

AN AFRICAN CONTRIBUTION TO THE CHRISTIAN DEBATE ON RELIGIOUS  
PLURALISM

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# CONTENTS

<i>Chapter</i>	<i>Page</i>
<b>1: An African Contribution to the Christian Debate on Religious Pluralism</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 Introduction.	
1.2 The Central Argument	
1.3 Significance of the study	
1.4 Methodology	
1.4.1 The use of literature	
1.4.2 The Theological Method	
1.5 Overview of the following chapters	
1.6 Problems of Definition	
<b>2: The Christian Debate on Religious Pluralism</b>	<b>15</b>
2.1 Christian Paradigms in the Theology of Religions	
2.1.2 The Exclusivist Paradigm	
2.1.3 The Inclusivist Paradigm	
2.1.4 The Pluralist Paradigm	
2.2 Christology: The Central Issue	
2.2.1 Ontological Christology	
2.2.2 Theocentric Christology	
2.3 The Soteriological Argument	
<b>3: The Contribution of African Traditional Religion to the Debate</b>	<b>31</b>
3.1 African Absence from the Debate	
3.1.1 Terms of Reference of the Debate	
3.1.2 Effects of Colonialism	
3.2 The Theology of Religions in African Traditional Religion	
3.2.1 Setiloane	
3.2.1.1 Creation Stories	
3.2.1.2 Community	
3.2.1.3 The human person- "Umntu-Motho"	
3.2.1.4 Setiloane's Assessment of Other Religions	
3.2.1.5 Setiloane's Contribution to the Debate	
3.3 John Mbiti	
3.3.1 God	
3.3.2 Salvation	
3.3.3 Mbiti's Contribution to the Debate	
<b>4: Towards An African Theology of Religions</b>	<b>56</b>
4.1 The Christological Question	
4.2 Concepts of Christ in Africa	
4.3 Towards an African Theology of Religions	
4.4 Conclusion	
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>64</b>

## CHAPTER 1

### AN AFRICAN CONTRIBUTION TO THE CHRISTIAN DEBATE ON RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

#### 1.1 Introduction.

The debate on religious pluralism has come to occupy the centre stage of theological discourses in recent years. Those who are engaged in these debates make the point that because of plurality, pluralism<sup>1</sup> is a phenomenon that cannot be ignored given the socio-cultural and religious nature of our contemporary world.

Willem Saayman, noting the reality of our today's existence asserts, that:

Altering historical realities such as shifts in economic or military power, changes in regimes, etc, result in ever-mutating relationships between adherents of differing religious convictions (Saayman 1995:2).

But not only that, the movement of people from one part of the world to another either through political or economic reasons and through refugee movements has come to mean that we no longer live in isolation. This confirms that,

our traditions of faith no longer live in isolation from one another. .... The result of this interpenetration of communities is that we can no longer neatly divide up the world in terms of religious affiliation. The map of the world in which we now live cannot be colour-coded according to its Christian, Muslim and Hindu identity but each part of the world features a mosaic of colours and textures of the whole religious reality of planet earth (Lubbe 1995:163-164).

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<sup>1</sup> The difference between religious plurality and religious pluralism is that the former simply recognises the presence of more than one religion in a particular geographic location or society. The latter recognises the plural nature of religion in a given geographical or social context but goes beyond this mere recognition (plurality) to include meaningful relationships in the midst of diversity (pluralism) (Lubbe 1995:163-165).

These developments and changing circumstances require an in-depth theological reflection that takes into account what it means for the Church to be a Church in mission. Such a reflection should however be one that is unbiased but one that will take seriously the existence of all religious traditions and not by way of picking and choosing.

It does seem that the Christian Church has several options open to it to enable it to deal with the dynamics and the nature of the present religiously plural world. But these options have to be weighed against their consequences and impact and whether they are in concert with God's purpose of creating a new humanity. In Africa, the Christian Church can choose to adopt an arrogant path whereby it refuses to accept the reality of the presence of African Traditional Religion.<sup>2</sup> It can also acknowledge the presence of these religions but refuse to enter into dialogue with them and thereby creating an intolerant human society.

The Christian Church also has the option of classing religious traditions and thereby picking and choosing. This latter route creates a problem of marginalizing people who belong to certain religions. This is particularly the case in regard to African Traditional Religion. The objection to the marginalization and therefore the exclusion of African Traditional Religion from the debate on religious pluralism is therefore the central argument of this research.

## **1.2 The Central Argument**

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<sup>2</sup> The term African Traditional Religion will be used throughout this study. The term as used here refers to "the religious values, beliefs and practices which derive from the religious systems of non-Christian Africa" (Shorter 1975:1). The use of the term "Traditional" is used to make a distinction between the type of African religion discussed in this study and other African religions, e.g. Christianity and Islam, for these too are African religions (see Mbiti 1969 : xii). Therefore the term does not refer to "primitivity" but to "originality". The use of "Religion" in the singular is preferred because of the common elements that are characteristic of African religious values, beliefs and practices. This is not done without the recognition that African peoples have different religious systems. However, in view of this study, the similarities are more important than the differences. The plural "African Religions" or "African Traditional Religions" will be retained where they appear in a quotation.

African Traditional Religion is marginalized or totally ignored in the contemporary Christian debate on religious pluralism. This marginalization occurs at two levels: 1. The contributions of African Christian theologians are not considered in most of the influential publications; 2. The interaction between Christianity and African Traditional Religion is not "factored into the equation", since African Traditional Religion are not regarded as one of the "world religions" or "living faiths".

Often when inter-religious dialogue is talked of it is usually only in terms of Christianity and the so-called "world religions" or "living faiths". It is maintained that this dialogue "deals with truth and diversity at the borders of Christian identity in attempting to understand how Christian faith relates to other religious traditions" (Motte 1995:85). This conviction has formed the basis for advocating religious pluralism, recognizing that there should be a place for Truth and Diversity (Motte 1995:85).

Exponents of religious pluralism argue that God is bigger than Christianity. They correctly concede that the mystery of God cannot be restricted to one religious experience. This demands that there be mutual respect among peoples of differing faith traditions as people move towards a pluralist understanding of God (Motte 1995:86).

The study will attempt to show that despite the valid arguments that are advanced in favour of religious pluralism, the debate has remained between Christianity and the so-called "world religions" but has not been honest in terms of including African Traditional Religion.

It is appropriate that one should outline what one suspects to be the source of the contradiction that has led to the exclusion of African Traditional Religion from this debate. African Traditional Religion, I want to argue, has been accepted as a fact of religious plurality but not for religious pluralism. The terms of plurality are well defined by Lubbe. Plurality refers to,

the presence of more than one religious tradition in a particular society, without necessarily implying the existence of any kind of relationship between at least some of the different components constituting plurality..... religious plurality, does not necessarily imply the presence of religious pluralism (Lubbe 1995:162).

Further,

Diversity or plurality does not have to affect me. I can observe and recognise it. I can acknowledge the existence of others and even take some interest in 'them', in the third person. This does not imply reciprocity or togetherness (Lubbe 1995:165).

Scholarship, including Western scholarship, has studied African Traditional Religion but has not attempted to afford it recognition as a religion on its own terms. African Traditional Religion has been seen as objects of study and not as faiths to live by (Samartha 1991:3). This, in my opinion, accounts for the exclusion of African Traditional Religion from the consideration of religious pluralism. The debate on pluralism has focused on "the encounter of the mystery of Jesus Christ with the great religious traditions of humanity" (Dupuis 191:ix). It is the qualifier "great" that demonstrates the reason for this exclusion. It suggests that Jesus Christ has a different texture of encounter with "non-world religions", which are regarded as insignificant.

African Traditional Religion poses a unique world-view different from that of the West and the East. However, the difference in world-view does not justify the exclusion of African Traditional Religion from the debate. If such an exclusion is based on the fact that the African world-view is different, it could be equally argued that the Buddhist world-view is different from both the Christian and Muslim world views, but nevertheless has been part of the debate. If African Traditional Religion is different in structure and world view and if this is the term of reference for the debate, then there is good news! The good news is that African Traditional Religion will add a new dimension and insights to the debate on religious pluralism.

Parrinder (1974) raises an objection to relegating African Traditional Religion to "primitivity" and therefore treating it as a less significant phenomenon. There is little doubt that such a

perception about African Traditional Religion accounts for itsr apparent marginalization. Parrinder's observation is that:

It has merely too often been assumed that, because of the comparative isolation of tropical Africa till recent times, Africa must somehow show us how religion began or developed in its earlier stages; or that there was a stagnation and that African religion has been, as it were, fossilized until modern travellers came and unearthed it (Parrinder 1974:18).

Parrinder dismisses this assumption because as he says "religion is a living thing"(:18). The justification for the inclusion of African Traditional Religion in the debate on religious pluralism is for the very reason that it is a religion in its own right. On these grounds, dialogue with African Traditional Religion is necessary (cf.:14-23).

The peculiar structure of African Traditional Religion (in the eyes of outsiders) should not be used as a reason for its exclusion. Rather, African Traditional Religion should be seen as presenting a unique opportunity to broaden and deepen the debate.

The mission of the Church in Africa should go beyond inculturation to embrace dialogue. The premise of dialogue with African Traditional Religion cannot be different from that with world religions. Dialogue as a necessary dimension of religious pluralism should allow African Traditional Religion to be heard. Not only that but also to allow ourselves as a Christian Church to learn from it those things that are necessary for the existence of a respecting peaceful human society. My opinion is that such a genesis is only viable if we reconsider our theological starting point. I propose that our point of departure should be theocentric rather than Christocentric.

Hitherto the Christian Church in Africa has only understood its mission to be that of inculturation. This process (inculturation) is defined by Shorter (1988:11) as "the on-going dialogue between faith and culture or cultures". African Traditional Religion was seen as fertile ground from which to make Christian converts. What has been lacking is for the Christian

Church to positively acknowledge and appreciate the very existence of African Traditional Religion. Without an attitude of acknowledgment and appreciation dialogue with African Traditional Religion remains an illusion. A theocentric approach as a theological entry point therefore in my view, is tenable in that it recognises that God is bigger than and is the centre of all religions. It will acknowledge that African Traditional Religion stands on the same pedestal with all other religions with a contribution to make to the debate.

I believe inculturation can only happen with and after an authentic conversion. It should not happen before an individual has had an opportunity to fully understand his or her religious views and convictions in an atmosphere of dialogue with the other person. A denial of religious dialogue is denying the other person to fully become him/herself. Inculturation should not precede dialogue. The reason for dialogue is best expressed by Warren when he says:

Our first task in approaching another people, another culture, another religion, is to take off our shoes, for the place we are approaching is holy. Else we may find ourselves treading on men's dreams. More serious still, we may forget that God was here before our arrival (Warren 1959:9f).

In inculturation, whilst it is an appropriate process that allows for the Gospel to be communicated and to be incarnated in the culture of the people who receive it, it should not side-line the religious beliefs that have given birth and meaning to existing cultural forms. John Mbiti confirms this opinion by way of explaining the fabric of African religious life. He asserts,

Because traditional religion permeates all the departments of life, there is no formal distinction between the sacred and the secular, between the religious and non-religious, between the spiritual and the material areas of life. Wherever the African is, there is his religion (Mbiti 1969: 3-4).

As opposed to inculturation, inter-religious dialogue with followers of African Traditional Religion will allow this religion to make meaningful contributions to interfaith dialogue, social and economic advancement and the humanization process in general. Dialogue does not exploit

the strengths and weaknesses of another religion. On the contrary, the purpose of dialogue is to listen and to learn and to grow.

Samartha correctly observes that dialogue has nothing to do with the intention to "disclose the inadequacies and falsities of non-Christian religions and to demonstrate the adequacy and truth, the absoluteness and finality of the Lord Jesus Christ" (Samartha 1991:79). In dialogue it is presupposed that the other has something to offer.

Saayman is correct by conceding that "at the very least we have to conclude that God is active in every human being and groups of human beings, and that no religion can therefore simply be called 'human invention' which can tell Christians nothing about God" (Saayman 1995:7). This conviction does confirm and justify the need for an African Christian theology and African Traditional Religion to be participants in the debate on religious pluralism.

It is obvious, then, that when we speak about African Traditional Religion we are already making a fundamental theological affirmation, namely that God did not leave Africans without God's revelation. We cannot therefore start with the presupposition that when Christian missionaries moved into Africa (as has been mentioned by many scholars), they found a void, a people with no religion. Is the presence of African religious systems to be taken for granted? Does not African Traditional Religion pose the same questions and challenges to Christianity that "world religions" do? This study contends that it does.

