundamental Differences Between the Old Testament and the Bantu" (198-206), as well as "Similarities Between the Old Testament and the Bantu" (207-217). Later in his work he looks at "The Challenges Which the Gospel Presents to the Bantu" (237-249), and then develops an approach to "Inculturation of Some Aspects of the Bantu Philosophy of Life into the Christian Faith" (250-276).

While a position of radical discontinuity views African traditional religions as godless and pagan, and a

position of radical continuity pictures them as convergent paths, a position of partial continuity conceptualizes the relationship between African traditional religions and Christianity in one of three ways. First, African traditional religions may be seen as providing a *point of contact* for the Christian message. Second, traditional religions may be seen as *preparation for the gospel*. Third, Christianity may be seen as the *fulfillment* of traditional religiosity. These views are not mutually exclusive, but represent broadening perspectives. They could be represented as concentric circles, with the first in the center, the second embracing it, and the third embracing the others. To stay with our perspective of a continuum, however, they are represented vertically on the continuum as aspects of partial continuity.



Point of Contact

Africans are traditionally concerned with religious questions, and these provide the starting point for the proclamation of the Christian message. Traditional Africans

believe in God, practice sacrifice, and live in community with others. These elements provide appropriate points of contact with Christian belief. According to Edward Fasholé-Luke, finding these points of contact is the task of African Christian theology (1974, 100).

The evangelical theologians who issued the *Thailand Report* also took this approach. Because African traditional religion derives from God's general revelation, it "provides a point of contact or a sounding board for the message of God's ultimate revelation in Christ (e.g. in the traditional African idea of God)" (1980,4). The consultation acknowledged, however, that several crucial aspects of African traditional religion are incompatible with the gospel, so that there are "both elements of continuity and discontinuity between ATR and the Christian faith" (1980, 4).

Tite Tiénou, who sat on the committee, provides an example of this approach in his own efforts to do theology in the context of the Bobo people of Burkina Faso. Tiénou followed an ethnographic method to discover and describe the cultural, social, and religious setting of the Bobo (1984, 127). Based on this study he proposed questions which Christian theology among the Bobo should address.

Bobo religion relates to the quest for African theology through the answers it provides to the following three questions: How does one achieve meaning in life? How is one sure of harmony? and What is the meaning of one's death? These are fundamental questions and they can be the starting points of a Christian theology for the Bobo. (Tiénou 1984, 164)

Tiénou shows that Bobo traditional religion and Christianity address many of the same questions, but he does not assume

that the answers are the same. The differences which exist stem from the discontinuity between traditional values and biblical revelation.

There are no doubt many similarities between African religious and cultural values and those of the Bible. But, . . . one can also find numerous differences between the Bible and African religions. . . . Even the use of a term such as "similar" is ambiguous. "Similar" is not "same". And unless it can be shown that African religion is *identical* with biblical revelation, there will always be a problem. (Tiéno 1984, 88)

To Tiéno, partial continuity, while providing a point of contact, does not commend African traditional religion in any way. According to Tiéno, "The Gospel is Truth. It abhors even the half truths of human religiosity" (1984, 89).

Tokunboh Adeyemo also sat on the Thailand Committee. In his independent work, *Salvation in African Tradition*, he suggests that the traditional knowledge of God can serve as a point of contact for the Christian message. He draws this conclusion from the "indistinct" knowledge of God made possible by general revelation (Adeyemo 1979, 24).

Preparation for the Gospel

The view that non-Christian religions function as preparation for the gospel (*praeporatio evangelica*) arises from the position that the mission of God (*missio Dei*) functions independently from the mission of the church. This being the case, according to Lamin Sanneh, "By implication, God's initiative has anticipated and preceded the specific version of Christian mission, so that in Africa,

the 'good news' of Divine love and reconciliation was long diffused in the local religions before the missionary came on the scene" (1983, 247). The dependence of this position on one's view of revelation is again apparent.

