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Understanding African Theology in the 20th century

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African Christian thought in the post-missionary era: liberation and integration

It has become well known that two distinct trends have emerged in African Christian thought in the post-independent and post-missionary era, from the late 1950s to the late 1980s. One has been the theological dimension to the struggle for the social and political transformation of the conditions of inequality and oppression in South Africa. This is what produced Black Theology, a theology of liberation in the African setting, in response to the particular circumstances of southern Africa. The other has been the theological exploration into the indigenous cultures of African peoples, with particular stress on their pre-Christian (and also pre-Islamic) religious traditions. This trend has been more closely associated with the rest of tropical Africa, where political independence seemed to have taken away a direct regular experience of the kind of socio-political pressures which produced Black Theology in South Africa. In this second trend, the broad aim has been to achieve some integration between the African pre-Christian religious experience and African Christian commitment in ways that would ensure the integrity of African Christian identity and selfhood.

This article will focus on the second of these 'trends', which is what is generally meant by the designation 'African Theology'. It needs to be pointed out, though, that the two are by no means to be regarded as mutually exclusive. Rather, they may be described as 'a series of concentric circles of which Black Theology is the inner and smaller circle'.¹ Nonetheless it will be

more helpful to make 'Black Theology' the subject of a separate discussion.

An early shared concern: the African religious past as a prime theological issue

The predominant concern with the pre-Christian religious traditions of Africa in the early literature of African Theology has been characterized, sometimes, as an unhealthy, inward-looking preoccupation with an imagined African past. No less an interpreter of African Christianity than Adrian Hastings has made this criticism, and is to be taken seriously; he saw greater possibilities in the more politically-attuned *theologia crucis* of Black Theology.² At the same time, African non-Christian critics have vehemently rejected what they have regarded as African Theology's attempt to 'christianize', and hence to distort, African tradition. For them, the effort to seek an integration of the pre-Christian religious tradition and African Christian experience is misplaced and unwarranted, being the search for the reconciliation of essentially and intrinsically antithetical entities.³

However, it is significant that it is a practitioner of Black Theology who has made one of the most positive evaluations of African Theology, and of its achievements.⁴ Desmond Tutu's observations at the Jos Conference on Christianity in Independent Africa are worth citing at some length:

African theologians have set about demonstrating that the African religious experience and heritage were not illusory, and that they should have formed the vehicle for conveying the Gospel verities to Africa. . . . It was vital for the African's self-respect that this kind of rehabilitation of his religious heritage should take place. It is the theological counterpart of what has happened in, say, the study of African history. It has helped to

give the lie to the supercilious but tacit assumption that religion and history in Africa date from the advent in that continent of the white man. It is reassuring to know that we have had a genuine knowledge of God and that we have had our own ways of communicating with deity, ways which meant that we were able to speak authentically as ourselves and as pale imitators of others. It means that we have a great store from which we can fashion new ways of speaking to and about God, and new styles of worship consistent with our new faith.⁵

Whereas Archbishop Tutu's observations are a strong affirmation that the effort made in African Theology to 'rehabilitate Africa's rich cultural heritage and religious consciousness' has been valid, it still remains important to appreciate why this effort has been made as a self-consciously *theological* endeavour, and in a specifically *Christian* interest.

Writing on the early developments in African Theology in his *African Christianity – An essay in interpretation*, Adrian Hastings drew attention to the fact that 'the chief non-Biblical reality with which the African theologian must struggle is the non-Christian religious tradition of his own people', and that African Theology early became 'something of a dialogue between the African scholar and the perennial religions and spiritualities of Africa'.⁶ For Hastings this was frustrating, since it meant that 'areas of traditional Christian doctrine which are not reflected in the African past disappear or are marginalised'.⁷ He was particularly concerned about the absence of serious discussion on Christology.⁸

It is not hard to see what had happened: the same religious traditions – the primal religions of Africa – which were generally deemed unworthy of serious theological consideration in missionary times, now occupied 'the very centre of the academic stage' in African theological reflection. It is worth recalling at this point that in 1910, the World Missionary Conference held in Edinburgh, operating under the prevailing European value-setting for the Christian faith, had concluded that Africa's primal religions 'contained no preparation for Christianity'.¹⁰ Accordingly, it becomes crucial to understand this heightened theological interest in the primal religions of Africa if we are to interpret correctly the pioneer writers of African Theology, to give due recognition to their achievement and to discern accurately the trends and directions which they set.

African Theology and the shaping of a method – theology as the hermeneutic of identity

To the extent that African Theology's effort at 'rehabilitating Africa's cultural heritage and religious consciousness' has been pursued as self-consciously *Christian* and *theological*, it may be said to have been an endeavour at demonstrating the true character of African *Christian* identity. For looked at from the standpoint of the context of the writers themselves, the primal religions of Africa belong, strictly, to the African religious past. However, this is not so much a chronological past as an 'ontological' past. The point of the theological importance of such an ontological past consists in the fact that it belongs together with the profession of the Christian faith in giving account of the same entity, namely the history of the religious consciousness of the African Christian. It is in this sense that the theological concern with the African pre-Christian religious heritage becomes an effort aimed at clarifying the nature and meaning of African Christian identity. Involved in such an effort is the quest for what Kenneth Cragg describes as 'integrity in conversion, a unity of self in which one's past is genuinely integrated into present commitment, so that the crisis of repentance and faith that makes us Christian truly integrates what we have been in what we become'.¹¹ It is the same notion which E.W. Fasholé-Luke had in mind in his statement that 'the quest for African Christian theologies... amounts to attempting to make clear the fact that conversion to Christianity must be coupled with cultural continuity'.¹²