The study will attempt to show that, at another level, the method and theological presupposition of Western scholarship inevitably leads to this exclusion.

### **1.3 Significance of the study**

There is a growing consciousness in Africa that brings to the surface the original religiosity of Africa. This requires the Christian Church to re-examine its theological premises and the way it seeks to do mission in an authentic rather than an imperialistic way. The only authentic way to

set foot on this path is for the Church to acknowledge that African Traditional Religion is a critical and integral part of the religiously plural global village in which we live.

One of the dominant characteristics of African history was the impact of the Christian missionary enterprise from Europe. Africa was seen as a "mission field" whose inhabitants were regarded as irreligious and therefore targets for conversion. This meant that whatever religious traditions were in existence were not given recognition. Anything that showed evidence of being contradictory to the religious and philosophic heritage (in this case, Christian) of the Westerners was termed "pagan"<sup>3</sup> and subsequently suppressed. To be precise, nothing was ever regarded as authentic. 'African culture was trampled underfoot, their institutions undermined, lands confiscated, religions smashed, and their magnificent artistic creations destroyed' (Martey 1993:8).

This approach meant that the African world-view was discounted and suppressed. An opportunity was denied the African people to openly enter into dialogue with the new religion. Because though converted to Christianity, Africans did not turn away from their religion. They began a journey of religious dual existence to this present day. What are the fundamental reasons for this duality? The "African Report" of Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) gives answer:

The new deal of traditional religions is due to a purely simple phenomenon. The Christian faith, as transmitted by missionaries, is completely coated in its Western cultural straitjacket. Too intellectual, too judicial, too much of a stranger to day-to-day life problems, the revived doctrine becomes a Sunday dress worn to Church. At home, at the farm, on the job, we put on once more our ordinary dress for current business. Those day-to-day problems are sickness, infertility of wife or cattle, ..... Now, regarding all that, we find little or nothing in the Roman Ritual. What do we do then? We have to live and try to solve all those problems. In the traditional religions all that is provided for; there are rites and formulas for everything (Abraham 1990:38-39).

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<sup>3</sup> The term "pagan" is used here in terms of Kritzinger's definition, namely that, the term has come to denote "backward", "uncivilised" or "deprived" (Kritzinger 1991: ix)

Since new developments in Africa, a new consciousness has been born. Original African religiosity is surfacing. This new revolution requires the church to re-think its mission and its attitude towards African Traditional Religion. It is only through a positive attitude and a new approach towards African Traditional Religion that the Church will effectively and authentically carry out its mission in the 21st century.

One of the reasons for the existence of the Church is, amongst others, to seek to create a peaceful and reconciled human society. Such a task should not be exclusively understood in terms of converting other persons to the Christian faith if they are to be truly agents of peace and reconciliation. Such a prior requirement in a religiously pluralistic society, like Africa, has not proved to be totally successful. In the first place, not all Africans have accepted the Christian faith. Millions of people across Africa adhere to the African Traditional Religion or Islam.

And even those Africans who profess to be Christian continue to show evidence of being both Christian and African in their religious perspective, belief and practice. In this context, then, the church is required to take dialogue seriously so that it enables its membership and the African person in general to achieve his/her total liberation that spills over into other areas of his/her existence. This is a challenge that the Church has to take with utter seriousness.

It is imperative therefore for the Church in Africa to understand its liberative and reconciling focus. Its missional responsibility is to be alert to and to enter into dialogue with those aspects of African Traditional Religion that seek to promote economic growth, justice, equality and a healthy society. The liberative potential of African Traditional Religion, with which dialogue is of uttermost importance was spelled out by the EATWOT consultation on religion and liberation in 1987. The consultation concluded that:

...the third world theology must be alert to the movements for liberation that are at work in the many and varied religious traditions which continue to flourish in the third world today. It must encourage these movements by fostering a creative dialogue between them (EATWOT Consultation 1989:123).

The EATWOT consultation correctly appealed for a "liberative ecumenism" for this is what is required. Here liberative ecumenism refers to that process of inter-religious dialogue "which is concerned not so much with the doctrinal insights or spiritual experiences that different religions can offer one another, as with the contribution to human liberation that each can make" (:123). Integral hermeneutics<sup>4</sup> becomes critical in a dialogue of this nature. The total condition of a people is taken seriously.

The insights highlighted above illustrate the importance of this study in regard to the contribution that African Traditional Religion can make toward the debate on religious pluralism. There should be an openness and readiness to acknowledge that religious traditions have different experiences "embodied in various ways in the religious traditions of the world" (Race 1983:139). This however does not nullify attempts to work towards a liberated human society within which there is understanding and respect.

## **1.4 Methodology**

### **1.4.1 The use of literature**

This study will confine itself to a literature study. Besides the authors mentioned under the section 'sources', other writers on the subject of religious pluralism and African Traditional Religion will be widely consulted.

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<sup>4</sup> Integral hermeneutics here refers to an approach of interpretation that takes both the existential and religious context of a people seriously particularly in reference to the "third world". EATWOT preferred this approach because "it is an 'unblinker' hermeneutics of dialogue. Its attentiveness to religious traditions other than one's own will enable it to avoid the parochialism in-built into the perspective of any single religious tradition (however "catholic" it may claim to be), and to grasp the significance of third-world reality for many complementary points of view" (EATWOT 1989:123).

The main sources of this study will be the texts of leading authors on the subject of religious pluralism. Principal authors who will be studied are Paul Knitter, John Hick, S.J. Samartha, Alan Race, etc. Authors on African theology and African Traditional Religion will also be consulted. Those who will feature prominently are Gabriel Setiloane and John Mbiti.

#### **1.4.2 The Theological Method**

There is a general agreement amongst theologians and phenomenologists of religion that human communities, be they modern or 'primal', are religious. They all have a sense of the Ultimate. The degree to which this is apprehended and lived might vary, but fundamentally all human communities are religious.

The religious apprehension of the Ultimate or Being is realised in and somehow born out of the cultural, social, geographical and historical contexts. It is within these human circumstances that God manifests God's presence in so many different ways. For that reason, the theological method that is going to be followed in this research is the one that precisely takes this view seriously - that God has not left any people without a glimpse of God's knowledge. That theological method is the Anthropological method of contextual theology as proposed by Bevans (1992). This model is chosen because it compels us not to reject but to accept that - no matter how 'developed' or 'undeveloped' a religion might be - the task of theology is "attending and listening" to that religious tradition so that "God's hidden presence can be manifested in the ordinary structures of the situation" (Bevans 1992:48), and that it is within these structures that God is experienced.

This model helps us, particularly in the present research, to recognise that African Traditional Religion is unique in its own right and within its own structures. Such an approach in the theology of religions means that all religions must of necessity be approached with humility and equal respect.

My use of this model does not discredit the Christian tradition and message. On the contrary, it enables one to discern the hidden Word of God in every culture. The Word can express itself in different forms and by being in dialogue with each other, we are able to overcome the fragmentation of humanity, "the isolation or opposition of peoples and cultures, and so towards the wholeness of human life ...."(Taylor 1976:1).

I am aware that the danger in this method is the tendency to romanticise culture and to be less objective. This is not my intention. The aim is to argue that African Traditional Religion (within its own cultures) is equally qualified to be a participant in the debate on religious pluralism for it too is of human society and its contribution is valuable.

### **1.5 Overview of the following chapters.**

Chapter 2 on '*The Christian debate on Religious Pluralism*' will focus on Knitter and others, examining the issues that they raise and the theological method they use to arrive at their proposals. In light of the exclusion of African Traditional Religion from the debate, the study will try to point out the basic assumptions that underlie this exclusion. Particularly the study will do so by examining the basic theological propositions that constitute the core of the debate, namely Theocentrism and Christocentrism.

Chapter 3 on '*The Contribution of African Traditional Religion to the debate*' will focus on the views of two selected authors (Gabriel Setiloane and John Mbiti) on African theology and religion and try to identify their theology of religions. The contribution that an African theology of religions can make towards the debate will also be examined.

Chapter 4, which will conclude the study, is entitled '*Towards An African Christian Theology of Religions*'. The chapter will briefly examine how African Christian theology has dealt with the question of Christ. On the basis of these African christologies I will make some suggestions of how Christology could be dealt with in an African theology of religions.

## 1.6 Problems of Definition

The problem of the study lies in how African Traditional Religion has been excluded from the definition given to the so-called "world religions". African Traditional Religion, along with various other religious movements from the South, are classified as "primal" or "traditional" religions and consequently left out of the debate.

Reference to African Traditional Religion as "primal" or "traditional" implies that it is in a completely different class from the so-called "world religions", especially Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. A common feature of these religions is that they are regarded as having a long history, a founder as well as "considerable literature, and innumerable temples and priests" (Parrinder 1974:9).

Despite the differences in the nature of "world religions", an approach that excludes African Traditional Religion cannot be justified. Parrinder (1974:18) advances a similar argument when he contends that, "it has sometimes been assumed that because there was no written history or text therefore African religions are 'primitive'". He argues that African Traditional Religion(s) has a long history though not a written one. He says "they are not 'primitive' in the sense that they are somehow an older people than others, or in the sense that they have developed later and in some way show us the childhood of the race more clearly" (:18).

On the contrary, a feature that dominates African Traditional Religion(s) is that "they are relatively small groups whose individuals are heavily dependent upon one another as well as upon the forces of nature" (Thorpe 1992:5). Therefore, if one has to bring African Traditional Religion into the arena of the discussion on religious pluralism, which has been confined to "world religions", one has to break through the wall of exclusion that has hitherto prevailed. Very little material is available that tries to venture into this area of discussion. The argument that can be advanced is that such a task is impossible because there is no historical relationship or comparison between African Traditional Religion (as primal or traditional) and "world religions" (Thorpe 1991:1). Given these sentiments, I am convinced firstly, that from the works

of the theologians that will be examined in chapter 3, one is able to demonstrate that African Traditional Religion has a voice to be heard. Secondly, the non-historical relationship or comparison between African Traditional Religion and "world religions" should not forbid a new venture of dialogue between the two.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE CHRISTIAN DEBATE ON RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

#### 2.1 Christian Paradigms in the Theology of Religions

In 1983 Allan Race started a new trend<sup>1</sup> by using the *tripartite* scheme of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. He articulated this scheme in his book, *Christians and Religious Pluralism*. Race's basic concern was to respond to and attempt to solve the Christian's problem in relating to other religions. In his words, Race (1983:viii) set out "to develop a typology as a means of bringing some order to the range of positions being canvassed in the Christian response to other world religions, and also to argue a case for a more pluralist approach as the way forward".

The same classifications that Race uses (exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism) are also employed by D'Costa (1986) and Barnes (1989). Before Race, in 1976, David Bosch had already used a four-fold typology that illustrates the different attitudes in relating to other religions - exclusivism, fulfillment, relativism and abiding paradox. Paul Knitter (1985) adopts a similar structure, but uses confessional models: Conservative Evangelical, Mainline Protestant, Catholic and Theocentric.

Within the broader debate about the models used in the theology of religions it is helpful to use the terms inclusivism, exclusivism and pluralism. I prefer Race's typology to Knitter's confessional models because a model (which is an *abstraction*) should ideally bear an *abstract* title, rather than a concrete (*confessional*) title. The weakness of Knitter's models as Kritzingler (1991:93) points out, is their inherent confusion because some Roman Catholics theologians can be found to belong to the "mainline Protestant" model, etcetera, so that it is misleading to

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<sup>1</sup> It may be that other theologians used this scheme before Race, but it was Race's book that made it widely known and acceptable.

term all Roman Catholic theologians inclusivists.<sup>2</sup> Race's typology is therefore plausible because it recognises amongst Roman that Catholics and Protestants for example, could be found theologians who are committed to the pluralism.

### 2.1.2 The Exclusivist Paradigm

The exclusivist stance believes in the total revelation and self-disclosure of God in Jesus Christ. Here the revelation of God has exclusively taken place in the event of the incarnation. On this conviction exclusivism "counts the revelation in Jesus Christ as the sole criterion by which all religions, including Christianity, can be understood and evaluated" (Race 1993:11).