Although other African theologians hold this view (cf. Ezeanya 1969, 45), John Mbiti has argued most widely for this approach. This stems from his conviction that "the basic truth seems to be that God's revelation is not confined to the biblical record" (1980c, 818). Mbiti describes his view in this way:

[W]e can rightly say that African religion has prepared the religious and spiritual ground for many of its adherents to listen carefully to the teachings of the Bible, to reflect seriously upon them, to find a high degree of credibility in them, to discover meaningful parallels between their world and the world of the Bible, and in many cases to convert to their Christian faith without feeling a sense of spiritual loss but to the contrary thereby gaining a new outreach in their religious experience. (1986, 11)

Mbiti sees continuity between the biblical record and African beliefs in moral, ethical, and spiritual areas (1979b, 68). His enthusiasm for this relationship leads him to positions very close to full continuity. The African praying tradition, he says, "presents us with the most fertile ground for the reception, retention, assimilation and practice of the biblical faith" (1986, 71). "There is no overt conflict," he says, "and at the deep level of praying, the two worlds, African and biblical, come extremely close to each other, overlapping at many points" (1986, 87-88). There is some degree of discontinuity, however. There is a "switch" to be made, but it is an easy one (1986, 72) be-

cause "the African religious background has already laid the foundation for the praying tradition" (1986, 88).

Mbiti sees some aspects of African traditional religions as discontinuous with the Christian faith. Christianity and traditional religions are "to a great extent compatible," but the search for compatibility indicates that a "line of incompatibility is to be drawn" (1970b, 435).

[I]n matters of belief there are clear areas of common ground. . . . On the other hand, magic, witchcraft, sorcery and divination, which feature prominently in traditional religions, fall clearly outside the Christian orbit and are, therefore, incompatible with Christianity. (1970b, 435)

Ultimately, the uniqueness of Christianity, for Mbiti, is in the naming of Jesus Christ.

I consider Jesus Christ to be the central norm for Christian theology, since without him the meaning of our religiosity is not complete. Also without him there can be no Christian experience, even if there are continuous experiences of people in Africa and other parts of the world. (1979b, 68)

In the continuity between the African and Christian praying traditions, the name of Jesus is the source of discontinuity. Now Christians pray in Jesus' name "to cast out demons, heal the sick, protect the endangered and prosper the needy" (1986, 76). In chapter 4 I discussed Mbiti's ambiguity concerning the presence of Jesus in African tradition (see page 88). Though he affirms the particularity of the historical Jesus, he sees some kind of presence of Christ in African tradition. The discontinuity is not radical. Even in his ambiguity, Mbiti clearly believes that the gospel

brought by the missionaries made complete⁸ the traditional religiosity of the African.

God was not a stranger in Africa prior to the coming of the missionaries. What the gospel brought them was Jesus Christ. The gospel enabled people to utter the name of Jesus Christ; and for that reason many African Christians and others have died for the sake of Jesus Christ--that final and complete element that crowns their traditional religiosity and brings its flickering light to full brilliance. (1979b, 68)

It appears that in many ways traditional African religiosity has prepared the people of the continent to hear the gospel. But *religiosity* should not be confused with *religion*. Bishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa has noted,

[T]he African sense of the numinous, his awareness of the proximity of the spiritual, his attitude to death and disease, in all these ways he [the African] was far closer to the Biblical thought patterns than Western man could ever hope to be. (1978, 366)

This may well be true. It must be remembered, however, that witchcraft, sorcery, idolatry, and curses are as much a part of African traditional religion as is a "sense of the numinous," and acknowledgement of the Creator. Though there are some areas of traditional religion which compare favorably with Christianity, others serve to prepare hearts for the gospel only in a negative sense; they lead men and women to yearn for good news.

Fulfillment

Mbiti's view of the relationship between African traditional religions and Christianity is broader than the

⁸Here the line between "preparation" and "fulfillment," to be discussed in the next section, is blurred.

claim that traditional religions serve as preparation for the gospel. At times also he speaks of Christianity *fulfilling* traditional religiosity in much the same way that it fulfills the Old Testament revelation.

Mbiti believes that traditional religion is one of the main contributors to the growth of Christianity in Africa today.

It was as if African Religion said a big YES to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It was as if the people heard Jesus saying to them: "I have not come to abolish . . . but to fulfill" (Matt. 5:17). (Mbiti 1989, 2)

According to Mbiti, Africans may approach traditional religion and the Old Testament similarly, but they must approach the New Testament differently. This view of *fulfillment* spells discontinuity as well as continuity.