From the perspective of African Christian identity, therefore, the missionary presumption of the European value-setting for the Christian faith, which led to the exclusion of any 'preparation for Christianity' in African primal religions, could only produce the *problematik* of what John Mbiti meant when he

wrote of the post-missionary church in Africa as a 'Church without theology and without theological consciousness'.¹³ This could only result from not allowing, in the first place, for the existence of a pre-Christian memory in African Christian consciousness. For theological consciousness presupposes religious tradition, and tradition requires memory, and memory is integral to identity: without memory we have no past, and if we have no past, then we lose our identity. Andrew F. Walls, commenting on the literature of African Theology, rightly, in my view, identified what lay at the heart of the theological investigation of the religious past:

No question is more clamant than the African Christian identity crisis. It is not simply an intellectual quest. The massive shift in the centre of gravity of the Christian world which has taken place cannot be separated from the cultural impact of the West in imperial days. Now the Empires are dead and the Western value-setting of the Christian faith largely rejected. Where does this leave the African Christian? Who is he? What is his past? A past is vital for all of us – without it, like the amnesiac man, we cannot know who we are. The prime African theological quest at present is this: what is the past of the African Christian? What is the relationship between Africa's old religions and her new one?¹⁴

Perhaps it is not surprising, therefore, that 'the central theme of this literature' became 'the nature of the traditional religion of Africa and its relationship of continuity rather than discontinuity with Christian belief'.¹⁵ Whereas this theme of continuity would be pursued with varying degrees of vigour by different writers, nonetheless it could only become a common concern because there existed a number of equally common factors which in turn helped to shape African Theology itself. These factors included: the need to make some response to the sense of a theological *problematik* in African Christianity produced by the widespread and much-publicized perception that the Western value-setting for the Christian faith in the missionary era had entailed also a far-reaching under-estimation of the African knowledge and sense of God; the unavoidable element of Africa's continuing primal religions, not as the remnants of an outworn 'primitive mentality', but, in terms of their world-view, as living realities in the experience of vast numbers of African Christians in all the churches, and not only in the so-called Independent churches; and the intellectual struggle for, and 'feeling after', a theological method in a field of enquiry which had hitherto been charted largely by Western anthropological scholarship, and in terminology relating to Africa which would often be 'unacceptable' to Africans. Terms like 'fetish', 'animist', 'polytheistic', 'primitive', 'uncivilized' and 'lower' – these were the Western intellectual categories devised to describe and interpret African religious tradition; each of these, African Theology would reject. In this respect, it is significant how virtually all the pioneer writers of this formative period of African Theology, though trained in theology on Western models, in their actual academic and intellectual careers in Africa became engaged in areas of study and writing for which no Western theological syllabus had prepared them, being 'forced to study and lecture on African Traditional Religion, ... and each one writing on it'.¹⁶

It is extraordinary, therefore, that the practitioners of African Theology in fact took on the challenge of re-interpreting African primal religions, approaching the subject 'not as historians of religion do, nor as anthropologists do, but as Christian theologians',¹⁷ and arriving at some startling conclusions. Thus when African theologians came to describe African primal religions, using terms like 'monotheism' or 'diffused monotheism', as Bolaji Idowu did with regard to Yoruba religion;¹⁸ or when John Mbiti, reversing the verdict of the Edinburgh World Missionary Conference, calls African pre-missionary religious experience a *praeparatio evangelica*,¹⁹ these writers are simply to be understood as drawing on their sense of belonging within Christian tradition and using categories which to them describe their understanding of their pre-Christian heritage when related to their Christian commitment. The failure in some of the criticisms expressed of African Theology may be related to the misconception about what the tasks of these African Christian writers ought to be. When John Mbiti's *Concepts of God in Africa* is objected to for its 'primary theological purpose', in that it 'is attempting to lay the basis for a distinctively African theology by blending the African past with the Judeo-Christian tradition',²⁰ or when his book on *The Prayers of African Religion* is

judged to be 'unsatisfactory' because 'it tends to blur the distinctiveness of African spirituality by seeking a *praeparatio evangelica* rather than the integrity of the cult-group',²¹ such criticisms also have the effect of obscuring the contributions which these African theologians could be making towards the understanding of what is, after all, their own religious heritage, which is, indeed, a proper task of theology. In both of these instances, the critics, in my view, have rightly interpreted the intention of the African theologian; it just happens that they do not approve of what they find. And yet, if it is the case that an underlying motivation of the quest for an African Christian Theology in the first place was an endeavour 'to draw together the various and disparate sources which make up the total religious experience of Christians in Africa into a coherent and meaningful pattern',²² then African Theology is more accurately judged by its own 'primary theological purpose' than by any extraneous criteria.

