



# Re-Imagining African Christologies

Conversing with the Interpretations  
and Appropriations of Jesus in  
Contemporary African Christianity



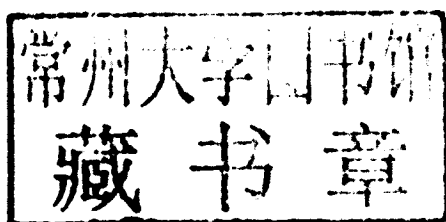
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VICTOR I. EZIGBO

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*Conversing with the Interpretations and Appropriations  
of Jesus Christ in African Christianity*

VICTOR I. EZIGBO



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Princeton Theological Monograph Series 132

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*To Adamma Rita Ezigbo*

## Foreword

THEOLOGY IS AN ACADEMIC DISCIPLINE, TO BE PURSUED, LIKE OTHER disciplines, with rigor; but its sources lie, not in the study or the library, but in the nature of Christian life. The mainspring of theology is in the decisions that Christians—all Christians—have to make, simply because they are Christians.

The first theological decisions to be made usually involve the question “What, as a Christian, should I do?” in certain specific circumstances. Of this order are the questions that the Christians of Corinth asked the apostle Paul, such as “Should I accept an invitation from a pagan friend to go to dinner when I think he may have got the meat from a sacrifice in a pagan temple?” It is noteworthy that Paul’s answers to this question range not only through a series of possibilities about the meat, but through a series of theological themes, including the ontological status of pagan gods, the nature of Christian freedom, the status of apostles and the need for mutual responsibility within the Body of Christ.<sup>1</sup>

But if “What, as I Christian, should I do?” about some specific issue is the usual beginning of theological enquiry, a further stage of theological activity, “What, as a Christian, should I be thinking?” soon presents itself. Any thinking we do, in theology as in other matters, will be done with the intellectual materials to hand. When the Lord asked his disciples the question that lies at the heart of christology, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter answered in the terms of his Jewish background, “You are the Messiah.”<sup>2</sup> Asking the same question in a Greek context, in the Greek language, in a setting in which Greek intellectual materials formed the discourse, produced the centuries of heart-searching debate issuing in the declarations of Nicaea and Chalcedon. Even now, we can recognize in those declarations discoveries about Christ calling us to

1. The argument on this and associated questions occupies 1 Corinthians chapters 8 to 10.

2. Mark 8:29.

worship as we recite the words. Statements about the One who is “begotten of his Father before all worlds . . . being of one substance with the Father,” do not replace the word Messiah or make it obsolete. But even if we argue that all that the creeds say is contained in the word Messiah, it remains true that only the long process of enquiry, study of Scripture, investigation and debate using the intellectual materials to hand—the theological process, that is—made the discovery plain.

Africa is a theological laboratory now, in the way that the Mediterranean world was then. Dr. Ezigbo’s thought-provoking book reveals the astonishing degree of current theological activity on the African continent. He uncovers the works of a multitude of theological writers, from West and East and Southern Africa, of Catholic and Protestant background, and a whole spectrum of theological positions within those traditions. But he does not confine himself to the theologians who write books and articles; he examines the working theology of what he calls the “grassroots,” that is ordinary Christians, Catholic, historic Protestant, Evangelical, Charismatic, and those from the African-Instituted Churches. All of these are necessarily integrating the question “Who do you say that I am?” into their daily lives, and he underlines the importance for these informal theologians of the figure of Jesus the Problem Solver. The theological workshop never closes; the exposure to changing human life that we call culture continues to force the questions on us, first “What, as a Christian, should I do?,” and then “What, as Christians, should we think?” The business of theology is to learn to think in a Christian way, and African Christians are at work on these questions.

It is one of the many merits of Dr. Ezigbo’s book that he does not isolate this ferment of African theological thought, but brings it into engagement with theological thought in the West. Here, too, he covers a wide range, geographically and confessionally, including representatives of that special category of theological thought characteristic of Latin America; and there is a hint towards the end of the book that he believes that Asian theology should also be at the table. At the end of the day, all theology is contextual; modern Western theology arises from centuries of Biblical and Christian interaction with the languages and cultures of Europe. The universal Christian confession is that in Christ, divinity assumed humanity; yet there is no such thing as generalized humanity; in practice, we meet only culture-specific humanity, humanity under the

conditions of particular times and places. Yet there is only one Christ; it is our expressions of humanity, not his, that are partial and incomplete; only together can we hope to understand the full stature of Christ.

