



The Finality of Christ: From out of Africa

LEE E. SNOOK

University of Zimbabwe, Harare, Zimbabwe

For a Christian to deny the finality of Christ is tantamount to denying Christ altogether. The finality of Christ is entailed in the confession, "Jesus is the Christ." This is not a thesis to be debated; it is an article of faith to be explored.

Two factors compel such an exploration. The first is contextual, the second is conceptual.

I. FINALITY IN CONTEXT

A major impetus for reconsidering what the finality of Christ means arises when one observes how that term is perceived in a context such as Africa.

A. Finality as Cultural Imperialism

Virtually all the people of Africa identified Christianity with a powerful, alien culture whose people came from afar-invading their territory, and claiming it as their property. Some missionaries were surely "culture bashers." Even those who respected the indigenous culture benefited by their association with compatriots who had come to Africa to establish mines, railroads, vast farms, and commercial enterprises. The Ndebele, the inhabitants of the southern part of Zimbabwe, were the first people to encounter the invading pioneers and adventurers who had come north from South Africa accompanied by missionaries acting as translators. Little wonder that the Ndebele could not distinguish between those who brought the gospel and those who were looking for gold. Ndebele resistance to conversion was of a piece with their resistance to an overwhelming cultural invasion. And so they initiated a revolt in the 1890s and, together with the Shona, mounted the first "Chimurenga" or armed struggle against the settlers, a war for independence which would be taken up again in the 1970s and would, this

time, succeed in establishing an independent Zimbabwe in 1980.¹ Finality has too often been tied to "Western dreams of domination, mastery and certainty";² in Africa it is understandably difficult to dissociate Christian claims to finality from the Europeans' presumption that they had a right to dominate this continent. After the "native uprisings" of the 1890s some of the missionary societies embarked on a new strategy. Converts were now systematically isolated from their own culture. Christian schools, villages, compounds, and farms were instituted, thus alienating the African Christians from the African culture which many Europeans perceived as "heathen." The Africans were relatively defenseless against the "superior" European culture and its missionary religion.³

The colonial name for Zimbabwe was Rhodesia, and its namesake, the empire builder

Cecil John Rhodes, naturally found missionaries in Rhodesia very useful. In his scheme of things, colonial expansion and missionary expansion were a partnership of convenience. In fact, Rhodes once wrote that he considered a lone missionary in Rhodesia to be more valuable in pacifying the Africans from whom he was appropriating land and minerals than one hundred of his armed mercenaries.⁴ Similarly many of the missionaries adopted an air of superiority. When a Swedish bishop, Hjalmer Danell, visited so-called Rhodesia in 1904, he declared that the people's religion was "mainly...witchcraft and superstitious fear" and so not worthy either of serious study or of the effort required to understand it as an authentic religion.⁵ Not all missionaries shared the bishop's view, of course; but if the letters, diaries, and reports back home to the missionary agencies are indicative of the prevailing attitudes in Rhodesia, then one can conclude that most of them held the African to be utterly bereft of genuine religion or cultural sophistication.⁶

In Africa, therefore, explorations into the meaning of the confession that Christ is final must avoid any suggestion of cultural superiority or of domination over or contempt for others. The heritage of colonialism only began to fade in the 1960s as one after another "colony" won or was granted

¹For a careful account of Zimbabwe's war of liberation and for the history dating back to the 1890s, see David Martin and Phyllis Johnson, *The Struggle for Zimbabwe: The Chimurenga War* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981). Also, N. M. B. Bhebe, "Missionary Activity among the Ndebele and Kalanga, A Survey," *Christianity South of the Zambezi*, ed. J. A. Dachs (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1973). In December 1857, the famous missionary-explorer, David Livingstone who was the first European to see Zimbabwe's great cataract which he named Victoria Falls, gave a challenge, "I go to Africa to make an open path for commerce and Christianity. Do you carry out the work I have begun?" Quoted in G. Morehouse, *The Missionaries* (London: Methuen, 1973) 19.

²David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987) 114.