Once it is granted that African Theology's investigations into African primal religions are qualitatively different from the observations of anthropologists, then it becomes possible also to appreciate how, by its fundamental motivation, African Theology, in fact, may have been charting a new course in theological method. It is not that this course has no parallel in the totality of Christian scholarship, for the categories were being derived from Christian tradition, as much as from African experience and realm of ideas. Rather, this new theological approach had no counterpart generally in the more recent Western theological thought forged within the context of the notion of Christendom. At the heart of the new theological method would be the issue of identity, which would itself be perceived as a theological category, and which therefore entailed confronting constantly the question as to how and how far the 'old' and the 'new' in African religious consciousness could become integrated into a unified vision of what it meant to be African and Christian. The issue of identity in turn forced the theologian to become the *locus* of this struggle for integration through a dialogue which, if it was to be authentic, was bound to become personal and so infinitely more intense. A far cry from 'the clinical observations of the sort one might make about Babylonian religion', the African Christian theologian is quite often 'handling dynamite, his own past, his people's present'.²³ Hence the development of theological concern and the formulation of theological questions became linked as the unavoidable by-product of this process of Christian self-definition. Here, in fact, is the clue to Adrian Hastings' apt observation about African Theology becoming early 'something of a dialogue between the African Christian scholar and the perennial religions and spiritualities of Africa', but also the answer to his complaint that 'areas of traditional Christian doctrine which are not reflected in the African past disappear or are marginalised'.

A range of responses: indigenisers, biblicists and translators

Against this background of a common concern there emerged, nevertheless, divergences and differences, some of which were considerable.

While the theme of continuity was manifestly central, the terms in which the argument for it was pursued differed among its protagonists. The pace-setter in the argument for a radical continuity was, quite clearly, Bolaji Idowu. Curiously, the argument, founded on the continuity and the unity of God,²⁴ was coupled with an equally strong case made for a 'radical indigenisation of the Church',²⁵ on the grounds that the church in Africa, as a result of its peculiar historical connection with Western cultural dominance, was failing to develop its own theology, churchmanship, liturgy, or even discipline. In order to remedy this 'predicament' of dependence,²⁶ the African church needed to build its bridges to the 'revelation' given to Africans in their pre-Christian and pre-missionary religious traditions of the past.²⁷ Ostensibly intended to connect the 'old' and the 'new' in African religious experience, the fundamental postulate of the 'foreignness of Christianity' which underlies this position tended to lead it towards a minimalist reading of the newness of Christianity in Africa at the specific level of religious apprehension. Accordingly, African Christian experience emerged as not much more than a refinement of the experience of the 'old' religion,²⁸ and the vindication and the affirmation of African selfhood, which, at the start, had been conceived as the task of

the church, later came to be entrusted to the revitalization of the 'old' religions, with their 'God-given heritage of indigenous spiritual and cultural treasures'.²⁹ The kind of perspective which Idowu exemplified found an echo in later writers, such as Gabriel Setiloane,³⁰ Samuel Kibicho³¹ and Christian Gaba³² among others.

A less radical form of the same concern with continuity was exemplified in the work done by another 'pace-setter' and vindicator of the claims of a specific African religious consciousness, especially among the francophone, and predominantly Roman Catholic theologians, the Zairian scholar Mulago, and in the 'school' of thought which grew from his researches at the Centre d'Études des Religions Africaines in Kinshasa.³³ While he retained a firm conviction regarding the relevance of the Christian message for Africa, Mulago insisted nonetheless that the process of forging the new integration 'cannot be solid and viable except as it remains faithful to ancestral traditions and as it manages to be judicious in its contact with the civilisations of other peoples and with the revealed religion'.³⁴

In its more radical forms, this perspective, with its fundamental postulate of the *foreignness* of the Christianity that had been transmitted in Africa, as well as its minimalist view of the *newness* of the Christian faith in relation to African religious tradition, was always in danger of leading specifically *Christian* reflection into an impasse. In other words, if the Christian gospel brought little that was essentially new to Africa in religious terms, then in what lay the value and the rationale of the quest for a specifically *Christian* theological thought in Africa? The writings of Bolaji Idowu represent, in my view, an acute form of this dilemma.

At the other extreme of the spectrum was the radical discontinuity stoutly championed by Byang Kato, representing the thought of those Christian churches and groups linked with the 'Association of Evangelicals of Africa' (formerly also 'of Madagascar'), and who trace their spiritual heritage, in the main, to the missionary work of Western Faith Missions in Africa. Basing himself on a radical biblicism, Kato stressed the distinctiveness of the experience of the Christian gospel to such an extent that he rejected the positive evaluation of any pre-Christian religious tradition as a distraction from the necessary 'emphasis on Bible truth'.³⁵ Kato's insistence on the centrality of the Bible for the theological enterprise in Africa must be reckoned a most important contribution to African Christian thought. On the other hand, his outright rejection of the understanding of theology as a synthesis of 'old' and 'new' in a quest for a unified framework for dealing with culturally-rooted questions meant that Kato's particular perspective could not provide a sufficient foundation for a tradition of creative theological engagement of the sort that the African context seemed to be requiring. Before long, other evangelicals, without denying their commitment to the centrality of the Bible for the theological enterprise, were already seeking more positive ways whereby the Christian gospel might encounter African tradition.³⁶

However, the largest portion of the literature of African Theology has been in the middle ground between the two radical positions. In other words, as well as a widespread consensus that there does exist an African pre-Christian religious heritage to be taken seriously, there has been also the realization that it is important to recognize the integrity of African *Christian* experience as a religious reality in its own right. The view here is that Christianity, as a religious faith, is not intrinsically foreign to Africa. On the contrary, it has deep roots in the long histories of the peoples of the continent, whilst it has proved to be capable of apprehension by Africans in *African* terms, as is demonstrated by the vast, massive and diverse presence of the faith in African life. In other words, the eternal gospel has already found a local home within the African response to it, demonstrating that Christ had effectively become the integrating reality and power linking the 'old' and the 'new' in the African experience. This perspective, therefore, seemed to offer the most hopeful signs for the development of a sustainable tradition of an African Christian thought into the future, having firmly taken on board the critical notion that the Christian faith is capable of 'translation' into African terms without injury to its essential content. Consequently, the task of African Theology came to consist, not in 'indigenizing' Christianity, or theology as such, but rather, in letting the