This leads to another important aspect of the book. It is not simply descriptive and analytical, but constructive and innovative. Dr. Ezigbo proposes for our attention a christological model of Christ as Revealer. One issue addressed in this connection is the dangerous gap that Dr. Ezigbo identifies between what the academic theologians are doing in Africa and the popular christology of ordinary Christians. Both groups are “contextualizing”; but, as he puts it, “whereas many theologians attend to the need to produce a contextualized Jesus by ‘dressing him up’ in the indigenous metaphors; the majority of lay Christians seek to experience a Jesus who has the power to solve their existential questions.” The Revealer model can be used to critique both modes of thinking; for, though we may seek to understand Christ in terms of humanity as we know it, in truth, we can truly understand humanity, not to speak of divinity, only in the light of Christ the Revealer.

Models, of course, are ways of approaching and understanding reality, rather than reality itself; but Dr. Ezigbo has provided an immense amount on which to reflect, much to engage with, and much to employ the best theological resources of that complete, six-continent humanity that Christ has assumed.

Andrew F. Walls  
University of Edinburgh and Liverpool Hope University

## Preface

IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY, MANY THEOLOGIANS AND Christians who do not have a formal theological training perceive Jesus Christ primarily as a solution to the problems that confront humanity.<sup>1</sup> They expect Jesus Christ to inspire the conversations that will deconstruct and overthrow Western theological hegemony, to rekindle the quest to preserve some indigenous traditions, to liberate the oppressed, poor and powerless, to expose the oppressors and all evildoers, to liberate and protect people from the attacks of the malevolent spirits, and to save people from being eternally separated from God. But what these solution-oriented Christologies have overlooked is that the Christ-Event is a paradox: it creates simultaneously a problem and a solution for the Christian community which confesses that God has revealed God's self in this event. The contextual Christology that I develop in this book probes the theological, christological and anthropological consequences of this claim for interpreting and appropriating Jesus Christ in the African contexts. To achieve this task, I will converse with and critique some selected constructive Christologies and grassroots Christologies that exist in Africa.

I argue that the Christology that aims to engage concretely with both the Christ-Event and the complex contexts of Africa should construe Jesus the Christ simultaneously as a *question* and an *answer* to the theological, cultural, religious, anthropological, spiritual and socio-economic issues which confront, shape, and inform these contexts. Viewed from this perspective, I will argue that the Christ-Event may sometimes upset, unsettle, critique, and reshape the solution-oriented Christologies of African Christianity. I will explore this claim within

1. Although I use the expressions *African Christianity* and *Nigerian Christianity* throughout this book, I am aware that there are different and sometimes competing versions of Christianity within Africa. It is a mistake therefore to assume that the emerging Christologies from Africa are homogenous. This is one of the reason I have used the term *Christologies* to describe the existing interpretations and appropriations of Jesus Christian African Christianity.



the circumference of the overarching assumption of this book; namely, as both a question and an answer, Jesus Christ confronts us as a *revealer* of divinity and humanity. Therefore, he mediates and interprets divinity and humanity for the purpose of enacting and sustaining a relationship between God and human beings. I will construct within this christological parameter a model that will engage concretely with some of the key issues that are shaping African Christianity.

In chapter 1, I explore the major christological presuppositions that inform and shape the interpretations of the Christ-Event in African Christianity. Most of these presuppositions overlap. They illuminate the complexity of the backgrounds of the majority of the Christologies that exist in contemporary Africa. As we will see later, the theologians that I examined have drawn insights from most of the presuppositions. Therefore, the theologians cannot be neatly categorized under any single one of the presuppositions. I examine in chapter 2 the major christological models some key theologians have developed. Although I focused primarily on Nigerian theologians, I interacted with some other African theologians who either share or disagree with the models of neo-missionary Christology, the culture-oriented Christology, and the liberation-oriented Christology. In chapter 3, I examine the grass-roots Christologies that emerged from the qualitative research I carried out among five churches in Aba, a city in the southeast of Nigeria, from February to July 2006.<sup>2</sup> I analyzed and interacted critically with the emerging christological issues and themes.