We can find a great deal of interesting cultural and religious material in the Old Testament which parallels or matches the traditional background of the African peoples. But when we turn to the New Testament, we find that African religiosity in all its richness is utterly silent and ignorant. Therefore, African religiosity must here assume a listening posture, be at the receiving end, whereas in the area of the Old Testament a certain amount of give-and-take or mutual enlightenment can be carried out. (Mbiti 1970, 437)

Desmond Tutu speaks of a similar partial continuity. It is true that Christ comes in fulfillment of all the best aspirations of African culture, but he equally stands in judgment over all that is dehumanizing and demeaning; and several elements in the African *Weltanschauung* can be so labeled (Tutu 1978, 368). Again, the redemptive work of Jesus leads to discontinuity. Kwesi Dickson makes this point.

[T]he continuity between the Old Testament and African life and thought should be exposed to the cross-event, which for Christians is judgment on whatever insights might be gained by looking at the Old Testament and African life and thought together. And the radical nature of the cross-event spells discontinuity. Yet in this cross-event Christ's involvement with society is clearly seen; for the radical nature of the cross serves to underline the extent to which God would go to identify himself with humankind in the totality of human circumstances (Dickson 1979, 107).

The metaphor of *fulfillment* provides a powerful model through which the partial continuity between traditional religion and Christian faith can be discussed. This model, as do all metaphors, has limitations. First, we cannot equate the revelation in traditional religion with revelation in the Old Testament. We can only speak with confidence of natural revelation, with all of its limitations, in African tradition, while God spoke to the fathers through the prophets in the Old Testament. Mbiti and others quote Matthew 5:17, but Jesus' words concerning "the law and the prophets" cannot be taken to apply to African traditional religion. Pobee argues that although biblical passages dealing with fulfillment "are concerned with the relationship between Christianity and Judaism . . . , the principle deduced from them might guide us" (1979, 78). This application of the metaphor, however, is without a biblical basis and therefore caution should be exercised in its use.

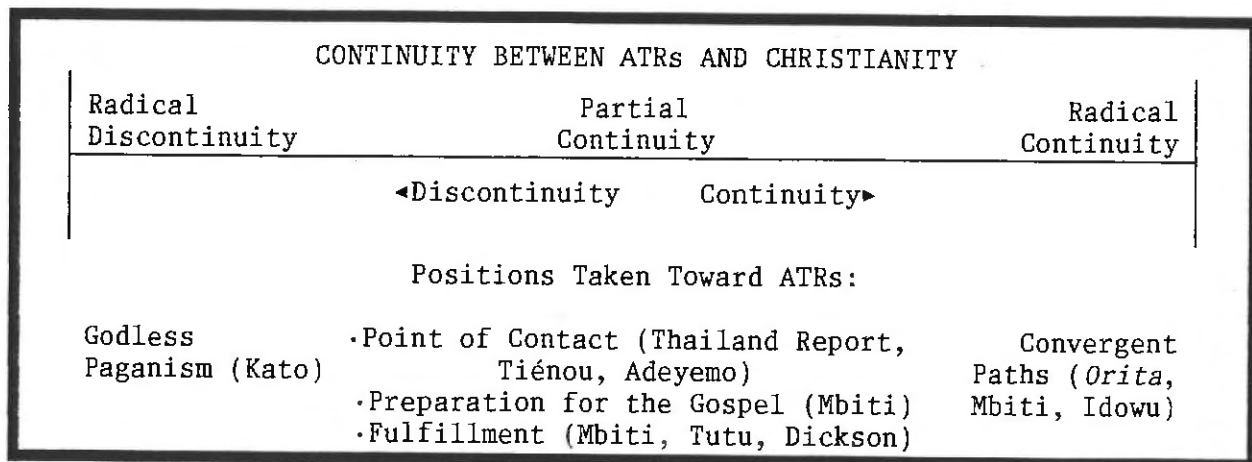
Second, it cannot be assumed that the African worldview always corresponds to that of the Old Testament (see pages 40-42). We have previously referred to Dickson's observation that "Predilection for the Old Testament . . .

must not be equated with a correct understanding of its meaning" (1979, 88). Nkurunzima demonstrates both similarity and dissimilarity between Old Testament and Bantu philosophies (1989, 198-217). Because the African world is not identical with that of the Old Testament, the danger of mnemonic heremetics, of seeing "false fulfillments" remains.

Finally, we must beware of the tendency to hang on to the partial revelation even after the complete has been given. Some African theologians give the impression that they want to retain every possible element of traditional religion. Adeyemo asks a relevant question concerning this tendency.

