AFRICAN CHRISTOLOGY

Jesus in Post-Missionary African Christianity

CLIFTON R. CLARKE

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To

Marcia, Joel, and Jessica

and

Hilda and Kenweline Clarke

Foreword

In this original, fieldwork-based study of the Christology of some Akan independent churches in Ghana, Clifton Clarke has broken new ground. He comes from a unique perspective as a Black British Pentecostal bishop who spent several years living and working as a mission partner of the Church Missionary Society. It was my privilege to work with him supervising his doctoral research at the University of Birmingham. His work indicates how much times have changed. Young English CMS missionaries humiliated the elderly first African bishop Samuel Crowther and wrested power from African leaders in West Africa in the late nineteenth century. Secession was inevitable and the first African independent churches (AICs) were often a reaction to that western missionary control that lasted well into the twentieth century. In the 1920s a new form of resistance to western cultural hegemony emerged in AICs that were founded as a result of healing and revival movements. These originated in grassroots movements throughout the continent, but especially along the West African coast, East Africa and Southern Africa. The Gold Coast (Ghana) was one of those centres of AIC activity, partly initiated after 1915 by followers of the famous Liberian prophet William Wade Harris. These churches that preferred to be called "churches of the Spirit" were more African in orientation, seeking to answer questions that Africans were asking and catering for the whole person and not just the dichotomized "spiritual" person. Although many of these AICs today do not refer to themselves as "pentecostal", the differences are not as significant as is often claimed, and their pentecostal character is recognized by scholars.

These AICs are African-initiated churches that, in common with Pentecostalism, emphasize the working of the Spirit in the church with ecstatic phenomena. They are widespread across a great variety of Christian churches in Africa, including the vast majority of the several thousands of AICs thought to be in existence today. They practise gifts of the Spirit, especially healing and prophecy, and they also speak in tongues. Because

of their Spirit manifestations and pneumatic emphases and experiences, earlier studies of these churches misunderstood or generalized about them and branded them "syncretistic," "post-Christian" and "messianic." Western observers saw these churches of the Spirit as accommodating the pre-Christian past, and being linked with traditional divination, ancestor rituals and the like. More recent studies have shown this to be an erroneous view. In particular, as this study shows, they have a Christological focus. The Spirit churches do differ from western pentecostals in several ways, and the passing of time has accentuated these differences. They differ in their approach to African religions and culture, in liturgy, in healing practices and in their unique contribution to Christian theology in a broader African context. Their innovative approach often differs sharply from those African pentecostals who are more heavily influenced by western Pentecostalism, and this creates a certain amount of tension.

The pentecostal missionaries that came to Africa from western countries in the early twentieth century also came from the margins and were doubtless influential in popularizing the new message of the power of the Spirit with accompanying spiritual gifts. But the message was about Jesus Christ. This message with its accompanying democratization of charismatic leadership in turn created space for the new African missionaries who arose in different parts of Africa in the early twentieth century. They were catalysts of a new ingathering of Africans to Christianity on an unprecedented scale, and for which western missions were totally unprepared. But it was also the precedents laid down by African charismatic leaders, pioneers largely untouched by western Pentecostalism, that had possibly the most lasting effect on the shaping of African Christianity in the twentieth century. Pentecostalism is a polycentric phenomenon that had different beginnings in Africa, just as in other continents. It is also a movement that is constantly reinventing and reinvigorating itself in the multitude of different expressions that exist in African Christianity today and in the forms of African Christianity that are now being reproduced in Europe and North America. It remains to be seen whether these vigorous expressions of Christianity in Africa will find each other and acknowledge both their inter-relatedness and their mutual indebtedness.

Although these forms of African Christianity emphasized the working of the Spirit empowering the powerless and marginalized in the oppressed social and political order of European colonialism, they were not exclusively pneumatological. In the analyses that have been made of these

churches, the equally significant Christological emphases have often been obscured. Dr. Clarke sets out to rectify this imbalance. Members and leaders of African Spirit churches, classical Pentecostal and new Charismatic churches often exclude each other from their self-imposed categories of "authentic" Christian and even demonize the others, but the unmistakable links that bind these movements to each other cannot easily be denied. In their inculturation of Christianity, they have a distinct and considerable contribution to make to African Christian theology. This inculturation has been done in an intense and far-reaching way. In a 1996 article on "AIC Contributions to the World Church", the Kenya-based Organization of African Instituted Churches said, "We may not all be articulate in written theology, but we express faith in our liturgy, worship, and structures".[1] Theology is our human response to God's word in Christ. The African pastors, bishops, or prophets who lay hands on the sick and lead their congregations in rituals of worship are enacting theology. Significantly, they do this in decidedly Christocentric ways. Members of AICs have responded to God's word in Christ to them in a particular way. In this respect they have an extremely significant part to play in formulating African theology. If, as Ukpong suggests, the main goal of African theology is "to make Christianity attain African expression", then "Christianity must be made relevant to and expressive of the way [Africans] live and think."[2]