I articulate in chapter 4 a christological model that I will be referring to in this book as *Revealer Christology*. I explore also the christological meaning of the word *revealer* and locate it within the broader context of the theological discussions on revelation. In addition, I examine the contextual and christological grounds on which an adequate African Christology can be constructed. I also engage with the two major potential christological problems that can obstruct a successful construction of a Revealer Christology model for the African contexts. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 contain the main substance of this model. In chapter 5, I examine some indigenous understandings of the Supreme Being and how this Being correlates to the Christian God. I also explore the ways in which Jesus Christ interprets and mediates God and also provides the con-

2. See chapter three for discussion on the methodology I used for data collection and analysis.

text for constructing a contextual Christology for the African contexts. Building on chapter 5, in chapter 6 I interact with the understandings of the malevolent spirit beings as construed in Christianity and the indigenous religions. This is an area that has been largely neglected by many African theologians who write Christologies. But any Christology that neglects how Jesus Christ interacts with the malevolent spirits will hardly connect with the existential questions and experiences of the majority of African Christians who have continued to believe that such spirit beings influence their daily affairs. In chapter 7, I investigate and critique some of the major understandings of humanity and the human world in both Christianity and the indigenous religions, locating them within a Revealer Christology model that I develop in this book. In the conclusion, I articulate the christological and contextual warrants of the Revealer Christology model. Appendix 1 contains the pre-set questions I asked the interviewees and Appendix 2 contains the names of the churches, the interviewees, and the date of the interviews.

## Acknowledgements

THIS BOOK IS LARGELY THE PRODUCT OF MY PHD RESEARCH DEGREE AT the School of Divinity, University of Edinburgh, Scotland. I am grateful to Dr. John C. McDowell, my principal supervisor, for teaching me how to research, develop and construct a theology from a systematic approach. Dr. T. Jack Thompson, my second supervisor, guided me into the world of African theological literature.

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My deepest gratitude goes to my parents Rev. and Mrs. ISLO Ezigbo for their enormous spiritual and financial support. I am also grateful to the members of my family for their immeasurable support and encouragement. Finally, I thank my wife, Adamma Rita Ezigbo, for bringing enormous joy, support, and kindness to my life. She has comforted and encouraged me throughout the rigorous stages of this research. I also thank her for her editorial advice.

## Abbreviations

AACC	All African Conference of Churches
AICs	African Indigenous (or Independent) Churches
<i>AFER</i>	African Ecclesiastical Review
CPM	Christian Pentecostal Mission
EAEP	East African Educational Publishers
ECWA	Evangelical Church of West Africa
EATWOT	Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians
<i>IJST</i>	International Journal of Systematic Theology
NASR	Nigerian Association for the Study of Religions

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## Introduction

### Historical Contexts of Christological Discourse in Sub-Saharan Africa

THE EARLY ECUMENICAL COUNCILS OF THE CLASSICAL CHRISTIAN church through painful processes—controversies, fierce debates, physical abuse, and voting—created what can be referred to as a standard resilient circumference within which many Christian theologians have explored the meaning and significance of Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup> Since the Chalcedonian Council, many theologians have wrestled rigorously with the issue of how to hold in tension the claim that Jesus Christ is both divine and human and how to explain this highly troubling christological assertion and confession.<sup>2</sup> The interpretations, reactions, and appropriations of this christological claim have varied depending on the contexts of different Christian communities. For too long, however, many North American and European theologians have hijacked christological discourses and have (consciously or unconsciously) constituted a Western christological hegemony.<sup>3</sup> But with the influence of postmodernity infiltrating almost unrestrained into theological and christological discourses, forcing many theologians to be more suspicious of metanarratives, many non-Western theologians now seek for ways to dismantle what seems to be the imperialist empire of Western Christologies. In what follows, I will explore how some Nigerian and other African theologians have reacted against Western Christologies,

1. See Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*; Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology*. For a book on the Christologies of the early Christian councils by a Nigerian theologian, see Ezech, *Jesus Christ the Ancestor*.

2. In this book, the expressions and names *Jesus the Christ*, *Jesus Christ*, *Christ*, *Jesus* are used interchangeably with no theological distinction intended.