³Cf. Greg Cuthbertson, "The English-Speaking Churches and Colonialism," in *Theology and Violence, the South African Debate*, ed. Charles Villa-Vicencio (Johannesburg: Skotaville, 1987) 15-30. Also, N. D. Atkinson, "The Missionary Contribution to Early Education in Rhodesia," in *Christianity South of the Zambezi*, 83-96; in the same volume, D. G. H. Flood, "The Contribution of the London Missionary Society to African Education in Ndebeleland," 97-108.

⁴Cited in Hugo Söderström, *God Gave Growth: The History of the Lutheran Church in Zimbabwe, 1903-1980* (Gweru: Mambo, 1984) 195.

⁵*Ibid.*, 222.

⁶See Anthony Chennells, "The Image of the Ndebele and the Nineteenth-Century Missionary Tradition," in *Christianity South of the Zambezi*, vol. 2, ed. M. F. C. Bourdillon (Gweru: Mambo, 1977) 43-68; also, W. R. Peaden, *Missionary Attitudes to Shona Culture, 1890-1923* (Salisbury: Bardwell, 1970).

independence from Britain, Belgium, Spain, Portugal, or France. But colonialism is still a palpable influence in Africa.⁷ Christians on this continent understandably feel obliged to purge African theology of any vestige of that era.

B. Finality within Religious Pluralism

The religious situation in Africa contrasts sharply with that of North America or Europe. It is a key factor in reconstructing what the finality of Christ might mean in this context.

First, African people are deeply, even notoriously, religious.⁸ "Secular consciousness" has made no significant inroads into the awareness of even university-educated Africans. For Africans there is no separation between sacred and profane; they do not live or think in two

spheres. What African Americans call “soul” comes close to the phenomenon of African religion as all-pervasive and indelible. Therefore it is totally demeaning to call African religion superstitious or primitive. A university student told me a joke which the Shona people have about Europeans. A missionary scornfully asked an African, “When will your dead ancestor come to drink the beer which you pour on his grave?” To which came the reply, “When your ancestors come to smell the flowers which you put on their graves.”

Secondly, the religions of Africa are as numerous as the language groups found there. “African Traditional Religion” is a relatively new academic field of study, but it does not refer to a more or less coherent body of beliefs and behaviors as with other world religions. “ATR” is comprised of many largely oral traditions which share some broad features. Christian theologians in Africa have become keenly interested in studying these religions as sources for constructing their own theologies, and thus they are supplementing the work already done by the anthropologists and sociologists who have tended to dominate the field.⁹ Experts in ATR, on the other hand, are suspicious that Christian theologians will smuggle biblical parallels into African religions which emerged quite independently of Israel.¹⁰ Together, these scholars have demolished many of the popular notions about the religions of Africa. For example, contrary to what many think, Africans do not “worship” their ancestors—just as Catholics do not worship saints or Lutherans worship Luther. In truth, the ancestors do have power, authority, and influence in the daily life of Africans—as does Luther, whose name can still be invoked to settle a dispute in some circles—and with considerable effect.

A third factor which touches on our exploratory task is the phenomenal

⁷Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (Dar es Salaam: Tanzania Publishing House, 1972).

⁸See Ambrose Moyo, “Religion and Political Thought in Independent Zimbabwe,” in *Church and State in Zimbabwe*, ed. C. Hallencreutz and A. Moyo (Grewu: Mambo, 1988) 377-395; J. S. Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969).

⁹David Lan, *Guns and Rain: Guerrillas and Spirit Mediums in Zimbabwe* (Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1985); G. H. Muzorewa, *The Origins and Development of African Thought* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985), especially chap. 6.