This is precisely what the AICs strive to do. Probably more than any other form of Christianity in Africa, the "Spirit" AICs have given a uniquely African character to their faith. In certain respects, they have attained the goals towards which formal African theology still struggles. Because theology is our human response to God's word, Christianity must be expressive of everyday life or be in danger of becoming inconsequential. Not only must the Christological contribution of African Christians be recognized by the wider community of theological scholarship, but its practical consequences for daily living in a marginalized continent that has suffered so much oppression and deprivation must be appropriated also. Clifton Clarke's study focuses on one aspect of this innovative approach to African theology, that of Christology. He sets out for posterity

1. Quoted in John S. Pobee and Gabriel Ositelu II, *African Initiatives in Christianity: The Growth, Gifts and Diversities of Indigenous African Churches—A Challenge to the Ecumenical Movement* (Geneva: WCC, 1998) 70.

2. Justin S. Ukpong, "Current Theology: The Emergence of African Theologies," *Theological Studies* 45 (1984) 520.

the Christological focus of the AICs he studied and worked with. I believe that this book will change the way we think about Christology in Africa and I commend it to you for your careful consideration.

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I AM FIRSTLY GRATEFUL to God for His boundless love and grace upon my life and for enabling me to complete this book project. I want to acknowledge the support and understanding of my wife Marcia and children Joel and Jessica, who gave me the room to complete this volume. "Hey guys, I'm back!" I also want to recognize the encouragement and support of my wider family and friends.

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I would like to thank the faculty and students of Good News Theological College and Seminary in Accra Ghana where I taught for ten rewarding years. Thanks guys for your friendship and insights. Thanks to Rev. Dr. Thomas Oduro, Dr. Abraham Akrong, and Professor Kwame Bediako for sharing with me their insights into African Indigenous Christianity. I would also express my appreciation for all the AICs pastors and church members interviewed for this research. Thanks for opening up your churches and ministry to me.

I am thankful to the Church Mission Society (CMS) for sponsoring this study during my tenure as a Mission Partner to AICs in Ghana. I am also indebted to the New Testament Church of God in England and Wales, particularly the Church of God in Nottingham, for teaching me the value of education and the pursuit of excellence.

Abbreviations

AIC	African Indigenous Churches
CMS	Church Mission Society
GNTCS	Good News Theological College and Seminary
MDCC	Musama Disco Christo Church
NT	New Testament
OAIC	Organization of African Instituted Churches
OT	Old Testament
TEE	Theological Education by Extension

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1

Introduction: The Quest for an African Christology

In 1967 John Mbiti, a Kenyan theologian, made the remark: "an African concept of Christology does not exist."[1] Seven years later at a consultation of African theologians in Accra, Ghana, Dr. E. W. Fashole-Luke of the University of Sierra Leone announced that "there are no signs that Christological ideas are being wrestled with by African theologians,"[2] and urged the delegates to make fulfilling this need a top priority. In 1977, ten years after Mbiti's statement, Kofi Appiah-Kubi of Ghana despairingly observed that very little literature on African Christology was available. Two years later, Gabriel Setiloane of Botswana announced that the "task given to African theologians is to work hard and thoroughly at such a Christology, exploring who Jesus is and what Messiah or Christ means in the African context."[3]

On one level this "crisis of Christology" is somewhat a "storm in a tea cup," perhaps nothing more than a crisis amongst the theological elite, many of whom have been educated in the west. The rapid growth of Christianity could point to the fact that Christ is "alive and well" in Africa. It could be argued, therefore, that this obsessive call for a seemingly "African Christological definition" is more a case of African theologians seeking to replicate the western Christological definitions they themselves were taught. However, this has very little to do with the way Christ is experienced by African Christians on a daily basis. The approach to theology taken by the Council of Nicea, AD 325, which declared that Jesus was *homoousios* (one in being or one of substance) with the Father, and the Council of Chalcedon 451 statement that the two natures of

1. Mbiti, "Some African Concepts," 51.
2. Fashole-Luke, "Quest for African," 110.
3. Appiah-Kubi, "Jesus Christ," 56.

Christ (the divine and the human) are without division or separation, is not an African approach to theology. The importance of a defined African Christology or even an African theological paradigm could be challenged on the basis that Christianity in Africa is not primarily an intellectual pursuit, conforming to western logic and discursiveness, but rather a "lived" experience in which Christ is a part of everyday life for an African believer. However, on another level, there is an important role for intellectuals (theologians or otherwise) to assess and define national phenomena and socio-cultural as well as theological significance of faith in Jesus, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the working of aspects of society as well as to have the capacity for self-definition.