Some of the African theologians have asserted that Jesus came to fulfill not only the Old Testament but African traditional expectations. Besides the fact that this is neither biblical nor traditionally true, it is pertinent to ask why the shadow is still embraced (that is, the Traditional Religion) when the perfect reality (Jesus Christ) has come? (Adeyemo 1979, 29)

The continuum below indicates the positions taken by some of the African theologians discussed in this thesis.



Results of Theological Engagement

Radical Discontinuity

A theology of radical discontinuity denies the essential truth of natural revelation. God has made some degree of knowledge of himself available to all people. This is reflected in traditional African *religiosity* (spiritual awareness), if not always in African traditional *religion* (beliefs and practices). Africans traditionally are aware of the spiritual nature of the universe and of humanity, although their religious practices often fail to honor God, the source of that spirituality. When those who espouse a theology of radical discontinuity encounter African traditional religions, at least three results of their proclamation can be predicted.

First, there will be a strong sense of separation between believers and their culture. Those who accept the message will renounce their heritage and cut ties with the past. They may be treated as outcasts or perhaps themselves as part of a new enlightened elite. An atmosphere of *exclusivism* is predictable.

We can also predict that the message which is proclaimed will be perceived as *irrelevant* by many who hear it. Traditional Western messages do not deal with the perceived realities of African spiritual life. Messages focusing on future individual salvation do not actively engage African perceptions of reality. Many will not have a fair opportunity to hear the gospel because they will not understand a message delivered by messengers who fail to understand them.

Finally, we can predict that *religious syncretism* will result (cf. Daneel 1989, 42-43). We will discuss syncretism in more detail below. Suffice it to say here that if no continuity is seen between Christianity and traditional religions, people will try to embrace the best of both worlds. Kwesi Dickson observes a common phenomenon in Africa.

There does not appear to be a conscious awareness of the need to bring Christ into those other areas which seem to be reserved for the traditional spirit powers. This would explain why African Christians--lay men/women and clergy alike--are able to live with such contradictions as have been cited without their being made uncomfortable by them. (1984, 105)

Radical Continuity

A theology of radical continuity is equally inadequate. It fails to come to grips with the limitations of natural revelation. In Scripture, the doctrine of natural revelation functions to point out not only humanity's *ability* and *opportunity* to honor God but also its failure to do so. All human religious formulations are, to some degree, idolatrous. A theology of radical continuity does not acknowledge humanity's tendency toward idolatry.

When those who receive the Christian message assume that radical continuity exists, either *few conversions* or *religious syncretism* result. If Christianity does not fundamentally differ from traditional religion, there is no real reason to convert. Those conversions which occur may be for socio-economic reasons. Elements of traditional

religion are then practiced, either covertly or overtly, alongside Christianity.

The subject of *syncretism* needs further discussion and definition. For many, the term has negative connotations. Evangelical delegates at the first Lausanne conference could not reach final agreement on a definition, but suggested that syncretism occurs "when critical and *basic elements* of the Gospel are lost in the process of contextualization" (Bradshaw and Savage 1975, 1227; cf. Buswell 1978, 88). André Droogers defines syncretism as "religious interpenetration, either taken for granted or subject to debate" (1989, 20-21). Droogers' definition allows for degrees of syncretism. Syncretism can occur on many levels. I use the term to refer to *religious syncretism*⁹ and adopt the definition offered at Lausanne, realizing that precision and consensus are not always possible.

Some theologians embrace syncretism which changes the essential character of Christianity. According to Mercy Oduyoye, the goal of the Christian-traditionalist encounter in Africa, is not to change Africa, but to revolutionize Christianity (1979, 116). This radical approach, however, is not an option for African *Christian* theology.

⁹A strict dichotomy between *cultural* and *religious* syncretism has been questioned by Anton Wessels (1989, 53). The problem is one of definition concerning a concept with many grey areas.

Partial Continuity

M. L. Daneel studied mission patterns in Roman Catholic and Dutch Reformed churches among the Shona of Zimbabwe. He demonstrates the need to acknowledge the partial continuity between traditional religions and Christianity and to adjust mission practices in keeping with such a position. Neither extreme accommodation, as practiced by the Catholics, nor extreme confrontation, as practiced by the Protestants, succeeded in winning the allegiance of the Shona to Jesus Christ.

