

THE HOLY SPIRIT AND SALVATION IN AFRICAN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

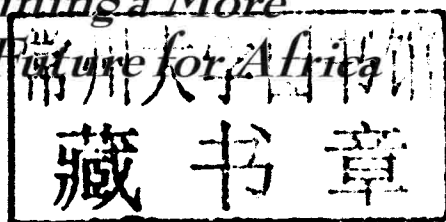
Imagining a More Hopeful Future for Africa

DAVID TONGHOU NGONG

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THE HOLY SPIRIT
AND SALVATION IN
AFRICAN CHRISTIAN
THEOLOGY

*Imagining a More
Hopeful Future for Africa*



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Preface

The prolonged malaise of much of Africa has led to the tendency to look for bright spots that may be celebrated. One bright spot has been found in the growth of Christianity in the continent. Scholars of Christian missions and World Christianity are swooning in celebration of the growth of Christianity in Africa, suggesting that African Christianity is becoming an important player in Christian missions and World Christianity. In fact, some even claim that African Christianity is transforming the West.¹ This celebration of the growth and global spread of African Christianity probably has its place.

However, it must, first, not be forgotten that many of the African Christian communities in the Diaspora are made up of both political and economic migrants. Second, the form of Christianity that is spreading both in the African continent and in the West is Pentecostal Christianity. In the first place, the people who populate African churches in the West are Africans who have run away from the continent because they are unable to live there due to political and economic reasons. Life back in Africa, for many of these people, was menacing so they left in search of a better life in the West.² In fact, many of these Africans in the West live on the fringes of Western societies. Many non-Westerners hardly join African churches in the West because some of the beliefs cherished in these churches appear as strange to Westerners. A case in point is the uproar that was generated in the United States when a Kenyan preacher prayed that Sarah Palin, the 2008 Republican nominee for vice president, should be protected against witchcraft.

African Christianity in the West, therefore, suffers from a double marginalization: the first is that it is made up of people who are largely marginalized in Western societies and the second is that African Christianity is largely shunned by non-Africans. The case of the Embassy of the Blessed Kingdom of God in the Ukraine which was founded by the Nigerian pastor, Sunday Adelaja, is an Eastern European exception. Thus, unlike Western missionary Christianity that had a large impact in Africa because it was accompanied by Western scientific and technological power, contemporary African Christianity in the West, rather than showing African agency, clearly demonstrates African dependency. Running from a precarious life in their

countries, African Christianity in the West is dominated by people who have come to seek a better life. Even though it is a claim of the Christian faith that God works through the despised things of the world (1 Cor. 1:27–29), that faith claim has done little or nothing to relieve the marginality of Africans both on the continent and in the Diaspora. The continent and its peoples play a generally subordinate role in world affairs. To claim that African Christianity is influencing the West is, at best, an excellent attempt to make a virtue out of weakness. Thus, the claim that African Christianity is somehow changing the face of Christianity in the West, and even changing Western societies, is not correct. It is a cruel attempt to make Africans believe that they are not marginal in a world where what determines human worth is not the faith they hold but the economic and political clout they have. Because of the marginal position of the continent in the geopolitical map of our contemporary world, African Christianity is still a marginal element in world Christianity, in spite of its rapid growth and spread around the world.

The marginality of the continent is not helped by the form of Christianity that is spreading like wild fire especially in sub-Saharan Africa. The form of Christianity spreading in the continent is Pentecostal Christianity and this has led to the idea of the Pentecostalization of African Christianity. The Pentecostalization of African Christianity means that much of African Christianity is Pentecostal in character, with special emphasis not on speaking in tongues but rather on the manifestation of the supernatural in the world in the form of healing, deliverance, anointing and empowerment, and so on. African Pentecostalism reclaims what is supposed to be the African spiritualistic worldview, seeing the world as charged with the supernatural. There is a rejection of what is described as Western Enlightenment rationalism, which seeks to disenchant the world. Comparable to African Traditional Religion,³ Pentecostals mostly attribute supernatural causality to events and thus seek supernatural remedies. It is this Gnostic distinction between rationalism and supernaturalism that makes the Pentecostalization of African Christianity pernicious to the well-being of Africans: it undermines scientific rationality, which is crucial to the well-being of peoples. This book, then, is a sustained critique of this undermining of the scientific imagination in Africa. Its central thesis is that Africa will continue to remain marginal in the global political economy if the scientific imagination is not cultivated. Even though this book illustrates the marginal place of Africa in the world, it is also a love letter to a continent that is undercutting its own potential through various

follies. It is a call for the continent to overcome these follies and realize its potential for the well-being of its peoples and to the glory of God.