In Knitter's Conservative Evangelical model exclusivistic claims are represented by certain fundamental theological viewpoints. Those who take this path 1) affirm the verbal inspiration, inerrancy and absolute authority of the Bible; 2) stress the necessity of a personal faith experience of Jesus as the only saviour and Lord; 3) require a resolute commitment to the urgency of converting the world to Christ; 4) have a mistrust of modern theology, especially the historico-critical method of interpreting the Bible (Knitter 1985:76).

In the exclusivist model God's revelation in Jesus Christ alone becomes the critical point of departure that determines relations with other religions. This in turn necessitates certain beliefs, attitudes and action towards the world, and consequently, towards adherents of other religions. According to this view there is no "other way" because God has exclusively and finally revealed Godself in Jesus Christ. This exclusive revelation of God in Christ, whose locus has become the Church, renders all other religions invalid.

General revelation in the exclusivist model is given a lesser place. However, there are exclusivists like Brunner who accepted general revelation but not *general salvation*. Exclusivists contend that if God has revealed Godself in Christ alone there is salvation in no

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<sup>2</sup> However one needs to acknowledge that Knitter's confessional models seem to derive from the official position (particularly in the case of the Roman Catholic model) and/or the majority point of view within confessional tradition.

one else but Christ. In turn this demands a living faith in God and Jesus as personal saviour. People of other faiths, who are perceived as living in the dark, must be converted to belief in the God who was incarnated in Jesus Christ.

Conclusively, the exclusivist position argues for the exclusive uniqueness of Christ as the sole mediator between God and the world. The Christian Church then becomes the sole guardian of the salvation wrought by Christ because the church has accepted that God has revealed Godself in Christ alone through whom humankind is forgiven and saved by God's grace. Not to accept this revelation, is to reject God and thus remain an unjustified sinner.

### **2.1.3 The Inclusivist Paradigm**

The inclusivist model goes further than the previous model but in a more positive way. Adherents of this model believe in the salvific presence of God in non-Christian religions. Nevertheless this model still maintains that "Christ is the definitive and authoritative revelation of God "(D'Costa 1986:80).

A further difference between the inclusivist and the exclusivist paradigms lies in their interpretation of the salvific will of God. Contrary to the latter the former acknowledges that God's grace operates outside of the church and outside of Christianity. The other religions are seen as ways of salvation. In this regard claims about salvation and revelation are not the monopoly of the church.

But at another level, the inclusivist paradigm is similar to the exclusivist when it comes to the finality and normativity of Jesus Christ. Other religions, though they may be arenas of God's revelation and salvation they are this only partly and imperfectly. Only Christ is the full revelation and final expression of God's love. The finality and normativity of Christ in the inclusivist paradigm, however, is not interpreted as negatively as in the exclusivist paradigm. The finality and normativity of Christ means that "the grace-filled elements and salvific structures in the lives and religions of non-Christians find their final and proper fulfillment and

completion in Christianity" (D'Costa 1986:84). It does mean for the inclusivist that Christ is not just the final and normative revelation of God but also the centre of human existence.

The concept of people who are not Christians becoming Anonymous Christians (Karl Rahner) is characteristic of this model. It is believed that though salvation is not the monopoly of Christianity, nevertheless this knowledge cannot be understood without the Church. Because God's revelation through human forms is always blurred, humans are always searching for a further understanding of God in history. God has, however, provided the avenue of God's own knowability, "a definite social and historical expression in Christ and His Church" (D'Costa 1986:88).

The inclusivist position gives rise to two implicit dimensions of ecclesiology (Schineller 1976). As we observed above, the one leads to the conclusion that the Church, like Christ, is a mediator of God's grace. The Church, like Christ, is necessary for the salvation of humankind. The second type of ecclesiology is that the Church is seen "as the representative community in continuity with Christ" (Schineller 1976:555). The church is a social vehicle for representing and proclaiming God's love. There is a problem however, with these two dimensions of ecclesiology. First, the Church is placed on an equal footing with the Christ. This negates the acknowledgment that the Church too is a human institution. This leads to the second objection, namely that the church consists of sinful human beings who need repentance. It will be almost heretical to think that God has no mission without the church. We must remember that God can raise stones to be God's witnesses!

Certainly the inclusivist model compared to the exclusivist model has a positive attitude towards other religions. The recognition that other religions are possible ways of salvation in my judgment is theologically valid. Once we are convinced that God has universally revealed

Godself to human beings (general revelation), we cannot at the same time claim that such revelation was void of salvific purpose.<sup>3</sup>

As Knitter observes, the inclusivist model is positive towards dialogue with other religions. Here again we see the inclusivist model parting ways with the exclusivist model. For the latter dialogue really means sharing the Gospel with people of other faiths with the intention that they will be converted. On the contrary, the meaning of dialogue for the inclusivist paradigm is well stated by Knitter:

The theological reasons given for this call to dialogue make it clear that the main intent of encounter with persons of other faiths is no longer the desire to convert ... Rather, the primary goals of dialogue are twofold: to co-operate with other religions in providing a unified religious contribution to the social-economic-political crisis facing the international community of nations and enable Christians to learn from other religious traditions and thus become better Christians (Knitter 1985: 141).

One of the debated tenets of the inclusivist model is the concept of Anonymous Christianity, and correctly so. The concept raises the question whether inclusivists put Christianity on equal footing with other religions or not. It is Christianity that includes other religions but seemingly Christianity is not to be included by other religions. Hick is correct in my view to be suspicious of the inclusivist paradigm precisely on the question of Anonymous Christianity. For Hick the difference between exclusivists and inclusivists is that the former are intolerant while the latter are benevolent (Hick and Knitter 1987:22).

Hick maintains that in the inclusivist model, "Non-Christians can be saved because, unknown to them, Christ is secretly 'in a way united with them'". But the saving truth unknown to them is

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<sup>3</sup> My view here is along the line of Race's (1983:52) position namely that, "this does not mean that Christianity and all other religions exist on an equal footing. What is being suggested is that Christianity should not be seen as having a monopoly of the means of salvation".

known to the Church, which is God's instrument in making redemption known (Hick and Knitter 1987:22).

Seen from the perspective of dialogue, Anonymous Christianity is an *a priori* view point. Christians have already judged that other religions are embraced and included by the Christian's conception about God. Christianity assumes that its language of reference about God is the same as, if not superior to, that of other religions. This attitude can in the long run become a hindrance to the very dialogue which inclusivism seeks to promote.

#### **2.1.4 The Pluralist Paradigm**

The pluralist paradigm works on the premise that other religions are equally salvific paths to God and that the claims that are made by Christianity that this religion is the only path or that other religions are fulfilled in it are theologically invalid. Further this model questions the belief that God has absolutely and finally revealed Godself in Christ, thereby locating the experience of salvation exclusively in the person of Jesus.

The pluralist paradigm differs from the two other models mainly on two fundamentals. In opposition to the exclusivist paradigm, it rejects the claims about the finality and absoluteness of Christ and inerrancy of the scriptures. In opposition to the inclusivist paradigm, it questions the location and experience of salvation.

Its theological reasons for rejecting the other two paradigms are basically twofold. First, regarding the inclusivist model, the pluralists contend that it contradicts "the venerable Christian axiom of God's universal salvific love and desire to save all people" (D'Costa 1986:24). Hick, particularly, argues that even though the inclusivist paradigm has moved from "the traditional claim to the unique finality of the Christian gospel" to a more inclusive one, nevertheless the Christian superiority assumption "has moved discreetly into the background". This is more so in the case of the Roman Catholic Church (Hick and Knitter 1987:21).

The pluralists contend that it is the nature of God to save all of creation - the universal salvific will of God. D'Costa (1986:25) phrases it thus: "the theological axiom of the universal salvific will of God is a fundamental tenet of the pluralist paradigm".

A logical consequence of the pluralist argument is to raise the point that, once we have committed our belief as Christians that God wills for all of humanity to experience God's salvation, we can no longer limit the extent of God experience to the person of Christ. Other religions are not however exonerated from exclusivist attitudes:

the claims of other religions to absolute validity and to a consequent superiority have likewise, given the same human nature, sanctified violent aggression, exploitation, and intolerance.... Christianity and Islam probably providing the greatest numbers of examples,... (Hick and Knitter 1987:17-18).

Secondly, the pluralist model disclaims the view of the exclusivist model on the exclusive revelation of God in Christ. If God wills for people of all cultures to know God, surely God will communicate Godself in ways that the recipient of this revelation will comprehend it, no matter how limited the comprehension. Christianity, argue pluralists, is not an exception. No religion stands above the other, no religion can claim an exclusive monopoly of truth. Klootwijk's contention is therefore convincing:

The different perceptions of truth in the various religions may be true in their own ; but at the same time, they are limited perceptions which cannot be imposed upon others (Klootwijk 1993:460).

The uniqueness of Christ is understood in relational terms in the pluralist model. Though Christ is unique and absolute for Christians, his uniqueness should only be understood in the context of other religious figures. The uniqueness, decisiveness and normativity of Christ should not be seen as incorporating other religious figures for they too are unique in their own terms.

## **2.2 Christology: The Central Issue**

In all the paradigms of the theology of religions Christology is central. The reason why Christology is critical is because all the paradigms are attempts by Christians to deal with and

develop a *theology* of religions. These paradigms represent attempts to redefine and re-interpret the Christ event in the light of the present religiously plural world.

### 2.2.1 Ontological Christology

This Christology is more representative of the exclusivist and the inclusivist paradigms. Its basic tenet is the ontological necessity of the person and work of Jesus Christ for salvation. Revelation is understood in terms of God being exclusively represented in Jesus. Jesus and God are the same or are of the same substance. It is not incorrect to say that this Christological presupposition is grounded in the historical Nicene and Chalcedonian definitions of faith. Because the person and nature of Christ cannot be seen apart from the very nature of the God who saves, salvation cannot be seen or wrought outside of the person and work of Christ: "Because of this unique ontological character, Jesus is the highest and definitive manifestation of God's saving love on earth" (Gillis 1993:74).

Unquestionably, an ontological Christology dismisses any attempt that sees God revealing Godself in general terms, that is, general revelation, for this will mean that God has also revealed who God is through other religious traditions. Therefore an ontological Christology supremely holds to the belief that God has solely and finally revealed Godself in Jesus Christ. In the ontological Christology of exclusivism the claims of other religions about their saviors are rejected in *toto*. The person and nature of Christ is described in uncompromisingly absolute terms.

The ontological Christology of inclusivism is somewhat different from that of exclusivism. In the inclusive model other religious traditions are recognised as possible ways of salvation (Knitter 1985:140) because of God's universal salvific presence. This universal salvific presence of God is not however distinct from the salvation that God effects through Christ. Christ therefore becomes "the final cause of salvation" (:141). That is to say, the salvation that can be experienced in other religious traditions finds fulfillment in Christ even if people of other religious traditions do not know it. Christ becomes "normative" for all religions.

### 2.2.2 Theocentric Christology

"The claim that Christians are saved by the merits of the death and resurrection of Jesus is perfectly appropriate for Christians to make about themselves. The difficulty arises when they state or imply that this claim also applies to persons of other religious traditions so that they too acquire salvation through Jesus" (Gillis 1993:71). A Theocentric Christology attempts to deal with this dilemma, to be both honest to the Christian claims about salvation in Christ and to be open to other religious traditions.

The argument of theocentric theologians is that Christian claims about Christ should not be made normative for other religious traditions. In other words, the merits of salvation that Christians have through Christ should respect the claims about the merits of salvation as experienced by people of other religious traditions.

In the place of the exclusivist and inclusivist type christologies theocentrism invokes what it calls "relational uniqueness" (Knitter 1985:171-72). This relational uniqueness places Jesus where he is able to relate to other unique religious figures. This means that Jesus still maintains an identity of his own but he does not replace or eradicate the identification and uniqueness of other religious figures. But also that this identification will be seen not as superior but as unique in its own right. "It affirms that Jesus *is* unique, but with a uniqueness defined by its ability to relate to - that is, to include and be included by - other unique religious figures" (Knitter 1985:171-72). In my judgment, this is at the heart of theocentric theology of religions. Also this is the challenge it brings to the very core of the incarnation christology.

One of the entry points of theocentric theology is the concept of "the Kingdom of God" as was proclaimed by Jesus. Theocentric theologians argue that the Kingdom that Jesus proclaimed was not to point to Himself but to God the creator. This is equally saying Jesus never proclaimed Himself as the Incarnate Son, but only understood Himself in the terms of the other relationship namely, to God as Father:

His deep awareness of God as His Father was in line with Jewish tradition: it does not automatically imply exclusivity. It does, however, indicate specialness, uniqueness. This must be respected in all contemporary interpretations of Jesus (Knitter 1985:174).