¹⁰For example, J. G. Platvoet, *Comparing Religions: A Limitative Approach* (The Hague: Mouton, 1982).

growth of Christianity in Africa. Much of this rapid expansion has been accomplished through the so-called Independent Church Movement.¹¹ As with ATR, the independent churches have captured the interest of anthropologists, sociologists, and even political scientists working in Africa. Using the standard of classical doctrinal formulations, a Western theologian would assess the independent churches as heterodox at best. But for the most part they are authentically African and authentically Christian, which is to say that they vigorously assert their African-ness to distinguish themselves from missionary churches, and they, with equal vigor, separate themselves from the practices and beliefs of African Traditional Religion to stress their Christian-ness.¹² The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zimbabwe, for example, is a missionary church, and as such it is heavily dependent on financial assistance from the Church of Sweden Mission and from the Lutheran World Federation in Geneva, while at the same time it mirrors the liturgical patterns, the administrative structures, the pastoral education and practice of its Swedish founders.¹³ By contrast, the huge Zionist Christian Church or the Apostolic Faith Mission—to mention but two of the independent churches which are many times larger than the

ELCZ—are genuinely self-supporting, self-directing, and self-propagating.

Religion in Africa, then, is integral to every aspect of society. It is immensely diverse, lively, and spirited, even volatile and destructive at times. And we have not touched at all on the impact of Islam on this continent!

In America theologians have to argue very hard to persuade people that there are religious dimensions to, let us say, politics or economics or ideology or any of a variety of public issues, but in Africa the role of religion is taken for granted. A glaring instance is *apartheid*. Both defenders and opponents see South Africa's racist policy as a religious issue.¹⁴ Another instance is Zimbabwe. The first president of the country after independence (from 1980 to 1987) was the Rev. Dr. Canaan Banana who is the only Zimbabwean theologian of international stature. His books and speeches have significantly shaped the political awareness of this country. Even when Zimbabweans disagreed with their president's theological stance, they did not take it amiss that a political figure should use his high office as a pulpit.¹⁵

One might expect that Africans would reject the religion of the colonials as soon as the white minority were toppled from power. This has not happened. Even though the government of Zimbabwe bases its policies on Marxist-Leninist principles, it does not accept the Marxist dictum that religion is the opiate of the people. Religious groups are granted complete freedom, and at the same time they are expected to assume responsibility as partners in creating a new social and economic order. So religion in all its

¹¹For example, see M. L. Daneel, *Old and New in Southern Shona Independent Churches*, 2 vols. (The Hague: Mouton, 1974).

¹²See Muzorewa, *Origins and Development*, chap. 6.

¹³Cf. Söderström, *God Gave Growth*.

¹⁴Albert Nolan, *God in South Africa: The Challenge of the Gospel* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1988).

¹⁵For a discussion of Banana's influence in Zimbabwe and a review of Banana's books and addresses, see Paul Gifford, "The Role of the President: The Theology of Canaan S. Banana," in *Church and State in Zimbabwe*, 411-440.

plurality flourishes in the southern region of Africa in spite of the negative features of Christianity's history during the colonial period.¹⁶

II. FINALITY AS A PARADOXICAL CONCEPT

Leaving aside for a moment the specific case of Africa where it is the *context* which compels a Christian to explore the meaning of finality, the compulsion to reflect would still arise because finality as a *concept* does not automatically define itself in a final way.

"Finality" arouses expectations that all ambiguity has been vanquished, and yet the plurality of meanings remains. What was radically new in the writings compiled by earliest Christians is the claim that Jesus had completed, fulfilled, and finished all that had been promised, and yet the light of that new and final testimony was refracted into a rainbow of many christological colors called the New Testament. The finality of Christ does not eliminate all ambiguity and plurality, but instead has stimulated and still provokes a multiplicity of interpretations. Every Christian lives in the paradox of finality, and is caught in the push and pull of conflicting interpretations. On the one side is a literal, arrogant, reductionistic certainty in full flight from ambiguity; on the other is a vague, woolly, tolerant, relativistic—but civil—

avoidance of commitment.

There are many religions but there is only one Christ—who, if not final, would not be Christ. All candidates who would render a final judgement on the meaning of finality are, alas, historically conditioned mortals who are unfit for the honor of final judge. And so, the only one who remains, who alone defines Christ as final, is the one named Jesus of Nazareth, who also was born of woman. Yet the Nazarene is the final word on the question: Who is Christ?