Through over-accomodation [by Roman Catholics] traditional ancestral mediation entered the church essentially unchanged. In the Dutch Reformed Church, on the other hand, radical discontinuity without adequate substitution created a vacuum which many members filled by leading a double religious existence: worshipping the God of the Bible at the mission station and venerating the ancestors for protection and well-being in the village. (Daneel 1989, 43)

African theologians use a variety of terms to describe their approach to proclaiming the gospel in a way which acknowledges the partial continuity between traditional religions and Christian faith. Semantic confusion results when these terms are not consistently defined. We will explore three of the terms used.

Adaptation

The word *adaptation* is capable of more than one meaning. To Zablon Nthamburi of Kenyatta University in Nairobi,

"Adaptation" refers to areas of apparent similarities and contacts between Christianity and African traditional religion. . . . [I]mmmediate adaptation

is experienced when elements of Christianity are taken to mean something already familiar. (1989, 113)

For Daneel, on the other hand, *adaptation* means radical *accomodation*. He uses the words synonymously to describe the approach taken by the Roman Catholic church in Zimbabwe. This approach stems from the Catholic view of natural theology in which confidence is placed in humanity's capacity to know God apart from Scripture. The strategy is intended to build bridges between Christianity and local culture. Instead, Daneel says, it results in "interpretive confusion" (Daneel 1989, 36-37).

Daneel cites two examples of this confusion, both relating to ancestors. In an adapted burial ceremony, proposed in 1966, the ancestral spirit is addressed both by the priest and the congregation. The spirit is asked to intercede for its family so that the family may be "free from problems in this world" (1989, 38). Similarly, a Catholic bishop adapted the *kugadriza*, a ritual in which the deceased's spirit is inducted into the realm of interaction with the living. Again, the ancestor is called upon to serve as an intercessor with God on behalf of his family. The adapted ritual seeks to overcome the remoteness of God by making God directly responsible for the well-being of the living (Daneel 1989, 38,39). While this may be accomplished to some degree, much greater losses occur in the compromise of biblical truth.

The role of revelation is important here. According to Catholic doctrine, ancestors who obeyed the natural law

(stemming from general revelation) are with God and can enter the community of saints and intercede for man. The doctrinal problems occur on many levels. The Roman Catholic view of the communion of the saints must be questioned. But even if it is accepted, there is no biblical indication that general revelation leads to a saving knowledge of God.

John Pobee uses *adaptation* in a more neutral sense. Together with "accommodation," "localization," and "indigenization," *adaptation* "acknowledges that there is a whole heritage in the non-Christian culture and consciously attempts to come to terms with that heritage" (Pobee 1979, 59). What it means to "come to terms with that heritage" will be largely determined by one's position regarding continuity.

Pobee bases his argument in the theology of the incarnation. "If revelation *par excellence* made use of frail, earthly, human nature, . . . it is not beyond God to make use of the natural circumstances of the non-Christian for his own purposes and glory" (1979, 71,72). Pobee finds biblical precedent for adaptation in Paul's method in Athens. This, however, "is far from accepting everything in African or Gentile culture" (1979, 77). The continuity is only partial. Pobee wishes to affirm what is good in African culture, but cannot accept everything *en masse* (1979, 78).

Opportunities for adaptation must be evaluated individually. One cannot endorse or reject the method outright. Some cultural forms provide the "point of contact"

for communicating biblical truths. Both Scripture and the history of the church are full of examples. On the other hand, forms are never neutral. They may be so loaded with non-Christian meanings that they must be repudiated. In choosing whether to adapt a cultural form, one must investigate the degree to which the form is tied to its original meaning as well as the degree to which the original meaning is consistent with Scripture. It would be dangerous to attempt to adapt a form which has an original meaning contrary to Scripture if the goal is to communicate biblical truth.

Indigenization

Nthamburi advocates *indigenization* as a special emphasis of inculturation. "Inculturation," he says, "expresses the encounter between Christianity and African traditional religion, which is basically an encounter between two cultures," since Christianity comes to Africa from a different culture. In order for Christianity to reflect the authentically African cultural milieu, a transformation must take place. *Indigenization* means essentially the same thing, but for Nthamburi, it emphasizes the incarnational aspect. "As Jesus became human in order to redeem humankind so must Christianity become African in order to reach the African soul" (1989, 113).