Theocentric theologians propose that there is a contradiction between how Jesus perceived Himself and how the early Church perceived Him. The problem arose when the proclaimer (Jesus) became the proclaimed. Jesus, as theocentric theologians contend, sanctioned people not to respond to Him but to His message about God. He was the eschatological Prophet. He was seen as one who was "so close to God that he can speak for God, represent God, mediate God" (Swidler 1987:225).

In proclaiming the Kingdom and pointing to God rather than to himself, Jesus remained theocentric. This conviction is crucial for a theocentric theology of religions and we are warned against the dangers of disregarding its significance:

Whenever Christology forgets this, it opens Christian consciousness to a "myopic Christocentrism," to a jesusology," to a reductionism that absorbs God into Jesus. Christocentrism without theocentrism easily becomes an idolatry that violates not only Christian revelation but the revelation found in other faiths (Knitter 1985:175).<sup>4</sup>

Christology therefore must be seen as the end result of the interpretation of the experience of the saving acts of Jesus.

What then does a theocentric theology of religions say about the Incarnation? Knitter, particularly, sees the Incarnation not as a matter of fact but a belief that arises from the interpretation of experience (Knitter 1985:175-76). But coupled with this interpretation of

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<sup>4</sup> It is important, however, to note that D'Costa's (1990) reply would be that a full-blown trinitarian theology precisely avoids this "absorption" of God into Jesus. He develops five theses in which he espouses the authenticity of the trinitarian doctrine of God in regard to religious pluralism.

experience was the influence of Jewish and Gentile religious thought.

It will be too simplistic for theocentrism to dismiss the Christocentric explanation of the Incarnation. How then does theocentrism explain the incarnation? Particularly John Hick is insightful here. He believes that the concept of the "binity", (i.e., God incarnate on earth as Jesus of Nazareth and God in heaven sustaining the universe, and hearing and answering prayers), was "a philosophical construction far removed from the thought world and teaching of Jesus himself" (Hick 1987:31).

"Binity" language, argues Hick, was a result of the gospel crossing frontiers into Roman territories, so that the church had to sustain itself through dogmatic literalisation of the Hebraic language of the "son of God" meaning, "intensely conscious of God". The argument therefore is that the ontological claims about Jesus Christ by the early Christians and early Church Councils was as a result of a development given rise by the faith experience of Christians. The language about the incarnation was therefore not a fortunate expression. The *language* was a matter of fact; but according to Knitter it was not meant metaphysically but metaphorically; not speaking about a factual state of affairs but the *significance* of Jesus for *Christians*.

As regards the Trinitarian christology, theocentric theologians contend that it evolved as a result of the inspiration theology - "seeing Jesus as the great prophet filled with the divine Spirit" (Hick 1987:31). Theocentrism as here represented by Hick contends that inspiration is not confined to special people because "the basic thought is that to speak of God's love becoming incarnate is to speak of men and women in whose lives God's inspiration, or grace, is effectively at work so that they have become instruments of the divine purpose on earth" (Hick 1987:32). Whether Jesus was more inspired than others, or even more absolutely, is something that can only be settled on the basis of historical information which is not at our disposal, argues Hick.

In order that we understand Hick, it must be pointed out that his arguments are in relation to inspired figures of other religions. Historically it is evident that Jesus was regarded as more inspired by those among whom he lived and carried out his ministry. And as such they regarded this inspiration as superior and therefore unique and absolute.

The above arguments resonate with yet another position that further solidifies the theocentric theology of religions. Theocentricism holds that "all the 'One and Only' qualifiers to the various Christological titles pertain more to the medium used by the New Testament than to its core message" (Knitter 1985:182). This is a very radical position that Knitter takes. What Knitter proposes here is that the "One and Only" should be understood in the context of *classicist culture* where one's experience and claims about truth either wins or is defeated by the truth-claims of others about their experience of truth as they have come to encounter it in their own historical contexts (Knitter 1985:183). The reason for the "One and Only" type language therefore, has to be understood within the cultural milieu of the time.

On that basis, theocentric theologians argue that the early Christian Community developed a Christocentric understanding of Jesus which is primarily the message of the New Testament. They believe that such an understanding of Jesus is incompatible with who Jesus understood himself to be. He proclaimed the Kingdom of God and not himself.

### **2.3 The Soteriological Argument**

The question of salvation cannot be separated from the Christological one in the theology of religions. The doctrine of the Incarnation and the historical veracity of the person of Jesus Christ are all linked to the desire of human beings to attain salvation as a result of their natural predicament.

The predicament of human beings and the subsequent need to find their salvation/liberation and to achieve their potential are all a matter of concern that in my view have given birth to both the scriptures and Christian doctrines. As a matter of fact, the doctrine of the Incarnation

in which God is understood as revealing Godself to human beings and to identify with them is all related to the question of salvation. The concern for salvation, however, is not the exclusive engagement of Christianity to the extent that religions compete on this issue. To that effect, Hick (1985:28) says:

Looking at the religions of the world, then, in the plural we are presented with competing claims to possess the saving truth. For each community believes that its own gospel is true and that other gospels are false in so far as they differ from it. Each believes that the way of salvation to which it witnesses is the authentic way, the only sure path to eternal blessedness.

Besides competitiveness all religious traditions know something of suffering and death and the need for healing and wholeness. The degree to which this salvation is sought may differ but salvation remains the basic concern of all religions (Knitter 1987:187).

Traditionally Christian theology has always held the conviction that God has taken the initiative to make it possible for humans to experience salvation. God chose to reveal Godself specially and exclusively in Jesus Christ. God's self-revelation therefore becomes the only way through which men and women can attain healing and wholeness. This, as was noted earlier, requires faith in and personal commitment to God's self-revelation - Jesus Christ.

This exclusive understanding of salvation (which is undergirded by a rejection of general revelation) means that any notion or claims of the possibility of salvation in other religious traditions is to be dismissed. Salvation becomes the monopoly of one particular tradition, "so that it is an article of faith that salvation is restricted to this group, the rest of mankind being either left out of account or explicitly excluded from the sphere of salvation" (Hick 1985:31). This exclusive understanding of salvation was vividly and emphatically expressed in the earlier dogmatic expression of the Roman Catholic Church, *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (outside the Church, no salvation). Equally the Protestants acclaimed: outside Christianity, no salvation (Hick 1985:31).

Salvation, in the inclusive paradigm, moves away from the exclusivist fundamental position by rejecting the notion that it can only be experienced through personal confession and faith in Jesus Christ who is God's self revelation. Inclusivist soteriology believes in the universal saving act of Jesus Christ whether people recognise it or not. Hick (1985:32) explicates this position thus:

In the former terms it is the view that God's forgiveness and acceptance of humanity have been made possible by Christ's death, but that the benefits of this sacrifice are not confined to those who respond to it with an explicit act of faith. The juridical transaction of Christ's atonement covered all human sin, so that all human beings are now open to God's mercy, even though they may never have heard of Jesus Christ and why he died on the cross of Calvary.

The difference between inclusivism and exclusivism lies in the confession and personal faith in Christ. In the former confession and personal faith in Christ is not a necessary condition for experiencing the benefits of Christ's saving event. But at another level an inclusive soteriology could mean that when transformation or liberation happens in other religious traditions, that movement is understood as the universal manifestation of the saving grace of God incarnate - the divine Logos (cf. Hick 1985:33), so that people of other religious traditions are saved "anonymously" through the divine Logos.

Subsequently, the difference, therefore, between Christians and people of other religious traditions is to be found in the Christians' unique discovery of salvation that springs from Christ and have entered into a personal and faith relationship with Jesus Christ, God incarnate. Jesus Christ nevertheless remains both "the constitutive cause as well as the final fulfillment of every human being's experience of grace" (Knitter 1986:100).

In the pluralist theology of religions the soteriological argument takes a different route from that of the two other views. Since the inclusivist position is that salvation does take place in other religions because of God's universal salvific plan, the pluralist stance is that such an affirmation should recognise the plurality of God's saving ways. Hick (1985:34) postulates that:

If we accept that salvation/liberation is taking place within all the great religious traditions, why not frankly acknowledge that there is a plurality of saving human responses to the ultimate divine Reality. ....There is not merely one way but a plurality of ways of salvation or liberation. In Christian theological terms, there is a plurality of divine revelation, making possible a plurality of forms of saving human response.

The question then arises, how does the pluralist arrive at this conclusion or hypothesis, which is contrary to both the exclusivists and inclusivists who draw their conclusion based on orthodox theology? The pluralist begins theocentrically and not Christocentrically. Here the inductive conclusion is that God is limitlessly transcendent, taking us beyond the point of the historical Jesus. In that way, human beings everywhere encounter and experience divine Reality. They develop "a plurality of forms of saving human response. These forms of saving human response are a result of experiencing the transcendent divine Reality within specific religious contexts, undergirded by different conceptualities, and embodied in different institutions, art forms, and life-styles" (Hick 1985:37).

Until recently, even the proponents of pluralism have retained an element of bias towards the understanding of salvation. It has always been understood that salvation/liberation begins primarily with a personal relationship with the divine Reality. This conclusion seem to be arrived at as a result of the knowledge of the character of salvation in 'world religions'. This hermeneutic does not equally represent the concept of salvation in African religions. The hermeneutic of salvation in African religions is different. It will be explored in the next chapter.

Knitter has however recently moved ahead of his colleagues on the question of salvation. For him, the question of salvation should not hinge on our hypothesis about God for all religions relate to God. He therefore proposes what he calls "soteriocentrism" (Knitter 1987:187). The central concern of all religions, which is *salvation*, should be the basis of dialogue. This new approach that Knitter now proposes holds much hope for a broader, non-restrictive and non-prescriptive route in the theology of religions. In this new approach one hopes that the

wisdom of African Traditional Religion will be counted as a significant contribution when it comes to the liberation of human society.

## CHAPTER 3

### **THE CONTRIBUTION OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION TO THE DEBATE**

The focus of this chapter is to throw light on what I regard as the contribution that African Traditional Religion could make toward the Christian debate on religious pluralism. I argued, above (see 1.2), that because African Traditional Religion has not been regarded as a "world religion", it has been marginalised to the extent that it has not been brought to feature in the Christian debate on religious pluralism. The focus of this chapter therefore is to illustrate quite to the contrary that the traditional religion of Africa can make a contribution to the debate.

In choosing the two African theologians Gabriel Setiloane and John Mbiti (see 1.5), I hope to show from their views about the African world-view that African Traditional Religion has a contribution to make toward the debate. My reading of them, therefore, is not to outline their theology of religions. My intention is to show that their African Christian theology has pointers to those elements of the African world-view that are unquestionably relevant to the debate on religious pluralism.

#### **3.1 African Absence from the Debate**

The question that needs to be asked is: why is African Traditional Religion absent from the debate on religious pluralism? Before an attempt is made to respond to the question, it needs to be acknowledged that there are nevertheless debates on religious pluralism that have drawn in the so-called primal or traditional religions. An example is that of the 1973 exploratory consultation held under the auspices of the World Council Churches in Ibadan, Nigeria, to look at the area of Christian dialogue with Traditional Religion in Africa.

This consultation did not intend to focus on the contribution that African Traditional Religion could make towards the debate on religious pluralism as a global theological concern, a subject which is the main concern of this study. On the contrary, the Ibadan consultation focused on the dialogue that takes place within African Christians, between their new-found religion, Christianity and their ancestral religion. The purpose of the consultation was defined thus: "We tended to talk in terms of 'an inner dialogue' because the issues involved in the relationship between Christianity and the primal world-views are very often felt within the Church" (Taylor 1976:v). Notwithstanding discussions of this nature, African Traditional Religion has not featured in the theological debates of renowned scholars like John Hick, Paul Knitter, Allan Race, Gavin D'Costa, to mention only a few.

How is the absence of African Traditional Religion in the debate on religious pluralism accounted for? The question will be explored in the light of what African theologians have written concerning African Traditional Religion.