Christian gospel encounter, as well as be shaped by, the African experience; and this task could proceed without anxiety about its possibility, but also without apology to Western traditions of Christianity, since the Western traditions did not enshrine universal norms. The overall goal of African Theology then, was to seek to show that there were genuinely and specifically African contributions – derived from the twin heritage of African Christianity, namely, the African primal tradition and the African experience of the Christian gospel – to be made to the theology of the universal church. Some of the best-known exemplars of this perspective became Harry Sawyerr,³⁷ John Mbiti³⁸ and Kwesi Dickson³⁹ among others.

The 1990s and beyond – into new directions

It will probably be helpful to consider the 1980s as a period of transition, as a number of the earlier writers appeared to bring their major work to a close (some, such as Idowu, seemed to have begun to do so even in the 1970s), and a new generation was emerging to continue from where the previous one had left off. While the broad concerns of the relationship of the primal religions to Christianity still retained some interest, all the indications were that a watershed had been passed, and that the fortunes of African Christianity had ceased to be beholden to Western assessments and interpretations of Africa. Not what Western missionaries did or said (or failed to do or say), but what African Christians would do with *their* Christian faith and commitment was now seen to provide the determining factors in the development of Christian thought in Africa.⁴⁰

Furthermore, an indication that the early concentration on the theological meaning of the pre-Christian primal heritage had been appropriate was the fact that a later generation of African theologians, while exploring other themes, were able to do so by taking off from genuinely African categories. This was most markedly so in relation to christological discussion, which had been rather conspicuously minimal or absent in earlier writings. It was interesting, however, that much of the 'new' concern with christological explorations began around categories such as Christ as *Healer*, as *Master of Initiation* and as *Ancestor* – all of which were derived directly from the apprehension of reality and of the transcendent as experienced within the world-views of African primal religions.⁴¹ Apart from Christology, the 'new' African Theology was also engaging seriously with subjects such as African Christian theological discourse and methodology,⁴² soteriology and conversion,⁴³ as well as the broad sweep of the history of Christian expansion and diffusion⁴⁴ and historical theology, in which issues in contemporary African Christianity were being related to the Christian tradition as a whole.⁴⁵ It seemed as though the growing realization that Africa, in the late 20th century, had become one of the heartlands of the Christian faith itself,⁴⁶ had substantially registered in African scholarship. In 1983, in an innovative investigation of West African Christian history, Lamin Sanneh felt able to conclude:

No one can miss the vitality of the [Christian] religion in much of the continent . . . African Christianity may well have entered upon a universal vocation in the onward march of the people of God in history, a destiny comparable to that of Gentile Christianity in the early Christian centuries.⁴⁷

It is no mean achievement, then, that African Theology, by the sort of agenda that it set for itself from the start, as well as by the method it evolved, managed to overturn virtually every negative verdict passed on African tradition by the ethnocentrism of the Western missionary enterprise; and it is a mark of that achievement that African Theology has succeeded by and large in providing an *African* re-interpretation of African pre-Christian religious tradition in ways which have ensured that the pursuit of a creative, constructive and perhaps also a self-critical, theological enterprise in Africa is not only viable, but in fact distinctly possible, as a variant of the universal and continuing encounter of the Christian faith with the realities of human societies and their histories.

African Theology – a feeling after new languages?

The era of African theological literature as reaction to Western misrepresentation is past. What lies ahead is a critical theologi-

cal construction which will relate more fully the widespread African confidence in the Christian faith to the actual and ongoing Christian responses to the life-experiences of Africans. Here, academic theological discourse will need to connect with the less academic but fundamental reality of the 'implicit' and predominantly *oral* theologies found at the grassroots of many, if not all, African Christian communities,⁴⁸ where, in the words of John Mbiti, 'much of the theological activity in Christian Africa today is being done as oral theology, from the living experiences of Christians . . . theology in the open from the pulpit, in the market-place, in the home as people pray or read and discuss the Scriptures. . . .'⁴⁹ This process may well validate Adrian Hastings' early observation that 'It is in vernacular prayer, both public and private, both formal and informal, and in the spirituality which grows up from such experience that the true roots of an authentic African Christianity will most surely be found.'⁵⁰

In this regard, it may even be suggested that it is in modern Africa where Christianity's essential character as an 'infinitely culturally translatable' faith⁵¹ has been most notably demonstrated in more recent Christian history. For unlike, say, in Islam, where the word of Allah is fully heard only through the medium of Arabic, in Christianity the perception of the word of God is achieved in our own mother-tongues (Acts 2:11). This recognition and its impact on missionary action had the effect of loosening the grip of any 'Western possessiveness' of the faith that there may have been in the process of its transmission.⁵² Whenever Western missionaries or a missionary society made the Scriptures available to an African people in that people's own language, they weakened, by the same token, whatever Western bias might have characterized their presentation and prescription of the gospel. African Christians, with access to the Bible in their mother-tongues, could truly claim that they were hearing God speak to them in their own language. It amounts to the awareness that God *speaks our language too*.