The impact of African theologians responding to the challenge of constructing an African contextual Christology has been impressive. Over the past thirty-five years or so, African Christian theologians have had to search for an authentic African response to the Christ event. Since then the quest for an authentic African Christology has been the subject matter in many international conferences as well as personal research. It has gone through many phases involving definitions and redefinition, out of which some key concepts emerged. The situation in regard to Christology in Africa has changed to such an extent that Nyamiti claims, with some degree of caution, that Christology is the most developed subject matter in African theology today.[4] The Christian religion revolves around questions concerning the meaning and identity of Jesus, and so Christology is perennially at the center of the quest to understand any particular expression of Christianity in an African context.

One indication that Christology in Africa is now coming of age and is perhaps more prominent today than ever before is the fact that African Christology itself is now being critiqued from within. There are two areas of which that critique is pertinent to this research. First of all, it reflects failure to break free from the "umbilical cord" of western mission Christianity. African Christologies have not been sufficiently related to Africans and the missionary responsibility of the African churches. This shortcoming was highlighted by John Mbiti who maintained that although African theologians have written a great deal about the role of foreign missions in Africa—particularly pointing out the biasness of

4. Nyamiti, "African Christologies," 3.

a western Christology—there is almost nothing written about ways in which the African church is engaging in homeland.[5]

The other critique levied against African Christologies is that they are mainly systematic academic reflections on the mystery of Christ in the midst of African realities which need to be complemented with Christologies that really function in the life of African people.[6] This position demands a greater dialogue between African academic Christologies and Christologies that are lived out in the everyday lives of African Christians. My observation further reveals an over-dependence on the theological methods adopted by the western theological tradition and an undervaluing of the resources African oral tradition provide.[7]

This research is part and parcel of the ongoing theological reflection on the meaning of Christ for Africans in an African context. It seeks to respond to the critique that African Christologies are constructed using the epistemology or the intellectual framework that is used in western theological reflection. Taking seriously the claim that a greater dialogue needs to ensue between the professional theologian and the local theologian,[8] it seeks to explore ways in which the raw materials of African oral tradition may aid the professional theologian and the local theologian alike to talk about Christ using a language reflective of an African epistemology.

THE SIGNIFICANCE AND AIM OF THIS STUDY

Christians through the centuries have tried to understand and express the meaning of Christ in terms that are meaningful to their culture and worldviews. The New Testament itself is no exception—containing images, titles, and models of Christ, all designed to answer meaningfully the question asked by an emerging generation: who is Jesus Christ? Thus Jesus is presented as the Good Shepherd, Son of God, Son of man, Son

5. Mbiti, *Bible and Theology*, 176–227.

6. Marthinus Daneel has argued this position in his book *African Earthkeepers*, 204.

7. The issue of "African oral tradition" will be discussed at some length in chapters 5 and 8 of this work.

8. Schreiter maintained that a professional theologian is one who has been professionally trained in the art of theology as an academic discipline. Local theologians he stated, on the other hand, are the small but condensed groups who have seen the insight and the power arising from the reflections of the people upon their experience and Scripture which has prompted making the community itself the prime author of theology in local context. See Schreiter, *Constructing*, 16.

of David, and Messiah.[9] In spite of the tension that exists in balancing locally constructed African Christologies and simultaneously respecting the universal significance of Christ, the long-term success of Christianity in Africa will ultimately depend on the development of an inculturated Christology.

Christology is, in the final analysis, the most basic and central issue of Christian theology.[10] The faith that Christianity cherishes and bears witness to must have Christ as its foundation and goal. From a Christian point of view, without Jesus Christ as the central cornerstone and final aim, nothing in Christianity counts; nothing in theological thought is of any significance. Mugambi and Magesa place beyond doubt the centrality of Christ to Christianity:

> In fact, to be precise, theology is not Christian at all when it does not offer Jesus Christ of Nazareth as the answer to the human quest, and as the answer to people who ask the reason for the hope that all Christians hold through faith.[11]

The works detailing the development of Christology in Africa are numerous; however, some of the more prominent contributions, as well as the shape the Christological discussion has taken, are compiled in Robert Schreiter's book *Faces of Jesus in Africa*, Mugambi and Magesa's *Jesus in African Christianity*, and John Pobee's *Exploring Afro-Christology* and *Towards an African Theology*. Among those who have examined Christology specifically from an Akan perspective are John Pobee in *Exploring Afro-Christology,* Kwame Bediako in *Jesus in Africa*, and Abraham Akrong in "Christology from an African Perspective."[12] Examining Christology from the perspective of African indigenous churches (AICs) is certainly not a new idea. Existing research from the Akan AICs provided important Christological insights. At the time of this writing, however, this author is unaware of any other research focused primarily on the Christology of Akan AICs in Ghana, as this study is attempting to do.