### **3.1.1 Terms of Reference of the Debate**

The terms of reference of the debate on religious pluralism have been premised on the assumption that authentic religion is one that has a prophetic figure as a founder, a revealed book, a building (place of worship) and shows the cohesive development of a religious system. Almost all the so-called "world religions" fit into these characteristics. In the writings of leading theologians on religious pluralism (e.g. Knitter) there is a call for Christians to recognise the uniqueness and absoluteness of Christ only in the context of other religious figures hence Knitter's proposal for a "relational uniqueness" of Christ. In my view such a theological proposition is only viable in the context of "world religions" where there are claims of such religious figures.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The only exception in this case is Hinduism which has no claim to a single founder.

It is true that "the questions of Christology are addressed with interreligious dialogue in mind and a change in Christianity's attitude toward other religions" (Heim 1987:1). In this sense to claim that African Traditional Religion does not feature in this endeavour can be refuted. But in the process of formulating theological propositions intended for a changed attitude towards other religions, there is an element of exclusion. As I have tried to illustrate with the proposition of the "relational uniqueness" of Christ, African Traditional Religion find itself at the margins. In fact, it is rather surprising that international conferences intended to bring together theologians from different religious and theological orientations have excluded African theologians who would have made a significant African contribution.<sup>2</sup> None of the topics of the conference dealt with African Traditional Religion.

Shorter (1975:38), however alludes to this absence as a bias that is symptomatic of the inability to understand the complexities of the religious world of Africa. To that effect he concludes:

To many people the study of African religions must seem like an encounter with Idimungala! Religion in Africa is a many bearded giant and the unwary scholar can easily lose all sense of direction when he beholds all those heads and eyes and mouths. After years of study and research by innumerable scholars no methodology has emerged which allows us to view African Traditional Religion as a convincing unit. It is, perhaps, for this reason that African Traditional Religion has never been placed on a par by theologians and ecumenists with the so-called "world religions".

Shorter (1975:38-39) illustrates his arguments with the attitude revealed in the Second Vatican Council's refusal to mention African Traditional Religion as one of the non-Christian Religions in the Churches' Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (Nostra Aetate). This classification, was only reserved for Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism and Islam. These religions were associated specifically with "more advanced civilizations" (Flannery 1975:738). Such bias against African Traditional Religion is also traceable in the

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<sup>2</sup> This was evident in the conference of 1984 under the theme: "Toward a Universal Theology of Religion" (which became the title of the book edited by Leonard Swidler.

comments of Stephen Neill, who argued that because of the lack of a cohesive, systematic account of religious signs and ideas in African Traditional Religion it can be judged to be no religion at all (Neill 1961:129).

Coupled with what Shorter maintains to be the inability to understand the complexities of the religious world of Africa, was an attitude of the supposed superiority of the culture and religion of the imperialists. In my judgment Shorter's case is compelling. If not, how then do we account for the conspicuous absence of African Traditional Religion from the debate? It stands to reason that because of the totally different and perplexing texture of African Traditional Religion, scholars on religious pluralism have found nothing appealing or challenging in it.

### **3.1.2 Effects of Colonialism**

The effects of colonialism have meant that the seriousness with which African Traditional Religion should have been viewed was minimized. Colonialism meant Western imperialism and the subjection of not only the political, economic and social life of the people, but also their religious lives. Because of this aggression which was not only a desire to expand the territories of the colonisers but also the extension of Western Christendom, often African Traditional Religion was deemed to have been totally subsumed into Western Christianity. Deotis J. Roberts' (1972:43) observation is correct when he says:

African religion has this in common with Black religion: it has been greatly neglected by Western scholarship. White scholars, with some few exceptions, have applied "a colonial mentality" to African studies. Studies resulting from this subordination-superordination syndrome have not yielded the authentic information we need concerning African peoples and their religions. For example, some scholars upon finding traces of advanced civilization in various parts of tropical Africa have explained these finds by foreign influences upon Africa. They refuse to accept these as internal developments due to the pre-conception of Africa as "the dark continent" by which mean heathenism or primitivism in the worse meaning of these terms.

Coupled with the effects of colonialism has been the "success of missions" in Africa. It is a noted phenomenon that Christianity is growing at a high rate in Africa (Barrett 1970:47). It is projected that by the year 2000 there will be 351 million Christians in Africa out of a population of 768 million people (Barrett 1970:47). Because of this rapid growth rate it is assumed that African Traditional Religion does not present a challenge as do "higher religions". The result of this perception is that African traditional Religion is simply regarded as a push-over. As would be seen later (3.2), the rapid Christian growth rate in Africa is attributed to the accommodating or inclusive nature of African Traditional Religion and not because of the inability to be on par with other religious traditions.

### **3.2 The Theology of Religions in African Traditional Religion**

*The Theology of Religions in African Traditional Religion* in this study refers to an attempt to explore the nature of African Traditional Religion and how it could contribute towards the debate on religious pluralism. Such a process requires that one investigates whether traces of exclusivism, inclusivism or pluralism can be found; or whether there is something distinct about African Traditional Religion. In order to arrive at such a conclusion, which will be identified as a contribution to the debate under discussion, I will investigate certain themes as treated by Setiloane and Mbiti.

#### **3.2.1 Setiloane<sup>3</sup>**

In his writings on African Theology, Setiloane deals with, among others, certain themes through which he demonstrates the essence and vitality of African Traditional Religion. My aim here will be to draw some conclusions relevant to the debate on religious pluralism from his treatment of these themes.

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<sup>3</sup> Gabriel M. Setiloane is a retired professor and an ordained minister in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa. Before retirement he lectured at the University of Cape Town. Previously he was head of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Botswana in Gaborone. He is one of the renowned African theologians in Southern Africa.

### 3.2.1.1 Creation Stories:

In seeking to understand Setiloane's point of entry, one needs to examine what he has to say about creation stories in Africa. Once we have done that we can proceed to see how his understanding and interpretation of some of the African creation stories make a contribution to or point us to a theology of religions in African Traditional Religion. Referring to a common phenomenon that characterise creation stories of all people he says:

Biblical scholarship has for about a century now revealed that the much cherished Old Testament stories about Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden are, in fact, myths. They become even more interesting when understood for what they really are: attempts by humans in a certain area of the earth, at a certain time, to fathom the mystery of human origins and the human state. It becomes even more interesting when scholarship points out that the ancient Haberu (Hebrews) to whose genius the myths are ascribed in fact acquired them from their ethnic and geographical neighbours (1986a:3).

One of the creation stories or myths that Setiloane refers to is that of the Sotho-Tswana people. The story tells of how people and animals came into existence. They "came either out of the bowels of the earth through a hole or a cave or from a bed of reeds"(1975:33)<sup>4</sup>. Particularly the Tswana people believe that a "mysterious one-legged" being called *Loowe*<sup>5</sup> led people and animals out of the hole. It is believed that *Loowe* returned into the hole underground where there is life of abundance. In these creation stories that Setiloane describes there is a dominant theme that runs through them all: namely, that all people and animals and all necessities of life came into existence at the same time. Already in these creation stories is implied inclusivity as a given state of existence. This inclusivity, it is clear, is not as a result of the choice of human beings, but as a spontaneous act of the Creator.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Setiloane maintains that these versions of creation story are "widely shared with other groups of the southern Bantu" (1975:33).

<sup>5</sup> *Loowe* (whose foot is longer than that of the human being) is understood to be the agent of Divinity (1986:6) and symbolic of unity and justice (1975:34).

<sup>6</sup> It is important to note that according to Setiloane, Modimo (God) in Sotho-Tswana religion  
(continued...)

My interpretation of these creation stories as related to us by Setiloane, is that no group of people or individual can claim the sole possession of anything, because all things were given to human beings all at the same time. Any sense or attitude of monopoly or special knowledge about that which was given is absent from the stories to the extent that "Africans themselves recognise that they are *Bana ba thari encho: children of one mother*." Setiloane arrives at the conclusion that "the primary teaching of the myth is that people have always been in community, even in pre-existence, in the 'hole in the ground'" (1986b:48).

### 3.2.1.2 Community

Emanating from the inclusivity of creation, follows the second type of inclusiveness: namely, community. "In these myths" argues Setiloane, "whether the first people came out of 'a bed of reeds' or 'a hole in the ground', it is as a community of men, women, children and animals that they came" (1986a:9). The existence of a community subsequently is not a human creation but the good and intentional intent of the Creator. Equally it can be argued that this understanding is parallel to that of Genesis 2.

Therefore, Divinity creates a community and not anything contrary to it. To 'belong' and be a 'part of' is the very essence of being a human being. Hence "the most cherished principle in life-together is to include rather than to separate. Even the purpose of conquest in war was incorporation of the vanquished, not destruction nor elimination .... It is the principle of inclusion rather than separation which accounts for the life-together in community between the San, Khoi and the Bantu" (Setiloane 1986a:10-11).

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<sup>6</sup>(...continued)

is impersonal. Modimo is an IT - "mysterium"! intangible, all-pervasive, at no point capable of definition. It is 'tremendum' - 'selo', monstrous, whose very name is taboo to all but the few" (1976:85). He regards this view of Modimo as superior to the Western Christian view of God (:85 ; 1979:63).

If this view holds water, then the inclusive nature of an African understanding of existence derives its essence from a religious view that sees the Creator who creates inclusively. To destroy or work against community or relatedness is to act against the Creator who created that which is inclusive and relating. Acting against the intent of the Creator, and therefore acting against community, is in these terms sinful and inhuman. The essence of African Traditional Religion, therefore, is being in community. It is not a closed community which is selective or exclusive. How then does one account for ethnic tensions in Africa (e.g. in Rwanda)? A detailed response to this question requires an in depth inquiry but it suffice to say that Africans, despite their strong sense of community and acceptance of the stranger, are not immune from tendencies that betray the very principles of that which they believe in. Such unbecoming tendencies are equally found among Christians. An example of this is the Ireland situation of conflict between those Christians who call themselves Protestants and those called Roman Catholics.

But the inclusiveness that is basic to African Traditional Religion and philosophy does not begin with an individual's choice of a religion but is something that is a gift to human beings. The very existence of human beings consists in being in community. Setiloane, in defence of such an interpretation, concedes, in reference to African theology that:

African Theology does not claim to be a Theology for the Africans exclusively. It sees Modimo/Qamata as the same as Yahweh of the Hebrews and the God of Christianity. The only thing it claims is that it has a different perspective of this One and Only Source of Being. Naturally it will swear by that Divinity itself that its perspective is both authentic and correct. It will recommend it to others, but it will not go on a crusade to either convert or exterminate those who do not accept it. "When African Theology declares that Motho/Umuntu is a dynamic concept, it means ALL humans not only African humans" (1986a:37).

What seems to be critical in African Traditional Religion is not the Creator who creates inclusively, but the inclusiveness that must be lived and guarded against erosion, because such an erosion leads to the erosion of the understanding of the one who creates inclusively. Because of the very inclusive emphasis of African Traditional Religion, Setiloane argues that this made

it simple for Africans to embrace the Christian Faith. He writes, "It is my sincere belief that this is the soft spot that opened the door for Christian missionaries to win the people to accept their teaching - because they were in fact fast verbalising values, truisms and concerns which were right at the base and root of their understanding of being" (1986a:11). Contrary to Mbiti, Setiloane does not see African Traditional Religion as a preparation for the Christian Gospel (see 3.1.3). Rather, for him the acceptance of Christianity by Africans stemmed from their very nature as religiously inclusive people.

### **3.2.1.3 The human person - "Umntu - Motho"**

The human being in the African world view is not an isolated entity but a relational being fundamentally existing in and embraced by community. A person cannot "be" and fully exist without community and vice versa. "The human person is not a closed-in, self-containing, self determining entity" (1986b: 51). As such and as participating in Divinity, the human person is a vital force that is always participating, relating and interacting in and with community.

Arguably Tempels (1959:97) was not totally correct when he wrote that "The Bantu sees in man the living force; the force of being that possesses life that is true, full and lofty. Man is the supreme force, the most powerful among created beings. He dominates plants, animals and minerals. These lower beings exist, by Divine decree, only for the assistance of the higher created man." One could ask how Tempels would interpret Genesis 1:28 ("God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth").<sup>7</sup> Would he see it as an injunction for human beings to exploit and destroy creation, or as an injunction to be stewards of creation and co-creators with God? From the perspective of an African world view the Genesis injunction would be understood in the latter way. Creation is an imprint of the creating force of Divinity and should be held with reverence.

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<sup>7</sup> New Revised Standard Version.