This book is an extensive revision of the dissertation I presented to the department of religion at Baylor University for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in 2007. I therefore want to thank all the members of my dissertation committee, especially Barry Harvey, the director of that project. However, the history of this book goes far back and involved many people and institutions. I was first initiated into the Christian life, about which I now write as one with some authority, at the St. Anthony Catholic School and Jordan Baptist Church both in Owe, Cameroon. I was called to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ by the members of Mundemba Baptist Church, Ndian, Cameroon. I also wish to thank Grandview Baptist Church of Kansas City, Kansas, and Lake Shore Baptist Church of Waco, Texas, for being communities that have helped shape my thought here in the United States. I am especially grateful to Central Baptist Theological Seminary for initially offering me a scholarship to study at the United States. I am indebted to my mentors at the seminary, Molly T. Marshall and Robert Johnson. My thanks also go to Baylor University, especially to Sara Alexander (Director of the African Studies Program), Bill Bellinger (Chair of the department of religion), Mark Long (Interim Director of Baylor Interdisciplinary Core when I was hired), and Anne-Marie Bowery (Director of Baylor Interdisciplinary Core), for granting me a teaching opportunity that made it possible for me to write this book. Let me also extend my sincere appreciation to the staff members of Peter Lang for all their support. I take responsibility for the errors and limitation of insight that are often some of the hazards of writing a book.

I dedicate this book to the memory of my late father, but I want to offer it to my mother, Ma Juliana Mouh Ngong, as a different kind of gift from what she might be expecting from me. God probably offers different kinds of gifts from what we may be expecting, too! Last and most importantly, I want to express my deep gratitude to my wife, Prudencia Eshangke Tonghou, the woman who continues to bear my follies.

Waco, Texas
Pentecost 2010

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NOTES

¹ See, for example, Jehu J. Hanciles, *Beyond Christendom: Globalization, African Migration, and the Transformation of the West* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008).

² See Gerrie Ter Haar, *Half Way to Paradise: African Christians in Europe* (Cardiff: Cardiff Academic Press, 1998).

³ In this book, African Traditional Religion (singular) and African Traditional Religions (plural) will be used interchangeably. For more on the debate about this matter, see E. Ikenga-Metuh, *Comparative Studies of African Traditional Religions* (Onitsha: IMICO Publishers, 1987).

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Introduction

1. The Project

With the recent rapid spread of Christianity in Africa, spurred on by the Pentecostal/Charismatic expressions of the faith, one may be forgiven for assuming that there would be widespread pneumatological reflections on the continent. However, one would be hard-pressed to find monographs that reflect on the Holy Spirit in the African contexts because much of the pneumatological reflections are confined to journal articles and book chapters.¹ Even though these pneumatological reflections have been critical of some elements of Pentecostalism in Africa, they have generally seen the spread of Pentecostalism as a positive development for the continent. Pentecostal pneumatology is usually presented as the best way the Holy Spirit may be understood in the African context because it fits well with what is usually described as the “African worldview.”² This worldview is one in which there is no firm distinction between the spiritual and physical world as both are intricately intertwined. This spiritualized cosmology is usually set against what is supposedly a Western rationalistic framework that is largely disenchanted and inimical to the spread of Christianity.³ Western missionaries and the churches they planted in Africa are usually portrayed as having woefully failed to address the African spiritualized cosmology. African Initiated Churches (AICs), specifically the Pentecostal-type churches,⁴ are usually seen as the churches that have understood this African cosmology and tailored their message to address the felt needs of the people. The felt needs of the people are usually portrayed in terms of overcoming the malevolent spirits that threaten human life in their environment, thus enabling them to enjoy fullness of life. Thus it is that salvation in this form of theologizing is usually understood in terms of how salvation is understood in African Traditional Religions (ATR). In fact, the call is usually made that salvation and the Holy Spirit should be understood mainly in terms of their relations to African traditional religious cosmology.⁵ The recent spread of neo-Pentecostal/Charismatic Christianity in Africa is usually credited to the ability of this expression of Christianity to address the religious needs of the people in light of the African traditional cosmology.