In Africa, the continent of language and languages, the significance of this has been far-reaching. For, as Lamin Sanneh has graphically put it, the import of Scripture translation and its priority in missionary work is an indication that 'God was not disdainful of Africans as to be incommunicable in their languages'.⁵³ This, Sanneh goes on, not only 'imbued African cultures with eternal significance and endowed African languages with a transcendent range'; it also 'presumed that the God of the Bible had preceded the missionary into the receptor-culture'. As, through the very process of Scripture translation, 'the central categories of Christian theology – God, Jesus Christ, creation, history – were transposed into their local equivalents, suggesting that Christianity had been adequately anticipated', they created, in indigenous languages, resonances far beyond what the missionary transmission conceived.

Through these local equivalents, Jesus Christ the Lord had shouldered his way into the African religious world, and could be discovered there through faith by all those who 'approach the spiritual world with requests for guidance and help in difficulties', even where these requests are 'formulated in traditional terms'.⁵⁴ This process is entirely consistent with what is reported to have taken place in New Testament times, as in Acts 14:15-18. For the centrality of Scripture translation points to the significance of African pre-Christian religious cultures as a valid carriage not only for the divine revelation, but also for providing the medium of Christian apprehension. Indeed, the possession of the Christian Scriptures in African languages, which could probably be regarded as the single most important element of the Western missionary legacy in Africa⁵⁵ – in some cases, the Scriptures becoming the foundation for a new literary culture which did not exist previously⁵⁶ – ensured that there did take place an effectual rooting of the Christian faith in African consciousness. This, in turn, ensured also that a deep and authentic dialogue would ensue between the gospel and African tradition, authentic in so far as it would take place, not in the terms of a foreign language or of an alien culture, but in the categories of local languages, idioms and world-views.

At this point, one may well express a concern as to why African Christian theologians have not followed the logic of the translatability of their faith into a full-blown recourse to African indigenous languages.⁵⁷ John Pobee showed awareness of the

problem in his *Toward an African Theology*. Though written in English, Pobee's book nevertheless made ample use of Akan wisdom-concepts and proverbial sayings, and he felt it necessary to remark: 'Ideally, African theologies should be in the vernacular. Language is more than syntax and morphology; it is the 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 as wide a circulation as possible.'⁵⁸ And perhaps it is to the same problem that the Cameroonian theologian Engelbert Mveng has attempted to respond, though somewhat polemically: 'When the objection is made that this theology is not written in native languages, we reply that it is *lived* in native languages, in the villages and in the neighbourhoods, before being translated into foreign languages by its own rightful heirs, the African theologians.'⁵⁹ Mveng's observation is useful as a pointer to the impact that a 'translatable faith', apprehended by and large through the medium of mother-tongues, has had in Africa. It arises from the realization that the emergence of a significant African theological tradition in the 20th century, even if it is articulated predominantly in 'foreign languages', is itself an indication that the African Christian life there is a substratum of vital Christian consciousness, and a sufficiently deep apprehension of Jesus Christ at the specific level of religious experience, itself of a theological nature, which alone can be the real basis for a viable activity of academic and literary theology. In that sense, the translated Bible has provided in Africa an essential ingredient for the 'birth of theology'.⁶⁰

The fact still remains that the seriousness with which African Theology will treat African mother-tongues as a fundamental medium in its theological discourse may well become an important test of the depth of the impact, not only of the Bible, but also of the Christian faith itself, in African life, and so determine the directions in which African Theology too will grow.

African Theology - a relevance beyond Africa?

Since African Theology developed also as an African response to Western views and interpretations of African pre-Christian traditions, it may be worth exploring whether the African Christian thought that has emerged may, in turn, have some relevance for the same process beyond Africa. The issue may hold some special interest for the present task of theology also in the West.

It is worth mentioning that when the Edinburgh Conference of 1910 concluded that the primal religions of Africa contained no 'preparation for the Gospel', the realization that the primal religions of the world have, in fact, provided the religious background of the faith of the majority of Christians in the 20 centuries of Christian history, including the Christians of Europe, still lay in the future.⁶¹ In this connection one may recall Paul Bohannon's observation that 'African culture shares more of its traits, its history, its social organisation with Europe than Asia shares with Europe, and certainly more than the North American Indians' share with Europe'.⁶² In relation to our present discussion, what is important is the fact that Europe shares with Africa a pre-Christian primal religious heritage. But it is in Africa (as in some other parts of the non-Western world) that the significance of the primal religions in the history of Christianity has been seen for what it is. In the case of Europe, Christian mission on the basis of substitution appears to have been pursued to such an extent that the primal traditions were virtually completely wiped out.

What this - together with the fact that there was no sustained interest in the use of indigenous European languages and their pre-Christian world-views for Christian purposes - has done to the total Western religious memory may probably never be fully recovered. In the light of the European story, one might be forgiven for thinking that the old primal religions of Europe quickly became a spent force. Yet the fact that Christians continued to name the days of the week after pre-Christian deities, that pre-Christian elements and notions made their way into the celebration of Christian festivals, and in several other ways too, must be indicators that the old beliefs had not entirely lost their hold upon people's minds. It may well be that in

Africa, the opportunity which was lost in Europe for a serious and creative theological encounter between the Christian and primal traditions can be regained.