Indigenization requires the use of African means to express the truths of Christianity. A holistic understanding of life leads Africans to employ both ritual and spontaneity in worship. Africans appropriate, interpret, and

incorporate the Christian message into daily life through poems, songs, dances, and celebration (Nthamburi 1989, 117). Indigenization aims to discover and present an authentically Christian and an authentically African gospel.

The objective of indigenization is to give expression to Christianity in African religio-cultural terms. It is an attempt to create a synthesis between African culture and Christianity. It aims at abolishing syncretism which renders African Christianity ineffective. In presenting Christianity in a way that is congenial to the African experience and reality, African Christians will be enabled to live out their faith authentically and creatively. (Nthamburi 1989, 117)

According to Nthamburi, African Indigenous Churches formed out of reaction against white domination of mission churches (1989, 115). These have challenged the older mission churches, and the theological distance between the two traditions is disappearing.

Byang Kato objects to the use of the word *indigenization* because the gospel "is not indigenous to any soil. It is revealed propositionally and must be declared accordingly" (1975c, 1216). Here again we see how one's view of revelation impacts one's method of communication. If revelation consists only of propositional truths "straight from heaven," then culture cannot be allowed to shape its communication. If, however, revelation comes through culture-bound humans, then its communication must take into account the culture--both the language and thought forms--into which it was originally spoken as well as that to which it is being spoken.

Contextualization

Much of the problem concerning the use of *indigenization* is semantic. Kato prefers to speak of *contextualization*. Contextualization, he says, expresses "a deeper concept than indigenization ever does" (1975c, 1217). But to Kato, the incarnation forms the basis for contextualization, just as for Nthamburi it does for indigenization. Like Nthamburi's indigenization, Kato's contextualization is expressed through "liturgy, dress, language, church service, and any other form of expression of the Gospel truth" (Kato 1975c, 1217). Close examination reveals that Nthamburi and Kato are discussing very similar concepts but using different terms.

There are, however, legitimate distinctions that can be drawn. To speak of contextualization acknowledges that missionaries can, by definition, never introduce indigeneity. Their presence eliminates the possibility. In mission situations the gospel necessarily comes via messengers from other cultures who are never free from the influences of their sending cultures. Contextualization implies a cross-fertilization between cultures.

Kato maintains that though many forms can be taken from the host culture, some must be taught. In discussing theological terminology, he argues that "theological meanings must not be sacrificed at the altar of comprehension." This is true, but for Kato it means that, even with a symbol like a mustard seed, "the congregations should be taught the meaning of the term as originally meant" (1975c, 1217).

Kato never explains why the theological meaning of Jesus' parable is inseparably tied to the form of a mustard seed. We need not question the Africans' ability to come to understand a foreign symbol, but neither should we limit the communicator's vocabulary to literalistic translations of Greek and Hebrew vocabulary.

The word *contextualization* almost fell into disrepute among evangelicals because, in some circles, it came to refer to an uncritical process in which "the good in cultures was affirmed, but the evil in them, was left unchallenged" (Hiebert 1991, 268); it became a tool of radical continuity. Recent theologians, such as Kato, have sought to recover the term to describe faithful appropriation of biblical beliefs and practices in cross-cultural situations.

Contextualization best occurs, not when it is prescribed by missionaries and evangelists, but when it develops within a biblically anchored church. Tiénou reminds us,

In the final analysis, the Hellenization of the Gospel did not come out of the Departments of Religious Studies of that time, it was not the result of the application of a pre-established theology. It arose from the Hellenistic churches as these sought to understand their new faith in their own categories and as they lived out their faith in obedience to Christ. This church-based and obedience oriented theology is the only contextual theology possible. (Tiénou 1984, 126)

Tiénou's observations correspond with those of Paul Heibert concerning "critical contextualization." According to Hiebert, those wishing to present a contextually relevant gospel must first exegete the culture, observing the phenomenon of culture for the purpose of understanding, not judg-

ing. From there, with the help of a leader with "meta-cultural grids," churches should seek to understand the originally intended meaning of the text and its relevance to their situation. Some beliefs and practices will be rejected outright, while others will come into the life of the Christian virtually unchanged. Others will be modified by substituting forms borrowed from other cultures, adopting forms from the Christian heritage, or by creating new symbols and rituals (Hiebert 1987, 109,110).

The response may vary, but the involvement of the church is critical. They understand their own culture far better than the missionary who comes from outside. If they take the Bible seriously as their rule of faith, then the work of the Holy Spirit will lead them toward God's truth. This will be an ongoing process, but that ongoing search for God's truth--the struggles, reaffirmations, and recantations which occur--gives vitality to the Christian experience.