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It is this popular pneumatological soteriology that this book intends to call into question. It suggests that the method of theologizing on the Holy Spirit briefly outlined above is only part, and a very limited part, of how to theologize about the Spirit in Africa today. It argues that this popular narrative stifles the African imagination because it is tailored to fit what is believed to be *the* essential way an African thinks. This pneumatology, therefore, does not fire the Christian imagination as the Holy Spirit is wont to do but rather limits it to what is believed to be the way Africans think. That is why it does not appear to propose much that is new in the African context; it assumes that because Africans think in a particular way, the Holy Spirit has to work in their midst only in ways that are familiar. Since their greatest threat appears to be from a capricious, spiritualized cosmology, the Holy Spirit can only be presented as the power that enables them to overcome these capricious spirits. Since their greatest quest is for the fullness of life in the here and now, the Holy Spirit can only be presented as the one who guarantees fullness of life in the here and now. This work argues that this popular pneumatological soteriology operates squarely within the framework of Western discourses on the otherness of Africa by endorsing an essentialistic view of how Africans think. The work argues that the attempts by this dominant pneumatology to overcome Western discourses on Africa by crassly dismissing rationalism are not successful. Further, it argues that this popular pneumatological soteriology fails to meet the needs of Africans, in spite of claims to the contrary (African Christians are generally still very threatened by this spiritual cosmology and they are on average not better off).

Finally, the dominant pneumatological soteriology lays so much stress on the here and now that the end result is often the perpetration of capitalistic greed and the widening of the gap between the rich and the poor. In short, it is doubtful that this much touted pneumatological soteriology can do much to alleviate the woes of Africans. In fact, like the concept of Negritude in African literature and philosophy, it may appear to be an elitist ploy to encourage the continued marginalization of ordinary Africans by essentializing a mode of thought that is culturally conditioned.

This project also argues for a widening of our understanding of what it means to be “African” thus expanding what is usually understood as the ways the Holy Spirit is manifested in the continent. Indeed, the fire of the Holy Spirit is active in the African imagination in ways that are hardly spoken of in current pneumatological reflections. For example, in the dominant pneumatology the Holy Spirit is usually associated with (a crass understand-

ing of) prophecy, healing, empowerment, protection against malevolent spiritual forces, and so on. Most speak of the presence of the Spirit in Africa in terms of anti-rational or non-rational discourses. In this work, however, no sharp distinction is made between the rational and the non-rational, the Western and the African, as these are constructed categories intended to enshrine otherness as the crucial mode of being for the African. The idea of the African worldview is jettisoned in favor of complex modes of being African.⁶ Thus, in this work, we shall find the Spirit at work in discourses of rationality, especially as found in the work of African philosophers such as Kwasi Wiredu, Paulin Hountondji and Marcien Towa.

We shall find the Spirit in science and questioning and the desire for clarification. In fact, a central text for this project is Jesus' discourse on the Holy Spirit in John 16:4b–15, especially verses 12–14 where Jesus is reported to have said: "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot hear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you."⁷ This insight indicates that the Spirit enables Christians to gain access to truth, be it religious or scientific truth. The Spirit also grants wisdom. Thus, in this work, the Spirit will be seen in the context of the wisdom tradition as encountered in the biblical and African contexts.⁸ The biblical wisdom tradition challenges popular but mistaken ways of conceiving how things are, especially how God works in the world, as demonstrated in the book of Job. In other words, there is still more that Christians all over the world have to learn about the ways of God with creation. Limiting the Holy Spirit to a so-called African worldview is an attempt to limit the unpredictable Spirit in the African context, thus limiting the range of African Christians' imagination. We are still to see the Spirit unleashed in Africa in surprising ways.

We cannot effectively understand the Holy Spirit in the African contexts without first discovering the "person" of the Spirit in the triune divine life. This claim means that the field of pneumatological investigation has to be widened from the strictly functional understanding which now dominates African discourses on the Spirit to understanding the Spirit within the life of the Trinity. Further, it shall be argued that an adequate pneumatological soteriology is one that sees our highest good to be in our ultimate participation in the eternal and triune divine life. The Spirit enables us to place the temporal within an eternal framework so that our vision may not be held hostage by

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the present. This book places present material well-being in its proper place by insisting that our highest good is not limited to the present. This approach may sound as heresy in modern theology in general and African theology in particular, given that the continuous refrain in most African pneumatological reflections is that salvation has to do with the whole person rather than with only the soul and the hereafter, as some Western missionaries taught Africans.