Curiously, the fact that African Theology at its formative stage in the immediate post-missionary era focused on the theological interpretation of the African pre-Christian religious heritage may be the sign that such an encounter is possible; and it could be argued that in the process, African Theology has gained rather than lost. For, having been forced to do theology in the interface of their Christian faith and the perennial spiritualities of the African primal traditions of their own backgrounds, as well as having to internalize that dialogue within themselves, African theologians have recaptured the character of theology as Christian intellectual activity on the frontier with the non-Christian world, and hence as essentially *communicative, evangelistic and missionary*. It is this character of African theology which Dutch theologian and missiologist, Johannes Verkuyl, recognized when he wrote:

African theology does all the things which theology in general does, but in African theology (as in Asian) all these other functions are embraced in the missionary or communicative function. It is not primarily an intra-ecclesiastical exercise, but a discipline whose practitioners keep one question central: How can we best do our theology so that the Gospel will touch Africans most deeply?⁶³

But, perhaps even more significant in this African effort has been the underlying argument that space had to be made for a positive pre-Christian religious memory in the African Christian consciousness, on the basis that 'religion informs the African's life in its totality',⁶⁴ and that memory is integral to identity; and without memory, none of us knows who we are. As Dickson further explains, the theologian who fails to 'recognise the structures of religion as revealed by the historian of religions . . . may not notice the absence of religion from his theology. In the context of Africa, Christian theology must of necessity take account of that understanding of religion which bears the stamp of an authentic African contribution [that means, the primal religions]'.⁶⁵ To the extent that the African endeavour has achieved a measure of success, it may hold promise for a modern Western theology which is now also asking seriously how the Christian faith may be related, in a *missionary* sense, to Western culture.⁶⁶

It is this relocation of African primal religions 'at the very centre of the academic stage' which may prove a benediction to Western Christian theology as it also seeks to be communicative, evangelistic and missionary in its own context. For the African vindication of the theological significance of African primal religions, if it has validity, also goes to affirm that the European primal heritage was not illusory, to be consigned to oblivion as primitive darkness. The nature of the meeting of Christianity with European primal religions may hold more significance for understanding the modern West than it may have been assumed. A serious Christian theological interest in the European primal traditions and in the early forms of Christianity which emerged from the encounter with those traditions could provide a fresh approach to understanding Christian identity in the West too, as well as opening new possibilities for Christian theological endeavour today. And the primal world-view may turn out to be not so alien to the West after all, even in a post-Enlightenment era.

For the signs of what appears to be a *post-modernist* rejection of the Enlightenment in the West, which can be seen partly in the resurgence of the phenomenon of the occult as well as in the various 'quests' for spiritual experience and wholeness - even if without explicit reference to God - all bear the marks of elements of a primal world-view. These are sufficient indicators that a primal world-view, suppressed rather than encountered, redeemed and integrated, rises to haunt the future. In this connection, the viability of a Christian consciousness which retains its sense of the spiritual world of primal religions, as well as the theological encounter between the primal world-view and Christian faith that is evident in African Christianity, constitutes an implicit challenge to the notion that humanity can be fully defined in exclusively post-Enlightenment terms.

It seems, then, that the world's primal religions - in Europe as in Africa and elsewhere - the religious traditions which have

been most closely associated with the continuing Christian presence historically in the world so far, may yet again point the way into the Christian future, and specifically, the future of the Christian theological enterprise.⁶⁷ If this expectation proves right, the African contribution will have been an important one.

⁶⁷Desmond Tutu, 'Black Theology and African Theology – Soulmates or Antagonists?', in John Parratt (ed.), *A Reader in African Christian Theology* (London: SPCK, 1987), p. 54.

⁶⁸Adrian Hastings, *African Catholicism – An Essay in Discovery* (London: SCM Press, 1989), pp. 30–35.

⁶⁹Okot p'Bitek, *African Religions in Western Scholarship* (Kampala: East African Literature Bureau, 1970); see also Ali Mazrui's 'Epilogue'. See also Ali Mazrui, *The African Condition – A Political Diagnosis* (London: Heinemann, 1980).

⁷⁰Desmond Tutu, 'Whither African Theology?', in E. Fasholé-Luke et al. (eds.), *Christianity in Independent Africa* (London: Rex Collings, 1978), pp. 364–369.

⁷¹*Ibid.*, p. 366.

⁷²Adrian Hastings, *African Christianity – An Essay in Interpretation* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1976), p. 50f.

⁷³*Ibid.*, p. 52.

⁷⁴As an indication that Hastings was not alone in this concern, I recall that about 20 years ago, at an international theological conference, a Western missionary theological educator working in Africa admitted to me his bewilderment at having to teach 'African Theology' when virtually all the African theological literature he came upon seemed to be discussing and interpreting 'African Traditional Religions'. 'Where is the theology in that?' he inquired.

⁷⁵Adrian Hastings, *African Christianity*, p. 183.

⁷⁶See *The Missionary Message in relation to non-Christian religions – The World Missionary Conference 1910 – report of Commission IV* (Edinburgh & London: Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier, 1910), p. 24.

⁷⁷Kenneth Cragg, 'Conversion and Convertibility with special reference to Muslims', in John R.W. Stott & Robert Coote (eds.), *Down to Earth – Studies in Christianity and Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), p. 194.

⁷⁸E. Fasholé-Luke, 'The Quest for an African Christian Theology', in *The Ecumenical Review* Vol. 27 No. 3 (1975), p. 267.

⁷⁹John S. Mbiti, 'Some African Concepts of Christology', in Georg F. Vicedom (ed.), *Christ and the Younger Churches* (London: SPCK, 1972), p. 51.