3. The word *Western* in this book refers to North America and Europe.

and also how they have proceeded to explain the Christ-Event to befit their local contexts.<sup>4</sup>

### *Discovering the Missing Gene: Awareness of the Import of African Pre-Christian Worldviews and African Identity for Contextual Christology*

African contextual Christologies are weaved together into a complex political, cultural, economic, and religious web. A helpful way to unpack this complexity is to locate it within the broader historical context of the emergence of what has been described (for lack of a better expression) as *African theology*.<sup>5</sup> Since the focus of this book is a systematic and contextual examination of some African Christians' (particularly Nigerian theologians') interpretations of the Christ-Event, and not an historical examination, I will not discuss extensively the history of the development of Christologies in Africa. But it is important to note that some theologians began to wake up from their theological slumber in the 1950s to raise some questions that concerned their dual identities; namely, the issues that concerned their African *and* Christian heritages. Since the 1950s, many theologians have continued to seek for some novel and relevant ways to express the Christ-Event in their contexts.<sup>6</sup> Inspired by the rise of *pan-Africanism* and nationalism, the complex ideologies promoted by individuals such as Nnamdi Azikiwe (Nigerian) and Kwame Nkrumah (Ghanaian) which aimed to promote the one-

4. The expression *Christ-Event* is used in this book to refer to the birth, life, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ.

5. Some contemporary African theologians have argued that the existing theological discussions in Africa cannot be described in the singular due to the variety of issues that inform the discussions. Thus, they speak of *African theologies* and not *African theology*. The same principle is also applied to christological discourses in Africa. See Nyamiti, "Contemporary African Christologies," 62–77.

6. Scholars of Christianity in Africa disagree on who pioneered African theology, and what it means. Whilst John Parratt is willing to associate African theology with Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther and Holy Johnson, Benezet Bujo sees Placide Tempels as the father of African theology. Bujo also sees Mulago's 1955 dissertation titled "Life Unity Among the Bashi, Banyarwanda and Barundi" as a template of an African Theology. See Bujo, *African Theology in Its Social Context*, 58; John Parratt, *Reinventing Christianity*, 5–10. John Mbiti sees Harry Sawyerr as the first African theologian "to publish a substantial book in the area of indigenous theology." Mbiti, *New Testament Eschatology in African Background*, 187.



ness of African peoples, to empower them to fight against Western imperialism and domination, and to encourage them to promote their cultural heritage,<sup>7</sup> some theologians began to construct contextual theologies that promoted and defended the dignity of Africans in “a world that denigrated black humanity.”<sup>8</sup> The 1955 conference organized by the Christian Council of Gold Coast in Accra, Ghana (to explore the theme “Christianity and African Culture”) provided a platform for some Anglophone theologians such as C. Baeta to present arguments for the co-existence of African indigenous religions and Christianity.<sup>9</sup> A year later, in 1956, some Francophone theologians including Vincent Mulago and Engelbert Mveng began to launch attacks against the Europeanization of African Christianity.<sup>10</sup> Thus, from the 1960s through the mid 1970s, there were steady streams of theological articles, treatises, and books written by African theologians to defend the possibility of engaging in a Christian theological discourse from an African vantage point. Most of these theologians were also critical of the relevance of Western-shaped theologies and Christologies for Africa.<sup>11</sup>

The Nigerian theologian, Bolaji Idowu, in 1969 summarized what can be considered the underlying task of African theology.

We seek, in effect, to discover in what way the Christian faith could best be presented, interpreted, and inculcated in Africa so that Africans will hear God in Jesus Christ addressing Himself immediately to them in their own native situation and particular circumstances.<sup>12</sup>

Idowu's summation is, of course, broad for it does not specify exactly what he means by “African situation and particular circum-

7. Nkrumah, *Africa Must Unite; Neo-colonialism*; Azikiwe, “Future of Pan-Africanism,” 302–27; Hastings, *History of African Christianity*, 14–16.

8. Martey, *African Theology*, 7.

9. See Baeta, ed. *Christianity and African Culture*. In 1958, a similar conference took place in Ibadan, Nigeria. According to Uchenna Ezech, the conference led to the formation and inauguration of All Africa Council of Churches (AACC) in Kampala in 1963. Ezech, *Jesus Christ the Ancestor*, 104–7.

10. Baur, *2000 Years of Christianity in Africa*, 291.

11. Ibid.

12. Idowu, “Introduction,” 16. Concerned with the plurality and differences of the cultures of Africa, Aylward Shorter argues that an “African Christian Theology . . . will correspond to a culturally fragmented Africa, albeit with many chains of possible comparison and actual, historical interaction.” Shorter, *African Christian Theology*, 27.