After Karl Marx, one may wonder, is it not unwise to stress the hereafter in matters religious rather than the here and now? By stressing the hereafter, would one not be promoting the view of religion as the opium of the people? Would it not be going against the African religious cosmology which stresses fullness of life in terms of wealth, health, and so on, in the here and now? True, there is the danger that stressing the hereafter may seem a ploy to overlook the present sufferings of the people but it need not be so. Two issues stand out. First, to place the stress on the hereafter does not mean a stress on the salvation of disembodied souls, as has been the case in the past. A holistic understanding of salvation does not mean placing the stress on present life as is usually implied. It means taking all of life seriously. For Christians, all of life is not attained in the present. The hereafter has to be stressed because the Christian faith is an eschatological faith which does not see the here and now as ultimate. Thus, any theology that is not eschatological (in terms of seeing temporality as provisional and limited) limits the range of Christian reflections on present reality. Second, stressing our ultimate peace in the eternal divine life would help Christians properly understand how to value the present life and so properly place material well being. In fact, it may, if Max Weber's view on the connection between Protestant ethic and the rise of capitalism is correct, lead to the production of more wealth, rather than mainly promoting consumption.⁹ The Mourides of Senegal, an indigenous Islamic movement that stresses the centrality of life in the hereafter, and which is apparently doing more to make life better for people in that country than any other group, may be a current example.¹⁰

Therefore, the propriety of discourses on the Spirit in Africa will be evaluated on two grounds: a) whether they may enhance the overall well-being of Africans and b) whether they properly orient Africans toward the eternal divine life. The effectiveness of discourses on the Spirit will not be judged on whether there is a connection between biblical and African cosmology as most current African pneumatology does.¹¹ Claiming that a particular pneumatology is biblical is not a theologically sufficient ground for assessing

Christian discourses. While Christian theology takes the Bible seriously, it is not limited to simply pointing out connections between biblical and African (or any other) cosmology, as if pointing out such connections make African Christianity somehow more appropriate than non-African ones.¹²

2. The Method

The dominant form of theologizing on the Holy Spirit and salvation in Africa described above will be referred to as “endorsement or dominant pneumatological soteriology.” This pneumatologic soteriology derives from the form of African theologizing which is a reaction to colonial Christianity. In a recent piece on methodology in African theology, Kwame Bediako argues that African theology in the post-missionary era has been characterized by the methods of “liberation and integration.” He sees the theology of liberation as characteristic of South African Black Theology and the theology of integration as characteristic of sub-Saharan African theology (minus South Africa). The theology of integration is so-called because it aims at achieving “some integration between the African pre-Christian religious experience and African Christian commitment in ways that would ensure integrity of African Christian identity and selfhood.”¹³ Why was it necessary to integrate the African pre-Christian and pre-Islamic past with Christianity in order for the African Christian to achieve a coherent identity?

The first and most important reason was that the encounter between Africa and the West had undermined the African pre-Christian and pre-Islamic past. In fact, this pre-Christian past or the primal religions of Africa “were generally deemed unworthy of serious theological consideration in missionary times.” Africa’s primal religions, as the Edinburgh World Missionary Conference of 1910 held, “contained no preparation for Christianity.”¹⁴ It has therefore been the task of post-colonial African theology to show that African pre-Christian traditional religions prepared Africans to receive the gospel. This project was given a boost especially by the works of the Belgian missionary Placide Tempels, the Rwandan Philosopher Alexis Kagame, the Zairean theologian Vincent Mulago, and the Kenyan theologian John Mbiti, who argued that pre-Christian Africa had a coherent worldview characterized by the search for the power to be in a spiritualized cosmology.¹⁵

Thus, contemporary African Christian pneumatology has come to be directed largely at this spiritualized cosmology and the Holy Spirit has been

presented as the power that is stronger than any other spiritual power, the power that can overcome every other spiritual power that wants to do Africans harm, so that they may enjoy abundant life (salvation) understood as well being in the present.¹⁶ This pneumatological soteriology endorses what is believed to be the worldview of most Africans so that Africans may feel at home in the Christian faith. Inasmuch as this mode of doing theology reclaims the African pre-Christian past from the ignoble place given to it by Western Christian discourses and affirms Africans, this should be regarded as a worthwhile endeavor. However, this dominant pneumatological soteriology currently stifles the African Christian imagination by limiting pneumatological discourses mainly to what is supposed to be familiar to Africans. It presupposes that Africans do not respond to what is not familiar to them and thus fail to challenge African Christians to see perspectives that are sometimes wrongly characterized as un-African. This pneumatological soteriology does not only limit the range of African theology, it also undermines the dignity and well being of Africans, as it shall be argued presently.