For a Christian nothing can be more certain than this: Jesus alone is the final word on the reality of Christ and hence on what finality means. The many christologies about him are all relative and only to a greater or lesser degree adequate and plausible. The many (christologies) testify to the (relativity of each) one, and (indirectly) to the (final) One. For the Christian nothing is more certain than that Christ is final, but nothing is less certain than what it means.¹⁷ The finality is manifest in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Believers must ceaselessly explore what that means, knowing all the while that none of their efforts can be the final word on the subject.

¹⁶During the war of liberation, Robert Mugabe (later to be the first prime minister and since 1988 the first executive president) said of the churches that they should understand that the freedom fighters were not anti-Christian but anti-colonial and that “the churches should assist us in attaining the objective of a just society....” Cited by Sr. Janice McLaughlin, “Refugees and Religion in the Mozambican Camps:” in *Church and State in Zimbabwe*, 137. Banana said to the churches after independence, “You have nothing to fear from the socialist government...Cooperate in projects of development,” cited in Gifford, “The Role of the President,” 430. For an excellent overview of colonialism throughout Africa, see Bruce Fetter, *Colonial Rule in Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1979), especially 3-20.

¹⁷See Ninian Smart, “On Knowing What Is Uncertain,” in *Knowing Religiously*, ed. Leroy S. Rouner (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1985). Smart observes, “The paradox is this: on the one hand nothing seems more certain than faith or more compelling than religious experience. On the other hand, nothing seems less certain than anyone particular belief system, for to anyone system there are so many vital and serious alternatives” (76).

III. STRATEGIES FOR REDEFINING FINALITY

Revelation singles out the Church as the *locus* of true religion...[this] does not mean that the Christian religion is the true religion, fundamentally superior to all other religions.¹⁸

These words of Barth set the terms of the debate on Christianity and other religions and still challenge theologians with the question: If the truth has been revealed in Christ, how can that truth be related to others' truths without implying an arrogant superiority toward other religions? For Barth “true religion” can only be created by grace, and grace is a revelation of God. Grace, thus defined as revelation, cannot be used to justify religious intolerance. After all, it is God's grace, not ours. However, because revelation has been given to Christians, they are not in the dark about the truth and cannot be tolerant relativists without betraying the truth which has been revealed.¹⁹

Although Barth warned against using revelation as justification for religious intolerance, it fell to subsequent theologians to propose that Christians can actually learn something about the truth of Christ by being open to other religions. In its “Declaration on the Relation of the Church

to non-Christian Religions,” the second Vatican Council in 1965 stated that the Catholic Church not only respects other religions but their teachings often reflect the brightness of that Truth which is the light of all.”²⁰ And in 1974 the Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews stated that “while the Church must preach Jesus Christ to the world,” its witness must not give offense, and it must show “the strictest respect” and “great openness of spirit.”²¹

There is a consensus among many theologians that Christianity cannot abandon its commitment to Jesus Christ as the truth, but at the same time it must eschew all forms of intolerance, closed-mindedness, arrogance, superiority, absolutism, and exclusiveness. For example, Carl Braaten has written that “we should be open to exploring what the non-Christian religions can contribute to our understanding of the universal identity of Jesus Christ.”²² Other religions have something to teach Christians, enlarging their understanding of the truth given to them in the gospel. Braaten explicitly encourages openness to other religions, but does not go so far as Karl Rahner who, in a lecture on “Open Catholicism,” urged the church to take a more positive attitude toward the plurality of other religions. “It would be wrong to regard the pagan as someone who has not yet been touched in any way by God’s grace and truth.”²³ The finality of Christ, then, is not exclusivistic. What has been explicitly revealed in Christ is implicit outside the church.

¹⁸Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 1, pt. 2 (New York; Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1956) 298.

¹⁹Ronald Thiemann has revived the debate on revelation in his much noted *Revelation and Theology: The Gospel as Narrated Promise* (Notre Dame; University of Notre Dame, 1985).

²⁰Reprinted in John Hick and Brian Hebblethwaite, eds., *Christianity and Other Religions* (Philadelphia; Fortress, 1981) 81-82.