Nothing of the inferior-superior relationship between humans and created things is known in the African world view. The created things - animals, plants etc - are seen as part and parcel of a connected existence which is always interdependent because all are manifestations of the source of being. To that effect Setiloane concludes: "Therefore the consciousness of being human is not really that unique something to boast about, nor to give one licence to dominate other beings, animate or inanimate, for the animals, the flora and nature generally, also have their consciousness." (1980:51).

What meaning has this concept of "Umuntu-Motho"? The expression "Motho Ke Modimo" entails a call to respect the other human being because their very presence is a manifestation of the presence of Divinity, regardless of what they are (religious affiliation) or how they are (gender, race). Because of this participation in Divinity (being created in the image of God), human beings transcend differences and are interlocked with one another at all times. Human beings and creation are concentric, and this is what should hold them together.

At this point it is important to draw a distinction between Setiloane's inferred inclusivity and that of the current theology of religions. The inclusivism of the latter works from a predetermined starting point, that of salvation history. The assumption of that paradigm, in my judgement, works from the premise of disobedience and the fall. Because of sinfulness, humanity excluded itself from the all-inclusive saving grace of God. To experience this inclusive "paradise" one has to do so through the epistemologically and ontologically necessary saving act of Christ.

From Setiloane's view we see a new dimension of inclusivity, which can be called "original inclusivity". Within this original inclusivity there is space and respect for everyone. Within this interrelatedness one cannot claim to be inferior or superior to the other. The difference between the two paradigms comes through what is perceived as sin in the two religions. It is an inclusivity that within itself acknowledges diversity. It is not an inclusivity that is based on

"sameness" or "likeness", but on the principle of being created on par, and being citizens of the same global village. It should be remembered that quite often it is religion that divides on the grounds that the other person adheres to a different religious tradition. The pluralism that is required is not of the individualistic type but one that finds its place in inclusiveness as we have so far tried to define it.

#### **3.2.1.4 Setiloane's Assessment of Other Religions.**

Setiloane argues that the fundamental difference between Christianity and the primal world view of African Traditional Religion is that the former has "become a religion of dogma and creed, rather than a way of life" (1986b:41). The implication here is obvious: African Traditional Religion is a religion of pragmatism, a religion of the market place. In the same breath, Setiloane does not spare the other so-called 'world religions' the same criticism. Together with Christianity he calls them 'world denying' religions.

He believes this is in contrast to the world-affirming nature of the primal world view of African Traditional Religion. In defining what he means by world-denying religions he says: "the sincerity and depth of devotional achievement is attained by the degree to which the devotee withdraws from the humdrum world and becomes absorbed into Divinity. The peak of unity with Divinity is outside and away from the concourse of human life and effort. .... The point is that to a great extent they speak the same language as Western Christianity, metaphysics and withdrawal" (1986b:56).

Setiloane would argue that being "absorbed" into Divinity is the source of the present antagonism between religions. The moment one is absorbed into Divinity one judges him/herself superior by the extent to which he/she considers him/herself to be closer to Divinity. He argues that the measuring stick for true religion does not lie in the dogmatic arguments of a religion, but in how that religion is able to humble itself in relation to others. The uniqueness of a religion should not be found in its individuality as the pluralist paradigm suggests, but in its ability to embrace the other person as a human being.

Setiloane concedes that Christianity is a religion whose character should be to bring humanity together, but he argues that nothing in that regard has yet been found. The very attitude of those who profess the Christian faith starts with a disposition of superiority and arrogance in contrast to the one they claim to follow - humility. This disposition of superiority and arrogance of the devotees of Christianity is an attitude that emphasizes differences and distinctions (1986b:46). This attitude of intolerance leads to an ideology that renders all else nature, creation, and human beings as "debased", "unclean", "profane" and "fallen" (:46).

What then of African Traditional Religion: is it world affirming? Setiloane's contention is that it "accept all being, that is all that is a Deo data, 'given by Divinity' and therefore good" (1986b:46). Because of this nature of acceptance on the understanding that all existence participates in Divinity, there is tolerance and understanding of dissimilar and similar.

We can conclude therefore that differences of religious outlook in the African world view (which is world-affirming) would be understood as an expression of and participation in Divinity in another way. This world-affirming, accommodating attitude gives reasons why pre-Christian Africans could accept foreigners with a foreign religion amongst themselves.

The people of Africa lived in harmony with one another, otherwise they would not have survived: they co-existed with one another, accepting one another's right to be, belonging together, trading and inter-marrying with one another. When the White man came on the scene he was accepted just as another - indeed a peculiar species, but one with the others (1986b:50).

It is at this point that Western Christian theology introduces the question of Truth and Sin. Truth in Africa, as far as one is able to deduce from Setiloane's arguments, can only be judged in terms of how one relates in community and participates in Divinity. The essence of truth can only be lived in terms of living out Divinity. Put differently, truth is discovered not in dogma or creeds, but in 'a way of life'. Truth is discovered in one's respect for one self, others and all of nature.

### 3.2.1.5 Setiloane's Contribution to the Debate

Earlier we noted the types of inclusiveness in African Traditional Religion to which Setiloane refers. They are the inclusiveness of creation and that of community. Both these types of inclusiveness are premised on what God or Divinity has created inclusively. My reading of Setiloane therefore is that these types of inclusiveness are not of the co-option type. They are not of the type where our religious tradition and conviction become the criteria whereby others are seen to be embraced by what we see as the only means to relate to God.

The justification for this inclusivity is that God in God's Mystery has created all human beings and created them equal and therefore humanity is something that has been given. One cannot choose not to be a human being. Equally being a human being is not something that can be suggested to the other person nor can the other person be excluded from being a human being.

Twesigye (1987)<sup>8</sup> has suggested that the inclusivity of Karl Rahner as expounded in the theology of religions is compatible with that of African Traditional Religion as I am here trying to define it. He concedes that:

... Rahner would probably argue that the African Traditional Religion is a good example of a medium for "anonymous Christianity," which is endowed by God with supernatural gratuitous salvific grace, and as such, able to mediate supernatural salvation to its members according to God's unconditional infinite love, and his universal salvific will for all human beings that he has created, and that this is also the case with Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and Judaism as the other possible media of this "anonymous Christianity" (:130).

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<sup>8</sup> In his two books (see bibliography) he deals with how "anonymous" Christianity is compatible with African Traditional Religion's inclusivity. I agree with him on most of the points, but find it difficult to reconcile this position when it is worked from the Christocentric approach and somehow from a theocentric one, and that he is silent on the question of religious pluralism.

One cannot dispute the proposal that African Traditional Religion adheres to a universal understanding of God's activity. But to suggest that Rahner's inclusivity represented in the "anonymous Christianity" formulation is compatible with African inclusivity is to ignore the basic and fundamental difference. The difference between the two forms of inclusivism is that Rahner appeals to the Incarnation as his starting point. Twesigye in his own words states that:

Since God and the human being have become one by virtue of the Incarnation, for Christianity, the human being has similarly meaningful cipher in this categorial world, and as such revelatory of God. The human being is, therefore, the intelligent co-Creator with God, and because God has in Christ become a human being, and therefore, our very close neighbor, being symbolically incarnated in every human being, our search for God and our acceptance and love for God are correlative with our search, acceptance and love for our fellow human beings, for God has become inseparably bound with them through Christ's Incarnation. Hence, Christ's summary of the divine law is to love God and to love our neighbor as our selves (1987:134).

It is my conviction that the inclusivism of African Traditional Religion places emphasis on the human person and community. Therefore its basic approach is anthropocentric<sup>9</sup> rather than Christocentric or Theocentric. It is this anthropocentric approach to existence and our relation to God that I view as a unique contribution to the debate on religious pluralism. The nature of the anthropocentric approach of African Traditional Religion does not reject the validity of these two approaches. The test of the Christocentric and Theocentric paradigms, in the light of the anthropocentric approach however, lie in their ability to include and seriously account for the essence of being a human being regardless of one's race, religious adherence, etc. To that effect the anthropocentric approach to religious pluralism is not the question of either/or but of both/and.

Also a theocentric approach is implied in choosing an anthropocentric one. To see the human being as the centre of existence is to admit that humans are placed there by the Creator. But their

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<sup>9</sup> Recent ecological thinkers have criticised anthropocentrism, arguing for biocentrism (life-centred), since humans have selfishly been destroying the environment for centuries now.

placement there is not merely for their own sake but to be stewards also of what the Creator has created and for the purpose of being in community as an expression of the unity that the Creator intends the human family to be - social harmony and wholeness ("God's kingdom and heaven" Twesigye 1996:243). In that sense Twesigye is correct to call this an "African fundamental theocentric principle" (:243).

Assessing the Christian Theological Anthropology Musopole (1994:175) deems it lacking on account of its ethical application by its proponents. He writes:

Christian teaching on humanity came to Africa with the missionaries in a prepackaged doctrinal and cultural form. It was meant to be adopted whole without regard to the local views and what they could offer. However, the imported doctrine of humanity - based on the truth that all people are made in the image of God and are loved by God for redemption in spite of themselves - was not matched by the messengers' practice especially in their view and treatment of the African people. ....It is false theology to claim that all people are made in the image of God and then live to oppress a whole people just because they were created black or women or because they did not discover and manufacture both guns and gunpowder in time to conquer and dominate. Divorcing doctrine from ethics and subjugating both to racial superiority distorted not only the doctrine of God but the doctrine of humanity as well (1994:175).

It is my belief that to propose an anthropocentric paradigm for a theology of religions does not invalidate the theocentric approach that Knitter proposes for example. The two are dimensions of the same reality. So one does not have to deal with an either/or situation because such a hermeneutic does not and cannot represent the complex nature of our existence and religious experience. To acknowledge that being a human being is at the centre of our experience is not to worship humanity but to affirm that being human is what God intended for us to be and is also to be at the place where we are - the centre. To be at the centre is to be at the place of cosmic community and cosmic harmony.

....for humanity to be at the center in the cosmos does not mean that human beings are God or divine. Human beings are under the care of God as the overarching and surrounding reality. To be at the center also means being the

meeting point, the crossroad in the relationship of all realities. Thus to be human in African religious traditions is to carry tremendous responsibility towards the rest of creation (Musopole 1994:64)<sup>10</sup>.

To do that is to acknowledge that we are placed there as a community and for a purpose. One cannot, therefore, speak about the human being without speaking about God. An appeal for an anthropocentric approach to a theology of religions is similar to that of pluralism. It is an appeal for a centre of connectedness. This centre of connectedness in the African world-view is a centre that carries with it a priestly function that is in relation to God (cf. Musopole 1994:99).

The appeal for an anthropocentric paradigm in the theology of religions is also an appeal for an ethical approach. The Tswana expression, *O feletswe ke botho* or *Ga ona botho* means 'one has lost the essence or quality of being human'. The expression is largely used in the context of one's sour, uncaring, unloving, inhuman relationships with others and all that affects her or him. It is when one loses the correct perspective of treating others in a godly or righteous disposition that one is described as having lost the essence of being a human being.

The arrogance, isolation and hostility that constitutes the relationship between people of different religions would therefore be characterised as inhuman in an African worldview. The consequence of the loss of being human which manifests itself in the way we relate to those who are supposedly different from us is injustice in all its forms and the disruption of the sense of community and humanness. Mbon (1993:13) endorses the ethical importance of religious conduct which in my view is an important component of African religiosity. He maintains that:

An area of possibility for peace in a multi-faith world often neglected by students of religion and society lies in the opportunity which religions have in stressing the

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<sup>10</sup> Mbiti (1969:16, 92) equally makes the same assertion. He maintains that African ontology is anthropocentric. Human beings are at the centre of existence and everything that exists do in relation to this centre. So that there is a relationship between God, human beings, Spirits, animals, etc. without prior necessity for biological connectedness. In this anthropocentric ontology, God is seen as the "Originator and Sustainer" of human beings.

moral or ethical content of their teachings, especially those aspects that deal with good conduct toward fellow human beings.....Such teaching is usually predicated on the fact of our common humanity and, in the theistic traditions, on our common ancestry in the fatherhood of God, the Supreme Creator or, in non-theistic traditions on the recognition of the supreme power of some Ultimate Reality.

The anthropocentric approach strongly lends itself in favour of dialogue. In fact, to be human is to be in community and to be at the centre presupposes dialogue. Dialogue is intrinsic to that relationship. One cannot hope to be at the centre and yet be detached from the circumference. The two are interdependent. Therefore the African philosophy of interdependency and interrelatedness explains that which would seem to perplex someone looking at it from the outside. Such was what Hollenweger expressed.