The way of doing African theology which sees African pre-Christian religious traditions as a preparation for the Christian gospel undermines African dignity because it presents traditional African thought as incomplete. Presenting traditional African thought as incomplete, in itself, does not undermine the dignity of the people but given the colonial narrative on Africa as a kind of retarded continent, such a claim plays into that colonial discourse. Certainly, for those who practice these religions, it is not a preparation for any further religious system. It is a complete and coherent system in which people live and die. Thus, to claim that it is only a preparation for the Christian gospel is to undermine the dignity of this religious worldview by claiming that it is incomplete. It does no good to the dignity of Africans to portray their religious traditions as an incomplete system that needs to be completed by Christianity. In such Christian discourse, the Western narrative of Africans as sub-humans continues as their humanity is apparently completed only in Christianity. African theologians therefore need to give the dignity that is overdue to African traditional religious thought by not portraying it as a *preparatio evangelica* as Mbiti, Bediako, and Allan Anderson do. Thus ATRs should be treated as complete systems that need no further completion, at least, as far as those who live within this framework is concerned. In fact, the theology of ATRs should be developed within the framework of ATRs rather than through Christian theological perspectives. More specifically, the theology of ATRs should be affirmed or critiqued in terms of how

it fulfills the visions common to ATRs. Africans who become Christians have to be taught to begin to imagine life within the framework of central elements of Christianity rather than through ATRs. Africans who become Christians do not have to soothe their sometimes uneasy consciences, arising from accusations of betrayal of their ancestors, by dragging ATRs into Christianity as they have done in the past. Where there are similarities between the two religions these similarities should be probed and true dialogue enhanced rather than the monologue and suppression of ATRs that have characterized much of African theological discourse for a long time. Africans who become Christians should know that they are in fact betraying their ancestors by searching for a new vision which may clash with that held by their ancestors. In fact, it must be stressed that becoming a Christian entails changing one's imagination in a significant way.

This view of what it means for an African to become a Christian further implies that African theology does not have to address the so-called "primal imagination" by doing so "in terms of the primal imagination itself," as Bediako opines.¹⁷ Contending that Western philosophical traditions have stressed the transcendence of God, Bediako insists that because Africans are concerned with "*this* life, *this* existence" and have a "decidedly *this-worldly*" worldview, the crucial contribution that African theology can make to Christian theology is to stress divine immanence.¹⁸ The emphasis on the immanence of God, however, is not a particularly African contribution as it is central to the Christian understanding of divine life. In the Christian tradition, the immanence of God does not minimize God's transcendence, it being the case that God is other than humans in particular and creation in general. In fact, the decidedly *this* worldly orientation of the primal imagination is different from the Christian imagination which places this world within the framework of eternity, thus seeing this life as oriented toward divine life in whom there will be fullness of life (see Hebrews 11 and 13:14). In a significant sense, therefore, the Christian theological vision is different from the primal worldview so that becoming Christian entails introducing a Christian imagination rather than simply collapsing Christian views into the primal imagination. In fairness to Bediako, he does point out the eschatological orientation of the Christian gospel but this is not central to his theological method.¹⁹ His theological method simply allows the primal vision to set the agenda for African Christian theology.

This project does not simply endorse the primal imagination. Where the primal imagination can inform some aspects of Christian pneumatology, this

will be acknowledged; but it will not determine the pneumatological orientation. The method to be used in the work may be described as a “pneumatology of inquiry.” It may be described as a pneumatology of inquiry because it does not consider African theology to be a theology that simply draws from the so-called African worldview but rather a theology that deals with the pressing issues of our diverse and complex African world, generating helpful insights that promote well being now and eternal rest in divine life in the hereafter. It adopts this method because of the belief that the present dominant pneumatological soteriology neither promotes an eschatological vision nor the well being of Africans. In short, it neither orients Africans to God nor helps them improve their lives and livelihood. Why this is so will be seen as we discuss elements of the dominant pneumatological soteriology below.

3. Elements of Endorsement Pneumatological Soteriology

Endorsement pneumatological soteriology is, first, based on a facile understanding of what it means to be African. Like what has been described in African philosophy as ethno-philosophy,²⁰ it gives the impression that what is essential to Africa is a particular worldview, the spiritual cosmology. It fails to see, as influential Ghanaian philosopher Kwame Appiah has argued, that African identity is complex and multiple,²¹ and that African theology, in turn, has to be complex and multiple. Because of this failure to take seriously the complexity of the African context, attention has been focused on just one aspect of the African thought world and that one aspect has been treated as if it were basic to what it means to be African. Thus it is that the dominant pneumatological soteriology has been based on a lie, a lie about what it means to be African. According to this view, to be African is to be wedded to this spiritualized cosmology. However, it is clear that this cosmology is not particularly African as it is characteristic of most, if not all, primal societies. This means that theology informed by this cosmology is not particularly African as it can be developed in any primal society. Thus, to claim that to evolve a specifically African theology one needs to appeal to this particular worldview is to perpetrate an illusion. It is to perpetrate the illusion of Africans as different and as people whose thought, unlike that of others, need to be treated as somehow special.

That is why, in the second place, advocates of endorsement pneumatological soteriology always posit Africa against the West, in an apparent attempt to defend Africa against what they take to be sterilizing Western