²¹Reprinted in G. H. Anderson and Thomas F. Stransky, eds., *Faith Meets Faith* (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 1981) 183-184.

²²Reprinted in Anderson and Stransky, *ibid.*, 85.

²³Reprinted in Hick and Hebblethwaite, 75.

It was in this context that Rahner made his famous observation about anonymous Christians.

Another Catholic, Paul Knitter, has pushed the theme of openness to the point where some might suppose he has abandoned all claims to finality.²⁴ By his account, twentieth-century theology has moved from a church-centered to a christo-centered understanding of its mission and now, in this age of heightened awareness of religious pluralism, is moving toward a theocentric position. He cites with approval the work of James Dunn in New Testament studies: no single apostolic assessment of Christ was adequate, but a diversity of formulations was required; these several christologies, while not strictly compatible with each other, do not render each other invalid. Knitter also draws upon Stanley Samartha: only God is absolute, all historical religions by nature are relative, and so the incarnation can be “final” only in the sense that here the absolute God relativizes Godself. What Knitter most strongly opposes is any notion that Christ’s finality absolutely eliminates the claims of other religions to be genuine manifestations of God. With John Hick he would say that Jesus is wholly God but Jesus is not the whole of God: *totus Deus* but not *totum Dei*, hence there may be other names than Jesus by which to be saved.

Today’s theologians are, then, intolerant of intolerance, absolutely opposed to absolutistic interpretations of finality; they exclude all forms of exclusivism and have closed minds toward any who are closed-minded. While not all are as open as Hick, Knitter, or Rahner, most would

agree with Langdon Gilkey that a theologian today has a “divine covenant with modernity,” just as patristic theologians had a divine covenant with Greek thought.²⁵ By definition Christian theology must deal with the modern situation created by many religions and many cultures. Intolerance, absolutism, exclusivistic isolation, and closed-mindedness are not options for a Christian theologian, because the world for which Christ died is pluralistic, dynamic, open, and historical. It is the vocation of the theologian to have a “divine covenant” with such a world.

But if Christian pluralism means taking the world seriously, how does the Christian take Christ seriously? A covenant with the pluralistic world surely cannot mean that all possible ways of being committed are equal.

Does anyone really wish that Luther, instead of simply stating, “Here I stand, I can do no other,” had added *sotto voce*, “But if it really bothers you, I will move”? Any pluralist who cannot learn from Luther’s classic interpretation of Christianity can hardly learn from any interpretation of religion at all.²⁶

The question above persists: How does the “Christian pluralist” take Christ with utmost seriousness? How can one interpret the finality of Christ in a pluralistic world?

²⁴The discussion of Knitter is drawn from his *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes toward the World Religions* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1985), especially chapter 8, “The Theocentric Model.”

²⁵Langdon Gilkey, *Society and the Sacred: Toward a Theology of Culture in Decline* (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 166.

²⁶David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, 91.

IV. IN PRAISE OF PLURALISM AND OF CHRIST’S FINALITY

A pluralistic approach to the finality of Christ challenges any theologian who would rely too heavily on a presumed universal structure or metaphysical system. Radical pluralism assumes no such common ground, no common intellectual structure of *logos*. Paul Martinson notes that the “differences among the faiths...[may]...at their deepest be so vast as to be unbridgeable.” In that case the only approach to the many religions is mutual respect and interaction,²⁷ but one cannot presume that a common ground already exists or that the “other,” somehow deep down, is already connected to that ground. Deep down there may be no common ground. For a radical pluralist, cultures are not like islands which are connected by the ocean floor. In fact, cultures and religions are not all that secure, because they are the creatures or the “constructions” of fallible humans struggling to defend themselves against death and adversity. And when cultures do interact, when religions do come into contact with one another, the essential instability of these groups is all the more evident.