I was struck by the ease with which Africans deal with the pluralistic religious situation in their countries. The reason for this is probably that most of them have relatives of a different religion. Far from making religion "a private affair", as is the case in Europe, they try to see complementarities in the different religions (1993:xi).

Apart from seeing complementarities in the different religious traditions, Setiloane has argued that Africans in their way of life are accommodative. Their ethic is an ethic of "live-and-let-live"; an attitude that is conducive to the pluralism of religious "cooperation and peaceful coexistence" (Mbon 1993:7). For this reason African Traditional Religion is a religion of coexistence, of "ontological relationality" (Musopole 1994:135), which it strongly recommends to others.

### 3.3 John Mbiti<sup>11</sup>

Mbiti has written widely on African theology and philosophy. It is apparent, therefore, that in his writings will be found the content of what could be the African contribution towards the

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<sup>11</sup> John Mbiti teaches at the University of Berne in Switzerland. He is an ordained Anglican priest. Previously he taught at Makerere University in Uganda. He has also served in the World Council of Churches. Mbiti is one of Africa's leading theologians.

debate on religious pluralism. Amongst some of his theological formulations, the focus will be on his discussion of the African concept of God and salvation.

### 3.3.1 God

Mbiti starts by making the following statement: "I assume ..... that there is but One Supreme God" (1970: viii). Unquestionably this statement is representative of the nature of the African understanding of God. However the manner in which this reality is apprehended and expressed could differ from one geographic location to the other.

Every African people recognises one God. According to cosmology of some, there are, besides him, other divinities and spiritual beings, some of whom are closely associated with him. These divinities are mainly the personification of God's activities, natural phenomena and objects, or deified national heroes, and some are said to have been created as such by God (1970a: 29).

Ten years later Mbiti tackles the question of general and special revelation. It is interesting to note that his point of entry to this argument derives from his interpretation of the biblical material. He argues that the African conception of God is not excluded by the statements about God in the Old Testament. He argues:

Since the Bible tells me that God is the creator of all things, His activities in the world must clearly go beyond what is recorded in the Bible. He must have been active among African peoples as He was among the Jewish people. Did He then reveal Himself only in the line of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Samuel and other personalities of the Bible? Didn't our Lord let it be clearly known that 'before Abraham was I Am'? (John 8:58). Then was He not there in other times and in such places as Mount Fuji and Mount Kenya, as well as Mount Sinai? The decisive word here is "only". The more I peeped into African religious insights about God, the more I felt utterly unable to use the word "only" in this case (1980:817).

Even Daneel, who criticises Mbiti for generalising about the concepts of God in Africa (1989:112-13), is ready to recognise that,

All African religions speak of a Supreme Being.... He is a Creator God, responsible for the earliest origins of the world, nature and humanity, He is the ground of all that exists, not directly controlling or maintaining it, but an uninvolved God, who has retreated to a great distance because of some error committed by human beings (:111).<sup>12</sup>

It is immediately clear from the outset that Mbiti's approach is Theocentric rather than Christocentric. His formulation has some parallels with the current theocentric theology of religions which maintains that God is the Creator of the universe. God's revelation is not understood to have been exhausted in a single historical event - that of Israel. I believe on this point Mbiti will be in agreement with the theocentrics. He will agree that God has chosen other means to reveal Godself to people of different cultural, historical contexts and that these revelations must be respected.

However, it remains to be seen how Mbiti fits Christ into his theocentric approach. The test is whether he ends up with Knitter's model or an alternative to it. Besides Mbiti's "co-option" of African Traditional Religion into the Christian religion (which creates the impression that African Traditional Religion can only be judged through Christianity), there are useful implications of his approach in regard to our subject. He himself has acknowledged that his formulations are not ends in themselves but meant to "serve as a basis for further discussion and reflection" (1970b:431-432).

### **3.3.2 Salvation**

Salvation is another important theme in the theology of Mbiti. His discussion of this theme demonstrates that in both the biblical and African worldviews the concept of salvation has a plethora of meanings. Its meaning is not as restrictive as is often portrayed by traditional Christianity as simply a matter of preparing one's soul for Heaven (Mbiti 1986:156). Mbiti

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<sup>12</sup> Even Daneel himself has fallen into the same trap for which he criticises Mbiti. He is generalising by maintaining that all African traditional world views speak of an uninvolved God, who retreated because of wrong doings of human beings.

expresses the many meanings of salvation that are apparent and compatible in the biblical text and the African worldview thus:

The biblical message of salvation has landed on fertile soil in African societies. The biblical record is so broad that it easily encompasses the African world. This means that when an African opens the Bible, he finds something which speaks directly to him. This is particularly so in the case of the biblical portraits of salvation which embrace several meanings that are readily applicable to the African world (1986:155).

It has to be borne in mind that throughout his theological discourses, Mbiti sees a close connection between African Traditional Religion and Christianity. This is premised on his conviction that African Traditional Religion is a preparation for the Gospel. His approach to the theme of salvation, therefore, is not exempted from this basic conviction. On that account Mbiti juxtaposes an African understanding of salvation with that of the biblical world without seeing any conflict. However, what he seems not to clarify is whether he considers the African traditional understanding of the human situation to be compatible with that of the biblical world.<sup>13</sup>

Notwithstanding Mbiti's lack of explicitness on the compatibility or differences in the understanding of the human condition in the two worldviews, he is intent on pointing out that the two worldviews have more points of convergence than differences. He considers that, both in the African traditional worldview and the biblical world, life constitutes experiences of dangers and threats, making life an arena of both physical and spiritual struggle. The physical and the spiritual struggles in Mbiti's view are two components of the same reality. The one affects the other (1986:156f).

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<sup>13</sup> Mbiti's emphasis on the similarity between African Religion and Christianity is criticised, amongst others, by Setiloane who argues that Mbiti is apologetic and "...much too simplistically drawing up similarities between African traditional understanding and the Christian faith"(1979:62).

In illustrating that the predicament in the biblical world is similar to that of the African, Mbiti says:

That, too, is painted as one with a variety of threats and dangers to human life. From the early chapters of Genesis to the final chapters of Revelation, there is a clear struggle going on. This struggle involves both physical and spiritual dangers and threats (1986:156).

To say that the threats and dangers that face human beings are physical and spiritual is to concede that salvation is more than spiritual. It has to embrace the total existence of human beings and all of creation. Mbiti, therefore, would argue that the understanding of salvation in the two world views is not in opposition but in dialogue.

The two worlds, African and biblical, readily meet as far as threats to life are concerned. Biblical threats are readily matched with the threats of the African background. The message of salvation which is applicable in the Bible must also inevitably find application among African people, since they face similar threats to their life (:157).

### **3.3.3 Mbiti's Contribution to the Debate**

Mbiti's rejection of the distinction made between the two revelations (general and special) seems to be on the grounds that such a distinction is bound to make exclusive claims about the knowledge and operation of God in human history. Such an exclusivist approach inevitably leads to claims of superiority and the denial of the presence and knowledge of God by others. For that reason, Mbiti introduces the formula "also" to replace "only". "The more I peeped into African religious insights about God, the more I felt utterly unable to use the word 'only' in this case. In its place there emerged the word 'also'" (1980:817). This leads him to conclude that: "The God described in the Bible is none other than the God who is already known in the framework of our traditional African religiosity" (:818). Mbiti's formulations allow for a theological or religious interpretation of God which is not superimposed on the Judeo-Christian interpretation of God's revelation.

Mbiti's plea for a more inclusive revelation, it must be noted, is not only an appeal to include African Traditional Religion in the scheme of things. It is quite clearly also a plea for all religions to be recognised as arenas of God's revelatory activity. Because God did not confine God's revelation exclusively to a history of one group of people; Mbiti argues that when religions meet, people can expect to discover points of convergence, differences and uncertainty (Mbiti 1970b:433).

The critical point in the debate about the Christian God in reference to our present study is not whether God is immanent or transcendent, local or universal, that is, whether those who speak about their God do so in restricted terms or not. What is important is to unveil whether these African concepts of God (numerous as they may be ) define God in exclusive or inclusive categories. My answer is, they do so in inclusive terms. This conclusion is based on the fact that in African Traditional Religion there is "interrelatedness of African philosophies and world views" (:113).

My interpretation of Mbiti is that he sees the understanding of salvation in both the African traditional worldview and the biblical world as something cosmic. Salvation affects the interrelatedness and connectedness of our existence. Although Mbiti quite easily reads African Traditional Religion through Christian lenses, one is able to identify his genuine attempt to represent the African worldview. As I have said earlier, in Mbiti's judgment salvation is cosmic. It does not only affect the individual but the community as well. It is not only spiritual but also physical. Salvation is related to our total existence. It is inclusive in that it is an experience of human life as it faces both physical and spiritual struggles.

In regard to the theme of salvation in the African worldview, therefore, it is experienced in relation to community. If one's neighbour is hungry or is not well for example, that person would be said to be in need of redemption from a condition that reduces his/her humanness. It will be upon the one who is well and sound to bring about that moment of redemption to the one who needs it. At the moment of mediating that act of redemption the state of being a real

human being is at the same time demonstrated. That person would be said to be a "righteous" person - *Motho yo o tletseng Tshiamo*. Mbiti goes to the extent of saying that:

A dog may also save someone or something from danger, from attack or other situation which would have led to loss or death. A branch of a tree saves someone from falling to his death; the discovery of a well of water saves a traveller from dying of thirst; a log of wood floating in the water saves a swimmer from drowning; new information saves a person from an otherwise unnecessary journey or effort (1974:109)<sup>14</sup>.

Salvation is not only understood in terms of the God who effects it through some form of transcendental activity. But it is also effected when one accepts the responsibility of being human. This dimension of salvation, which emphasises our responsibility towards others, is equally important in formulating a theology of religions. It teaches us that salvation is not simply futuristic and individualistic but concrete.

Salvation happens in and for a community:

For the African, both God's activities for human creation and redemption take place within the social divine arena and context of the community. Both divine activities are inherently social and the community is God's sacred ground or Church to mediate these special divine activities of free and undeserved supernatural, universal creative and redemptive grace and agape of God (Twesigye 1996:256-57).

The traditional understanding of salvation is universal and cosmic. Human communities cannot be said to be without salvation because to be a human being wherever one is, means to be in a community made of individuals who are always mediating godliness - "*Bo - Modimo*". Because of this universal and cosmic understanding of salvation, Twesigye (1996:260) says that "there is no concept of missionary work in African traditional religion. Traditional Africans believe

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<sup>14</sup> A person of another religious tradition will also be seen as an agent of or mediating salvation in these terms. The story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:33-35) is a good example of this.

that all groups of people know God as their Creator and worship him as such". On the other hand, sin consists in an inhuman act. An act that not only destroys (dehumanises) the one who commits it but also results in the disruption of the harmony and wholeness of the community.

The context in which the African contribution is to be understood is the global community with its different religious traditions of which we are part. No world community resembles the other. What is considered to be wrong with human beings in one religious community is not necessarily the same for others. Notwithstanding these differences, however, in the traditional African worldview, even up to this day, it is not considered an abomination to seek means of salvation across religious boundaries so long as those means are for the good of human life. Though stating it negatively, Maimela attests to this:

Indeed, anyone who has ministered to African parishes will admit that the problem of syncretism among African Christians is a serious one, because experience shows that many of them mix freely both the Christian and the African religious ethos hoping thereby to have the best of the two religious worlds (1985:71)<sup>15</sup>.

It is in this spirit that dialogue has to be understood. There is something in other religions that can be learnt and appreciated which enhances our understanding of God and the completeness of our existence.

So far I have tried to illustrate the nature and content of the African contribution towards the Christian debate on religious pluralism. Clearly, African Traditional Religion is open to other religions on the basis of common humanity and the responsibility that comes with it. This African perspective, I am convinced, needs to be taken seriously by those who search for a theology of religions that bonds humanity rather than tear it apart. Now, what remains is to

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<sup>15</sup> In my view it is rather unfortunate that Maimela sees the mixing of the advantages of the two religious worlds as a "serious problem". He seems to forget that he is speaking here about African Christians who, despite being Christians, are and will continue to be rooted in their cultural and religious heritage. In contrast to Maimela, Oduyoye asks whether syncretism is not a positive and unavoidable process (1979:114)?

explore how Christ relates to the anthropocentric approach which I have proposed in this chapter.