⁸⁰Andrew F. Walls, 'Africa and Christian Identity', in *Mission Focus* Vol. 6 No. 7 (November 1978), p. 12.

⁸¹Adrian Hastings, *African Christianity – An Essay in Interpretation*, p. 50.

⁸²Andrew F. Walls, 'The Gospel as the Prisoner and Liberator of Culture', in *Faith and Thought* 108 (1–2) (1981), p. 49.

⁸³*Ibid.*, p. 50.

⁸⁴Bolaji Idowu, *Olódùmarè – God in Yoruba Belief* (London: Longman, 1962), p. 62; also his *African Traditional Religion – A Definition* (London: SCM Press, 1973), p. 168.

⁸⁵John S. Mbiti, 'The Future of Christianity in Africa (1970–2000)' in *Communio Viatorum: Theological Quarterly* Vol. 13, 1–2 (1970), p. 36.

⁸⁶Benjamin C. Ray, *African Religions – Symbols, Ritual and Community* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall Inc., 1976), p. 15.

⁸⁷P.R. McKenzie, 'Review of John Mbiti, *The Prayers of African Religion*', in *The Expository Times* Vol. 87 (1975–6), pp. 220–221.

⁸⁸E. Fasholé-Luke, 'The Quest for an African Christian Theology', p. 268.

⁸⁹Andrew F. Walls, 'The Gospel as the Prisoner and Liberator of Culture', p. 50.

⁹⁰This view was forcefully advanced in *Olódùmarè – God in Yoruba Belief* (1962); see also his 'Introduction' and article 'God', in Kwesi A. Dickson & Paul Ellingworth (eds.), *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1969), pp. 9–16, 17–29.

⁹¹Bolaji Idowu, *Towards an Indigenous Church* (London: OUP, 1965).

⁹²See Bolaji Idowu, 'The predicament of the Church in Africa', in C.G. Baëta (ed.), *Christianity in Tropical Africa* (London: OUP, 1968), pp. 415–440.

⁹³Bolaji Idowu, *Towards an Indigenous Church*, p. 26.

⁹⁴Bolaji Idowu, *Olódùmarè – God in Yoruba Belief*, p. 202; *African Traditional Religion – A Definition*, p. 209.

⁹⁵Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion – A Definition*, p. 205.

⁹⁶Gabriel M. Setiloane, *The Image of God among the Sotho-Tswana* (Rotterdam: A.A. Balkema, 1976); also his 'How the Traditional world-view persists in the Christianity of the Sotho-Tswana', in E. Fasholé-Luke et al. (eds.), *Christianity in Independent Africa*, pp. 402–412.

⁹⁷Samuel G. Kibicho, 'The Continuity of the African conception of God into and through Christianity: A Kikuyu case study', in E. Fasholé-Luke et al. (eds.), *Christianity in Independent Africa*, pp. 370–388.

⁹⁸Christian R. Gaba, 'Sacrifice in Anloreligion – Part I', in *Ghana Bulletin of Theology* Vol. 3 No. 5 (1968), pp. 13–19; 'Sacrifice in Anlo-religion – Part II', in *Ghana Bulletin of Theology* Vol. 3 No. 7 (1969), pp. 1–7; *Scriptures of an African people* (New York: Nok Publications, 1977).

⁹⁹For a useful survey of the earliest of the francophone Catholic 'response', see the collection of essays published as *Des prêtres noirs s'interrogent* (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1957). Mulago alone contributed two essays.

¹⁰⁰Mulago gwa Cikala Musharhamina, *La Religion Traditionnelle des Bantu et leur vision du monde* (2ème édition, Bibliothèque du Centre d'Etudes des Religions Africaines, 5, Kinshasa: Faculté de Théologie Catholique, 1980), p. 7.

¹⁰¹Byang H. Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa* (Kisumu: Evangel Publishing House, 1975), p. 169.

¹⁰²Tite Tiénou, 'Biblical Foundations for African Theology', in *Missiology* Vol. 10 No. 4 (October 1982), pp. 435–448.

¹⁰³Harry Sawyerr, *Creative Evangelism – Towards a new Christian Encounter with Africa* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1968).

¹⁰⁴John S. Mbiti, *New Testament Eschatology in an African Background – A Study of the Encounter between New Testament theology and African Traditional concepts* (London: OUP, 1970).

¹⁰⁵Kwesi Dickson, *Theology in Africa* (London: DLT/New York: Orbis Books, 1984).

¹⁰⁶See K. Appiah-Kubi & S. Torres (eds.), *African Theology en route* (New York: Orbis Books, 1979).

¹⁰⁷For examples of this development, see John S. Pobee, *Toward an African Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1979); Kwame Bediako, 'Biblical Christologies in the context of African Traditional Religions', in Vinay Samuel & Chris Sugden (eds.), *Sharing Jesus in the Two-Thirds World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), pp. 81–121 (first published by Partnership in Mission-Asia, Bangalore, 1982); also Kwame Bediako, *Jesus in African Culture – A Ghanaian perspective* (Accra: Asempa Publishers, 1990); Anselme T. Sanon & René Luneau, *Enraciner l'Evangile – Initiations africaines et pédagogie de la foi* (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1982); Charles Nyamiti, *Christ as our Ancestor – Christology from an African perspective* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1984); Bénézet Bujo, *African Theology in its social context* (New York: Orbis Books, 1992) (first published in German as *Afrikanische Theologie in ihrem gesellschaftlichen Kontext*, Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1986); see also Robert Schreier (ed.), *Faces of Jesus in Africa* (London: SCM Press, 1991), containing important contributions by Sanon and Nyamiti among others.