Here in Africa I have been intrigued by one proposal for taking *both* Christ *and* radical pluralism seriously. Mark Kline Taylor, in addressing the question which radical pluralism raises for a doctrine of Christ, utilizes the cultural anthropologists’ notion of liminality.²⁸ The liminal is that unstable zone between the boundaries of cultures; it is that area where representatives of different societies meet without benefit of a common “foundational perspective” and where all standards, like history or experience, are themselves mediated through interpretation. How can people inform one another of their respective worlds when in the nature of the case the religion

and culture of neither can be the preferred or normative one for the other? In such a circumstance, each informant must risk transmitting his or her own world through a tentative *interpretation* for the sake of the most preliminary communication with the other. Such a new interpretation can be little more than a tentative medium for interaction and dialogue. As an interpretation of the informant's world, it is itself shaky ground because it did not exist before. It cannot be seen as a sturdy bridge already provided or as the ocean floor between islands or as the eternal ground of being. In the zone of liminality there are only sheer differences which can be bridged, if at all, by the participating informants mutually constructing a new interpretation which did not exist before.

The New Testament, according to Taylor, presents Christ as a liminal figure. Christ is not reducible, without remainder, to a conventionally defined, typically pictured, first-century rabbi living in Galilee under Roman military occupation. Whatever is Jewish about him is highly qualified so that he stands out from his culture. He has no place to lay his head. The language of the New Testament depicts Jesus as extravagant, paradoxical, hyperbolic, persistently going far beyond the limits of ordinary cultural expectation. The effect on the readers is dislocation—invitation into the region

²⁷Paul Martinson, *A Theology of World Religions* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1987) 222-223.

²⁸Mark Kline Taylor, "In Praise of Shaky Ground: The Liminal Christ and Cultural Pluralism," *Theology Today* 43/1 (1986) 36-51.

of liminality, where they are no longer able to feel quite at home in their customary world. Christian existence, says Taylor, is liminal because the Christian community exists "in Christ," and Christ is the liminal Christ, the One outside the boundaries.

Radical pluralism points us to the essential instability and relativity of every culture and every religion. Liminality as described by anthropologists is haunted by non-being and by the absence of final security. Jesus comes as one who acts as the outsider, the liminal figure who is, finally, nailed to the cross—outside the city. The New Testament is an invitation to live in Christ, to live outside the apparent security of this or that humanly constructed culture symbolized by the city.

Knitter, Hick, and others seem offended by the presumption of claiming finality for Christ. They question the appropriateness of that claim for Christ. But does the New Testament warrant such a claim? C. F. D. Moule writes:

The New Testament specialist...sooner or later...is bound to ask himself what his findings mean for Christian doctrine in the larger setting...and indeed in relation to the whole universe....What bearings do his findings have upon...the "finality" of Christ? "Finality" is a question-begging word...but in any case the question is whether God's continuing revelation of himself in man's constantly widening experiences may still be meaningfully described as "in Christ."²⁹

In Moule's opinion the gospel account of Jesus, especially according to Mark, is a portrayal of one who does exceptional things, even spectacular deeds, but "seldom...for the sake of displaying his power." The deeds of Jesus were precisely *not* aimed at securing his own status

as mandated by the cultural and religious norms of his day. Jesus, in other words, did not try to “succeed” by fulfilling the criteria of late Judaism. Instead,

Christians of the New Testament...[described]...Jesus and his ministry in terms of the vocation of Israel. What Jesus was meant to be in relation to God, Israel failed to be; but Jesus had succeeded.³⁰

The failure of Jesus to satisfy cultural expectations—as a consequence of which he was rejected—is his success, because in that failure he did what no other person had done: he “gathered into himself the destiny of all Israel and so of all mankind.” The outsider, the liminal Christ, *finally* succeeded in accomplishing what God had, from the beginning, willed for Israel on behalf of the whole world.

What all this seems to come to is this: the uncontested fact of cultural and religious pluralism relativizes all religions and cultures, and so undermines all alleged “certainties” about the finality of anyone of them. Finality, if it is to be found anywhere, is in Christ named Jesus who is on the outside with no place to lay his head. A Christian, then, cannot help but be a pluralist, a pluralist with a difference. That is, a Christian follows Christ outside, out into the insecure zone, the shaky ground of liminality, with no security except faith that Christ is already there; here Christians—in obedience to Christ—must seek to construct, with persons of other religions and cultural

²⁹C. F. D. Moule, *The Origin of Christology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1977) 142.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 151.

commitments, a way to understand one another, and even perhaps become one in Christ.