## CHAPTER 4

### TOWARDS AN AFRICAN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS

#### 4.1 The Christological Question

The question of christology renders itself unavoidable in a theology of religions particularly when it is a Christian like myself who attempts to say something about the subject. In my mind there are at least two reasons why a discussion of an African contribution to the debate on religious pluralism should end by asking the questions: a) How does Christ fit into an African theology of religions; and b) why is it necessary to ask this question? What follows is an attempt to briefly explore these questions in the light of my previous arguments on the nature of an African contribution towards the debate on religious pluralism.

The need to explore this question, in my opinion, is premised on two assumptions: First, there is a growing majority of Africans who adhere to the Christian faith, a religion that confesses Christ as the Incarnate God. However as we observed with Maimela, this has not meant that African Christians have totally abandoned their African worldviews and religious convictions, at least to a large extent. Second, by describing the character of African traditional religiosity as accommodative and with its emphasis on the value of humanness we have to investigate how that claim receives or accepts the person of Christ whom the Gospels portray as the true human prototype and God's means for human salvation.

But one does not want to underestimate the difficulty of the christological question. It seems throughout Christian history that defining Christ in different contexts has not been an easy task. Jacqueline Grant (1992:65) is correct to observe that: "When Jesus asked the disciples the question who do you say that I am in Mark 8:29, he began what was to become an endless debate on a central doctrine in Christian Theology". What is more critical to African christology in relation to religious pluralism and its theology thereof, is what Grant continues to point out,

namely that: "...it is important to discuss the context in which Jesus is encountered by people, for this context provides the contours for the answer to Jesus' question" (:65).

Grant concedes that the question "who do you say that I am?" is "posed anew in each new generation and in each new context". In answering this question we are made to be subjects, she argues (1992:65). This is the more important concern in dealing with the christological question in Africa today. It is important that Africans answer this question in the light of their experience of Christ within the context of their particular African religious pluralism.

The Western response to the christological question and which Africa inherited could not have been without ideological background. That christology can no longer do justice to the African quest of who Jesus is. The way western contexts (with their ideological biases) have sought to answer the question, often "in a once-and-for-all fashion, that is, for all times, and for all peoples" assuming that such an answer is true and universal (Grant 1992:65). Equally, Taylor (1973:24) reminds us that "Christ has been presented as the answer to the questions a white man would ask, the solution to the needs that Western man would feel, the Saviour of the world of the European world-view, the object of the adoration and prayer of historic Christendom". The questions that Taylor asks following this reminder are also important and actually place themselves squarely on the proposal that I am trying to put forward here: "But if Christ were to appear as the answer to the questions that Africans are asking, what would he look like? If he came into the world of African cosmology to redeem man as Africans understand him, would he be recognizable to the rest of the Church universal? And if Africa offered him the praises and petitions of her total, uninhibited humanity, would they be acceptable?" (:24).

The answers to the questions that are posed by Taylor, if answered in the affirmative, cannot be guaranteed to be totally acceptable to a person who is in another context. One has to bear in mind what Knitter has reminded us about the "love language" of the early Christians in reference to Christ (see 2.2.2). One thing however cannot be doubted: In seeking to understand who Christ is, Africans will do so from a strong understanding of relationality. I am of the opinion that once

Africans have taken that route they will cease to see Christ as "the Christ of Euro-American Christianity who comes to Africa only on Sundays on a missionary visit from Palestine via Europe and America, and one who does not speak the African language nor understands the African culture" (Obaje 1992:45). They will begin to integrate the Christ who is truly human and relational into their lives and experiences. Christ will then become "*The Anthropos*".

#### 4.2 Concepts of Christ in Africa

Quite appropriately, Martey (1994:78) has used this sub-title in his discussion of *African Theology As Inculturation Theology*. My point of departure however in using the same sub-heading is to illustrate briefly that the African attempts to wrestle with the question of christology have, hitherto, not taken into account the question of religious pluralism. One has sympathy with this neglect because Africans have not yet sought to develop their own theology of religions systematically. An argument could be made out that an African theology of religions is not a priority for Africa. I do not think, however, such an opinion will be honest to the African situation. The fact that Africans are not just Africans but also African Christians, African Muslims, etc, does indicate that there is dire need to explore an African theology of religions.

On the basis of what I have described as an African contribution to the debate on religious pluralism I want to argue that such a christology is of critical importance. Christologies that are becoming predominant in the African context are those of inculturation and liberation. Inculturation christology has emphasised the need to answer the question "Who do you say that I am?" from the religiocultural perspective of Africa (Martey 1994:81).

Those who have pursued an African Christology of liberation identify Christ with those who suffer marginalisation and injustice.<sup>1</sup> This approach sees Christ as the Liberator. Unlike the

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<sup>1</sup> Christology of liberation is more predominant in Southern Africa (particularly South Africa) given its past apartheid history of oppression and injustice. African women also take this route in an effort to see how Christ relates to their marginalisation and unjust treatment in society.

christology of inculturation, the African women reject the African cultural stereotypes that discriminates against women. Therefore, "central to the christological reflection of African female theologians is the experience of women in patriarchal society and male dominated churches" (Martey 1994:82).

The other dimension of christology that Martey mentions is that of seeing Christ as the Ancestor Liberator.<sup>2</sup> In this connection "Christ is part of the human family. He does not live in a far distant heaven without relating to us. Never for a moment does he forget this world which gave him his being. He protects, guards and guides us. It is from Jesus the Christ that we, the whole tribes(sic) of God - we Christians - have taken our name" (Martey 1994:85).

What is common in the christologies that are cited above is that they do not, at least not explicitly, concern themselves with the issue of religious pluralism. Martey very clearly identifies the issues that are of great concern and that African christology must account for. According to him these issues are to be found on the religiopolitical and religiocultural planes. The issues to be confronted by the person of Christ are: poverty, racism, sexism, classism, colonialism, neocolonialism, imperialism, injustice, political dictatorship and repression, etc. (Martey 1994:85).

It is impossible to ignore the possibility that some of these problems are to a larger extent intertwined with factors of religious intolerance and misunderstanding. Our exclusive ideas about God and the expectation that others should toe the line of our religious convictions, failing

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<sup>2</sup> Nyamiti takes a broader approach to this dimension of Christology. For him Christ is not only an Ancestor but Christ also was there in African Traditional Religion. He writes (Nyamiti 1994:66): "It is commonly agreed that even before the coming of Christianity into black Africa, Christ was already at work among its citizens, revealing himself to them and drawing them to the Father through his Spirit in ways known only to himself. This being the case, one should expect to find traces of Christian teaching-and even of christology - in African religions or cultures that manifest Africans' religious experiences". Suffice it to say that Nyamiti's view is not different from the argument of "anonymous" Christianity.

which we relate and treat them with discontent, can easily lead to serious conflict, violence and injustice.

A christology of inculturation and liberation alone will not help us realise a community of wholeness. But because wholeness is something that has to be experienced by all, irrespective of our religious affiliations, an African christology that enables us to relate with those who are religiously different from us is equally critical in our African contexts.

### **4.3 Towards an African Theology of Religions**

If we acknowledge the religiously plural nature of Africa, then, we must strive for a christology that will enable us to enter into dialogue with ourselves and fellows inhabitants. A christology that allows us to see other people as on par with us who call ourselves Christian. Such a christology needs to place emphasis not on the difference between religious traditions (though differences cannot be brushed aside) but on the importance of the unity of humanity. I suggest that an African christology that will enhance an African theology of religions must be a christology that has stripped itself of the mentality of superiority where we regard Christianity as a religion of the "enlightened", where others are viewed as lost and children of darkness. I believe a christology that takes this route is still imperialistic and is foreign to Africa's understanding of God, creation and the human being.<sup>3</sup>

Whatever this christology emerges to be, it has to be a christology that is soteriologically contextual, that is, a christology that allows Africans to meet Christ who responds to their cries in their historical and cultural contexts. I am of the opinion that Christ must not be seen to be detached from the real experiences of the African people because the God whom the Africans

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<sup>3</sup> Setiloane makes a valid point when he says that being a Christian in Africa does not mean endorsing "every detail of western Christian theology" (1981:64). This suggests that christology can not only be universal but should also be particular. Africa must first experience and name Christ for herself. From this vantage point the African experience of Christ would no doubt have a universal application. Africa's christology will "...enable us to utilize creatively the tension between the universal and the particular and to develop the theology of the unity of humankind" (Oduyoye 1979:111).

have known is the God who is attached and not detached. A God who is cosmologically related to what God has called into existence. By this I mean what Panikkar has called *cosmotheandricism*.<sup>4</sup>

Christ must be experienced as Christ of the "market place". If christology fails at this critical point Christ will remain alien and only here to summon us to life after death, marginalising our cosmotheandric quest for wholeness. I suggest we explore a cosmotheandric christology. A christology that sees Christ as part of our total experience. When we plough our fields, etc, Christ must be understood to be there. However it must not be the Christ who blesses the cruelties of our cultures and traditions but the Christ who purges them of all their iniquities, bringing out the best in them and restoring true humanness. Nthamburi's words are worth noting here. He says:

If this African christology takes as its point of departure Christ's humanity, then it is as it should be. If because of Christ's humanity we tend to identify Christ with our ancestors, then let us state that our concern is not so much with the person of Christ but his function. He becomes our mediator, saviour, redeemer, and hope.... The major question will always remain: How has our understanding of Christ transformed people in our midst, particularly those who have suffered injustice, poverty and deprivation, physically as well as spiritually?" (1991:69).

The reality of our contexts, as I pointed out earlier, demands that we do not marginalise the issue of religious pluralism. Injustices and other practices of inhumanity are intertwined with religious exclusivism, arrogance and hostility. Such religious injustices and concerns must therefore be confronted with a christology that is in harmony with the African belief in the unity of humanity and the urge to express being human across religious differences.

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<sup>4</sup> I have borrowed this terminology from Panikkar. He coined it to refer to the irreducible relationship between God, human beings and nature. He writes: "I have called *cosmotheandricism* the experience of the equally irreducible character of the divine, the human and the cosmic ....., so that reality-being one-cannot be reduced to a single principle" (1993:121).

From the perspective of an anthropocentric approach to the debate on religious pluralism that I have proposed in chapter 3, Africa cannot afford an exclusive christology that is apt to divide communities and families and thereby perpetuating social, cultural and religious evils. Such a scenario in my opinion is opposed to the African concept of being human.

I suggest therefore, an anthropocentric christology.<sup>5</sup> Christ is the human prototype in whom God truly teaches us, as human beings, the essence of being a human being, which is to be truly and supremely related to God, and relating to the whole of existence, that is, cosmotheandrically related. In Christ is "the God who is ontologically in solidarity with human destiny" (Nyamiti 1995:5). I suggest that such an anthropocentric/cosmotheandric christology is not an either/or but both/and. The reason being that an anthropological christology becomes void of meaning if it does not carry with it the cosmotheandric dimension. The emphasis of the anthropocentric/cosmotheandric approach is not on who Christ is, but on what Christ teaches us and the transformation that comes with it.

#### 4.4 Conclusion

For us Africans who strive to be truly African and truly Christian there seem to be little chance that we can avoid the challenge to find a comprehensible African Christian theology of religions rooted in our commitment to Christ as we have come to understand his function in our midst as Africans. A critical element of that theology will have to be an emphasis on

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<sup>5</sup> I suspect that Obaje will accuse me of proposing a christology that is premised on human experience instead of one that is God-centred that is, Theocentric and therefore taking revelation as its point of departure (1992:49f). But he also resolves my fear of this accusation when he says: "The worldview of the African convert today still retains the belief that nothing is impossible for God to accomplish according to God's righteous will. If this is the case, it is unnecessary to prove to the Africans whether God can be fully human and still be God at the same time" (:50). My interpretation of Christ as being fully human goes beyond meaning his experiences of pain, etc. like all of us. For me it also means that being fully human refers to relating to God and others in a truly human (godly, righteous) manner. So that his being fully human is reflected and demonstrated in his dealing with the Samaritan woman (John 4:7-26) for example, crossing religious, gender and social barriers.

dialogue. To speak of being human, of community and the unity of humankind is to acknowledge the presence of dialogue as an intrinsic value common to all these dimensions of existence. It is in dialogue that we not only discover ourselves but also the other person, the meaning and broadness of our relatedness.

If we evade this task we will find ourselves "neither cold nor hot"(Rev. 3:15). We will then continue to hope for theological prescriptions manufactured on soils that are alien to the spirit of the unity of humanity that God has bestowed upon Africa.

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