9. For a fruitful discussion on the different titles and models used for Jesus, see F. Hahn, *Titles of Jesus*.

10. Mugambi and Magesa, *Jesus in African Christianity*, viii.

11. Ibid.

12. Schreiter, *Faces of Jesus;* Mugambi and Magesa, *Jesus in African Christianity;* Pobee, *Exploring Afro-Christology*, also Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, 81–98; Bediako, *Jesus in Africa*; Akrong, "Christology from an African Perspective," 119–36.

The fieldwork for this research has been extensive and utilized three different approaches to information gathering. Questionnaires were used in all ten regions of Ghana; one-to-one interviews were conducted; and focus group sessions were held. Each of these approaches was designed to obtain a grass roots perspective, which is considered to be a significant contribution within this research for the ongoing Christological discussions. Further, it is the aim of this work to examine the Christology of the Akan AICs, drawing upon their sources for Christological epistemology, as well as to discover how their Christology functions in the life of their faith communities.

It is the position of this study that their understanding and experience of Christ, which is appropriated through their view of the world, makes a valuable contribution to the quest for a relevant Christology in Africa as well as providing a critique to the western propositional approaches to Christology. This western approach is also very often adopted by African theologians and writers on religion in African. This work is concerned with how Akan AICs—out of the richness of their symbols, their cultural expressions, their experiences, their hopes, their fears and their daily life in community—articulate faith in Jesus Christ.

CHRISTOLOGICAL CONSTRUCTION

The notion that all Christologies are cultural constructs is today commonly acknowledged, particularly in missiological circles.[13] It is, however, only fairly recently that this essentially contextual nature of the faith has been recognized. For many centuries every deviation from what was considered "orthodoxy" was viewed in terms of "heterodoxy" and even heresy. The apprehension of theological (or Christological knowledge), which was thought to exist in "objective forms," was situated under the tutelage of the Church and was neither open to personal interpretation, nor was it contingent upon cultural, political, and social factors.[14]

13. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 421. See also Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 4–5.

14. The key to Plato's (429–347) philosophy is influential here. His theory of knowledge posited that "knowledge" in the strict sense cannot be obtained from anything so variable and evanescent as sense-perception. He forwarded a view of a transcendent non-sensible world of forms or ideals, which are apprehended by the intellect alone. See Kelly, *Early Christian*, 10.

This generated an attitude of intolerance against other forms of theological or Christological constructs which was particularly evident after Constantine, when the erstwhile *religio illicita* became the religion of the establishment.[15] The Church then adopted the imperial, Roman view of culture, which viewed culture as objective with Christianity as an integral part. In other words, it was assumed that the gospel must be proclaimed everywhere in a single, "perfect," cultural form.[16] Any variation was deemed to be either a deviation or a stage of development towards the, as yet, unrealized ideal.

It was this belief that governed the way the Church authorities handled the Christological controversies that challenged the Church's orthodoxy such as Arianism, Donatism, Pelegianism, Nestorianism, Monophysitism, and numerous similar movements.[17] Such movements were all regarded as doctrinally heterodox, and those who promulgated such views were often very severely dealt with. The ecumenical councils, such as the ones held at Nicaea in AD 325 and at Chalcedon in AD 451, had on this basis of preserving Christian orthodoxy sought to establish a single faith throughout the empire. This, they thought, represented revealed truth and therefore did not recognize how their own cultural, social, and political influence would determine the shape of their Christological construction.[18]

When the classical Greco-Roman philosophy came to be applied to the truths of the Christian faith, the immutability of the Christian cultural ideal was sealed. According to classicist assumption, there was only one culture which could be aspired to through diligent study of the ancient Latin and Greek authors and through the learning of Scholastic philosophy and theology. In Shorter's view, the classicist theologian often assumed therefore that the Church's dogma was permanent, not so much because it represented revealed truths, but because of belief in a universal, permanent culture and in the existence of fixed, immutable substances and meaning.[19]

15. Kelly, *Early Christian*, 223.
16. Shorter, *Toward A Theology*, 18.
17. See Kelly, *Early Christian*, 9–17.
18. Ibid., 223–338.
19. Shorter, *Toward A Theology*, 19.