V. POSTSCRIPT: CHRIST IN AFRICAN THEOLOGY

African theologians are self-consciously trying to avoid reproducing christologies which are echoes of theologies from the Northern hemisphere. For example, Kofi Appiah-Kubi of Ghana insists that christologies of Africa for African Christians must be

practical, dynamic, living and basically based on real life experience and comprehensive African notions of religion and of God taking off faithfully from the gospel message and African culture....Their theology is therefore very different from the liberal, systematic, intellectually arid and philosophical theology born of belief in “pie in the sky when you die.”³¹

Theologians in Africa are intent on finding the relevant and appropriate thought forms and images that will best serve christology in Africa. Some of their proposals will sound strange to Americans: for example, Christ as the Ancestor.³² John Pobee would stress Christ the Chief, avoiding associations with King Leopold of Belgium or Edward of England, monarchs of the colonial period.³³

It seems to me that African Christians do not have the same difficulties with pluralism as those Westerners who still find it hard to shake off imperialistic habits of thought. It is not

uncommon for Africans to be fluent in three, four, and five languages, at least one of them the language of the former colonial regime. “The vernacular principle” is an important element in the spectacular growth and the confusing variety of forms of African Christianity.

Much of the heat with which mission has been attacked as Western cultural imperialism begins to dissipate when we apply the vernacular principle.³⁴

Lamin Sanneh’s point here is that even culturally insensitive missionaries to Africa were totally committed to learning the vernacular languages and translating the Bible into those languages. The effect of that missionary

³¹Kofi Appiah-Kubi, “Christology,” in *A Reader in African Christian Theology*, ed. John Parratt (London: SPCK, 1987) 79. Three other anthologies of African theological essays should be noted: *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs*, ed. Kwesi Dickson and Paul Ellingworth (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1969); *African Theology en Route*, ed. K. Appiah-Kubi. (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979); *New Testament Christianity for Africa and the World*, ed. M. Glasswell and E. W. FasholeLuke (London: SPCK, 1974). Here one should also mention essays by Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflections on Christianity in Africa* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1986). The most accessible introduction, in very brief form, to the general area of Christian history and thought in Africa is by a former professor at the University of Zimbabwe, Adrian Hastings, *African Christianity* (New York: Seabury Press, 1977).

³²Charles Nyamiti, *Christ as Our Ancestor* (Gweru: Mambo, 1984).

³³John Pobee, *Toward an African Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979). “In our Akan Christology we propose to think of Jesus as the...linguist, who in all public matters was the Chief, God, and is the first officer of the state, in this case, the world. This captures something of the Johannine portrait of Jesus as the Logos, being at one and the same time divine and yet subordinate to God” (95).

³⁴Lamin Sanneh, “Pluralism and Christian Commitment,” *Theology Today* 45/1 (1988) 27. A native of Gambia, Sanneh is associate professor at Harvard’s Center for the Study of World Religions.

strategy was to demonstrate to the peoples of Africa that *any* language could be the language of revelation and worship, that the plurality of languages (and thus of cultures) is compatible with the universal message of salvation. While the colonial regimes demeaned the cultures of Africa, the missionaries—often in spite of themselves—were “de-stigmatizing” every culture and the people associated with them.

Christian pluralism was introduced by the missionaries with the effect, says Sanneh, that all the cultures of Africa were elevated by the gospel while at the same time they were all de-sacralized; all the languages were accepted as fit vehicles for the gospel, while all were relativized; all nationalistic strivings for emancipation were, at least indirectly, legitimated while at the same time no nation—white or black—could be venerated as ultimate or could be the final source of security. African Christians seem to be very clear on this point: the missionaries did not bring God to Africa, but they did bring God’s final Word, Jesus, and in this Christ they find God’s promise of ultimate security.