Having explored the possible results of theological engagement in the encounter between Christianity and African traditional religions, it is helpful to extend our continuum.

CONTINUITY BETWEEN ATRs AND CHRISTIANITY		
Radical Discontinuity	Partial Continuity	Radical Continuity
	◀Discontinuity	Continuity▶
Positions Taken Toward ATRs:		
Godless Paganism	•Point of Contact •Preparation for the Gospel •Fulfillment	Convergent Paths
Results of Theological Engagement:		
	◀Confrontation	Accomodation▶
•Irrelevance •Exclusivism •Religious Syncretism	•Adaptation •Indigenization •Contextualization	•Non- Conversion •Religious Syncretism

Conclusions

As with adaptation and indigenization, proponents of contextualization appeal to the incarnation for a theological basis for their method (Kato 1975c, 1216). Because all three approaches seek to express a single theological reality, there is much overlapping and confusion concerning the use of the terms. In the above discussion, I have presented them in the order *adaptation*, *indigenization*, and *contextualization* because, in one way, they represent increasingly complex tasks. I suggest, however, that the semantic confusion could be clarified by taking the three terms to represent three interrelated tasks. If a consensus could be reached concerning the definitions of the terms, they could be used to represent three necessary stages of a process which culminates in the indigenization of biblical Chris-

tianity into a host culture. A biblical understanding of revelation impacts the process on each level.

Contextualization can be used as an umbrella term for the entire process of interpreting Scripture and applying it faithfully in a particular cultural setting. More specifically, it refers to giving proper attention to three important *contexts* in the interpretation and application of Scripture. As discussed in chapter 3, faithful interpreters take seriously the revelation in Scripture as the authoritative basis for all Christian theology. They consider the context of the original author and original recipients of the biblical message. Then they take into account their own cultural, religious, and personal contexts, and how those impact their interpretations. Finally, they consider the contexts of their hearers so that the intended meaning of Scripture is communicated accurately to the third culture, without unnecessary distortion.

Adaptation is necessary because communication occurs through cultural forms. Translating the message from one language to another entails a change in cultural forms and therefore involves adaptation. But communication does not take place only through spoken and written symbols. It takes place through the symbols of ritual, architecture, drama, and music. Just as appropriate linguistic forms must be adapted, so must other symbols. Adaptation of religious symbols is possible because some elements of traditional religions reflect natural revelation. Because of the limitations of natural revelation, however, much caution must be

exercised in adapting religious symbols. Their pre-Christian meanings may very well be anti-Christian. Interpretive confusion (Daneel 1989, 36) and religious syncretism may result.

Indigenization should speak, not of a shallow concept (*contra* Kato 1975c, 1217; cf. Buswell 1978, 93), but of a mature church. Once missionaries and national evangelists have struggled, together with local churches, with the three contexts and learned to adapt appropriate cultural forms to express the biblical meanings, a maturation process is required before the new faith is at home in the new culture. In time, the hearts of believers are transformed by the message so that Christianity is no longer alien to them but has become an indigenous part of their lives.

Two words of caution should be issued regarding the use of *indigenization*. First, culture is constantly changing. It is not static. Hence, a truly indigenous church will be sensitive to the changes within culture. Second, the offense of the cross will always create a tension between the church and the values of the prevailing culture. Indigenous churches are part of the culture but are never *fully* at home in it.

James Buswell explains how indigeneity functions on a practical level.

Now the beauty of "indigenous" for the label of a truly "contextualized" church is that the surest sign of such Christianity is its incorporation within the *enculturative* experience in the home! When the Christian home rears its children as Christians and the teachings and belief system of Christ are "born or produced within" the home, Christianity is *indig-*

enous within that culture. The Christianity thus established need not be thought of as tied to any particular traditions of the past. It becomes part of the society and culture where it is, and may continue to be a part of that society and its culture as they change. Thus it may be as forward-looking as the people who accept it. (1978, 94)

This is the goal of God's revelation: to have his word planted in the hearts of people from every culture so that people come, not just to know his word but to know *him* as the only true and living God. The task of perceiving and communicating that revelation is complex, beyond our natural abilities. This is why "we have this treasure in clay pots, so that it may be clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us" (2 Cor. 4:7).

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