¹⁰⁸T. Tschibangu, *La théologie comme science au XXème siècle* (Kinshasa: Faculté de Théologie Catholique, 1980); see also his 'The Task of African Theologians', in K. Appiah-Kubi & S. Torres (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 73–79; O. Bimwenyi-Kweshi, *Discours théologique négro-africain* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1984).

¹⁰⁹See, for example, C.C. Okorocho, *The Meaning of religious conversion in Africa – The case of the Igbo of Nigeria* (Avebury: Gower Publishing Co. Ltd., 1987).

¹¹⁰See Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the message – the missionary impact on culture* (New York: Orbis Books, 1989).

¹¹¹See, for example, Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity – The impact of culture upon Christian thought in the second century and modern Africa* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1992).

¹¹²See David Barrett, 'AD 2000 – 350 million Christians in Africa', in *International Review of Mission* Vol. 59 (January 1970), pp. 39–54; Andrew F. Walls, 'Towards understanding Africa's place in Christian history', in J.S. Pobee (ed.), *Religion in a pluralistic society* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1976), pp. 180–189.

¹¹³Lamin Sanneh, *West African Christianity – The religious impact* (London: C. Hurst, 1983).

¹¹⁴See, for an example from Ghana, Afua Kuma, *Jesus of the deep forest – The praises and prayers of Afua Kuma* (compiled and translated from the original Twi by Fr. Jon Kirby, Accra: Asempa Publishers, 1981).

¹¹⁵John S. Mbiti, *Bible and Theology in African Christianity* (Nairobi: OUP, 1986), p. 229; see his earlier defence of 'oral theology' in his 'Cattle are born with ears, their horns grow later: towards an appreciation of African oral theology', in *Africa Theological Journal* 8(1) (1979), pp. 15–25.

¹¹⁶Adrian Hastings, *African Christianity – An Essay in interpretation*, p. 49.

¹¹⁷Andrew F. Walls, 'The Gospel as the prisoner and liberator of culture', p. 39; subsequently, see his 'The translation principle in Christian history', in Philip C. Stine (ed.), *Bible Translation and the spread of the Church – the last 200 years* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1990), pp. 24–39.

¹¹⁸Kenneth Cragg, *Christianity in World Perspective* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1968), pp. 15–28.

¹¹⁹Lamin Sanneh, 'The horizontal and the vertical mission – An African perspective', in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* Vol. 7 No. 4 (October 1983), p. 166.

¹²⁰P. Jenkins, 'The roots of African Church History – Some polemical thoughts', in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* Vol. 10 No. 2, p. 68.

¹²¹See Kwame Bediako, 'The Missionary Inheritance', in R. Keeley (ed.), *Christianity – A world faith* (Tring: Lion Publishing, 1985), pp. 303–311.

¹²²See L. Sanneh, *Translating the Message – the missionary impact on culture* (1989); see also Darell L. Whiteman, 'Bible Translation and social and cultural development', in Philip C. Stine (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 120–144.

¹²³See Kwame Bediako, 'The roots of African Theology', in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* Vol. 13 No. 2 (April 1989), p. 65.

¹²⁴John S. Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, p. 23.

¹²⁵Engelbert Mveng, 'African Liberation Theology', in L. Boff & V. Elizondo, *Third World Theologies – Convergences and Differences* (Concilium 199, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), p. 18.

¹²⁶Daniel von Allmen, 'The birth of theology – Contextualisation as the dynamic element in the formation of New Testament Theology', in *International Review of Mission* Vol. 64 (January 1975), pp. 37–52.

⁶¹Harold W. Turner, 'The Primal Religions of the world and their study', in Victor Hayes (ed.), *Australian Essays in World Religions* (Bedford Park, 1977), pp. 27-37; also Andrew F. Walls, 'Africa and Christian Identity', p. 11: 'It is the Primal Religions which underlie the Christian faith of the vast majority of Christians of all ages and all nations'. For an African scholar's view, see John S. Mbiti, 'African indigenous culture in relation to evangelism and church development', in R. Pierce Beaver (ed.), *The Gospel and Frontier Peoples* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1973), pp. 79-95.

⁶²Quoted in Robin Horton, 'Philosophy and African Studies', in David Brokensha & Michael Crowder (eds.), *Africa in the wider world* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1967), pp. 261-291; quotation on p. 263.

⁶³Johannes Verkuyl, *Contemporary Missiology - An Introduction* (ET by Dale Cooper) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), p. 277.

⁶⁴Kwesi Dickson, *Theology in Africa* (London/New York: Darton, Longman & Todd/Orbis Books, 1984), p. 29.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁶⁶See especially the recent writings of Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks - The Gospel and Western Culture* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1986); also 'Can the West be converted?', in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* Vol. 11 No. 1 (January 1987), pp. 2-7; and subsequently, *The Gospel in a pluralistic society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989); *Mission and the crisis of Western culture* (ed. Lesslie Newbigin) (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1989); and *Truth to tell - the Gospel as Public Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1991).

⁶⁷See the thought-provoking article by Andrew F. Walls, 'Structural problems in Mission Studies', in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* Vol. 15 No. 4 (October 1991), pp. 146-155.