

HOW CHRISTIANITY BECAME AFRICANS' OWN TRADITIONAL RELIGION

Ibrahim S. Bitrus
(Federal College of Education, Nola, Nigeria)

Abstract: This article explores the transformative journey of Christianity in sub-Saharan Africa, arguing that the faith has evolved from a perceived "white man's religion" into a genuine African traditional religion. While initially introduced by Western missionaries as an extension of European culture—often dismissing indigenous customs—Christianity has since undergone a profound process of de-foreignization. The author contends that through the internalization of faith and the translation of the Bible into vernacular languages, African Christians have reclaimed the Gospel as their own. Today, the faith is no longer viewed as an alien import but as a central pillar of communal identity, preserved and transmitted across generations as a living, indigenous tradition. Supporting this claim are several "theo-anthropological proofs" that distinguish the African church from its Western parent. These include a robust belief in supernatural intervention and spiritual warfare, a strict adherence to the infallible authority of Scripture, and an intense passion for local evangelism. Furthermore, African Christianity is defined by a "communitarian" worldview—rooted in the concept of *Obuntu*, where individual identity is tied to the collective—and a dynamic prayer life that integrates local languages and customs. This spiritual vitality is reflected in the continent's demographic explosion, with the Christian population projected to reach 1.9 billion by 2050. Ultimately, the article concludes that while Christianity's public influence may be waning in the West, it has found a vibrant and permanent home as a foundational African tradition.

INTRODUCTION

The Christian faith was introduced to sub-Saharan African peoples by Western missionary societies in the 15th century and later, through the 18th and 19th centuries, although Christianity had existed in the eastern expanses of North Africa prior to this period. During these centuries of missionary enterprise in Africa, Christianity was predominantly seen and practiced by African Christians essentially as a foreign, white man's religion. The reason is that the foreign missionaries, who introduced Christianity to Africans, propagated it exclusively as a Western religion, culture, and civilization. Although these foreign missionaries did not introduce a foreign God to Africa, because God was already present in Africa, and He, in many ways, brought them to Africa, the gospel of Christ, which they brought to Africa, was undoubtedly a foreign gospel to Africans.

In this article, I explore the ways and manner in which Christianity in Africa has become an African traditional religion. I argue that the days are gone when Christianity was seen and practiced in Africa as a foreign, white man's religion. I contend that Christianity has now become a typical African traditional religion precisely because Africans have practiced it for more than a century, but more profoundly because African Christians have entirely accepted, internalized, and traditionalized the Christian faith and its practices. There is essentially nothing now that is foreign about Christianity to African Christians. It is, therefore, a misnomer for us to continue to perceive Christianity as a foreign, white man's religion in Africa. Christianity is now arguably an African traditional religion. Interestingly, Christianity is fast losing its traditional character and public influence in the West and, in ways, almost becoming a foreign religion. As Hugh McLeod rightly identifies it as one of the declining symptoms of Christianity in the West, which according to him "... include the weakening of orthodox belief and diminishing rates of observance among Christians; the growing numbers of those belonging to non-

Christian religions or to no religion; and the declining influence of Christianity and the churches on morality, politics and the law."¹

CHRISTIANITY, A FOREIGN RELIGION IN A FOREIGN LAND

European writers stereotyped Africa before the introduction of Euro-American missionary Christianity as "the dark continent." Not only was Africa impenetrable by European explorers due to hostile climatic conditions, but also because they labeled the people as barbaric, uncivilized, and idolatrous. According to Friedrich Hegel, African people lack any knowledge of absolute being and morality. Hence, the practice of tyranny and cannibalism among them is quite customary and proper.² Derogating the African man, Ricard F. Burton also claims that he is an inferior race not only to the active and objective European race, but also to the subjective and reflective Asian race. Burton believes that the life of the African man is characterized by stagnation, indolence, moral deficiency, superstition, and childish passion.³ Patrick Brantlinger captures probably the worst exotic description of Africa. He writes, "The British tended to see Africa as a center of evil, a part of the world possessed by a demonic 'darkness' or barbarism, represented above all by slavery and cannibalism, which it was their duty to exorcise."⁴ Undoubtedly, although these exotic descriptions of Africa were based on the accounts of European explorers, they were exaggerated to provide the impetus and justification for the colonization and proselytization of the African people by colonial powers and missionaries.

As the dark continent, they claimed that what Africa needed direly and urgently was the light of Euro-American civilization and religion. They firmly believed that Africa was doomed forever to savagery and damnation unless the European, who is the bearer of the light of civilization and true faith, intervenes in this dark continent! Jehu Hanciles argues, "In their thinking, Africans needed to be rescued from the deep darkness of heathenism by the imposition of Western civilization as much as their souls needed to be redeemed by conversion to Christianity."⁵ The religious revivals in Europe and America that stimulated renewed interest in mission, the abolition of slavery, and humanitarian concerns led to the massive introduction of Christianity to much of sub-Saharan Africa by Euro-American missionaries. This massive missionary enterprise in Africa, which spanned from the end of the eighteenth century to the twentieth century, is often characterized as "the third era of dramatic expansion of the missionary movement" on the continent. As the products of their Western culture and civilization, the Euro-American missionaries came to Africa with assumptions of the racial superiority of their religion and culture. Serving as Western cultural "imperialists," the missionaries imposed Western culture and civilization on their new converts. To be a Christian was to be a Euro-American because Christianity and Euro-American culture and society were virtually identical in nature. Viera Pawliková-Vilhanová expresses it more succinctly:

In Christian mission stations. . . missionaries exercised a strong superintendence over the moral lives of their converts, banning polygamy, dancing, singing, ancestor-worship, and many other customs. The forms of religious service missionaries used, though translated into African languages, were

¹ Hugh McLeod, "The Crises of Christianity in the West: Entering a Post-Christian era?" in *The Cambridge History of Christianity: World Christianities C.1914—C2000 vol 9*, ed. Hugh McLeod (Cambridge Histories Online: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 324, <https://www.bethanyipcomm.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Volume-6-World-Christianities-C.1914-C.2000-Hugh-McLeod.pdf#page=402> (accessed September 18, 2023).

² Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. John Sibree (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), 99.

³ Ricard F. Burton, *The Lake Regions of Central Africa*, vol. 2 (New York: Horizon Press, 1961), 326.

⁴ Patrick Brantlinger, "Victorians and Africans: The Genealogy of the Myth of the Dark Continent," in *Chicago Journals* vol. 12 (1): 1985, 175.

⁵ Jehu Hanciles, "Back to Africa: White Abolitionists and Black Missionaries," in "African Christianity, 214.

reproductions of the liturgy of their home church, replete with hymns. A Christian became "one who abandoned the customs."⁶

The missionary system of education, which was designed to teach the new converts the Bible and basic literacy, was also an agent of socializing Africans into Western culture and civilization. Most missionaries taught them Western values, styles of dress, table manners, and morality in their residential schools. They thought that their new converts could become true Christians if they were totally Westernized to forsake almost all their traditional life. But sadly, the missionaries succeeded in producing African Christians with two conflicting identities, who were neither fully Africans nor fully Euro-Americans. The Africans were caught between two separate and irreconcilable worldviews: one African and the other Western.

Christianity is not essentially a foreign, Euro-American religion. But the way in which the Euro-American missionaries introduced and propagated Christianity in Africa and proselytized Africans created the impression that Christianity was a foreign, white man's religion. Virtually everything about missionary Christianity, ranging from its understanding of God, doctrine, liturgy, Bible, education, and culture to the hierarchy of leadership, was predominantly Western. Everything about it was loaded with the Euro-American foreign culture, civilization, and worldviews. Propagating and enforcing this Euro-Americanized religion, the missionaries rejected African traditional musical instruments, dance, songs, and poems from being part of church liturgy in Africa. The reason is that the missionaries believed they were used in the worship of the African deities and ancestors. As such, they could not be deployed to serve the Christian God. Allowing African Christians to use them in worship would amount to syncretism even though Christianity itself has been, in many ways, syncretic. But this Western style of worship, which is cerebral mainly, deprived Africans of their natural disposition to serve God with the whole of their being, including their emotions.

The missionaries, according to Kofi Appiah-Kubi, believed, "They found Africa a blank slate on which anything could be written. It was therefore the avowed duty of the missionary to 'civilize' the African and drum the idea of God into him."⁷ The God who was not known and believed in Africa brought them to Africa to teach African people about Him. Many of them taught Africans the God of the Bible as if He were exclusively their foreign, white man's God.

Again, they deprived African Christians of the privilege to assume any leadership positions in the hierarchy of missionary Christianity, even when they possessed the integrity, capacity, and competence. Justifying the exclusion of the black Christians from the leadership of the Church, Hinderer, a European missionary, argues that God gave the Europeans a remarkable influence and respect among Africans, with which they preached the gospel. Allowing them to be leaders over them would call their respectability among them into question.⁸

DE-FOREIGNIZATION AND INDIGENIZATION OF MISSIONARY CHRISTIANITY

As the missionaries taught them, the new African converts had no option but to accept and practice the Euro-American Christianity as such. That is, they accepted and practiced missionary Christianity as a white man's religion without question. They bought into the assumption of the missionary Christian theology, doctrine, liturgy, and civilization. They also threw away their traditional religion and culture with whatever therein that did not contradict the teaching of the Bible. They renounced the traditional polygamous system of marriage. Embracing monogamy, many of them who were polygamists divorced all other wives but their first wives. They adopted the Euro-American style of church wedding, reception,

⁶ Viera Pawliková-Vilhanová, "Christian Missions in Africa and Their Role in the Transformation of African Societies," in *Asian and African Studies* vol 17 (2): 2007, 257.

⁷ Kofi Appiah-Kubi, "Jesus Christ—Some Christological Aspects from African Perspectives," in *African Dilemma: A Cry for Life*, ed. Kofi Appiah-Kubi (Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians—EATWOT: 1992), 59.

⁸ See John S. Pobee, *Toward an African Theology* (Nashville, Tennessee: Parthenon Press, 1979), 57.

dressings, table manners, and a host of other things. Similarly, they forsook their tribal names at baptism, even if they were meaningful, and embraced Euro-American names as their new authentic Christian identity.

But later, most African Christians became disillusioned with the Euro-Americanized Christianity and sought ways to de-foreignize and Africanize it.⁹ As Samson A. Fatokun argues, "[O]wing to foreign domination in these mission churches, an initiative was taken by some African leaders towards the close of the nineteenth century to indigenize the faith to a greater extent than had hitherto been the case."¹⁰ Not only because they were domineering, racist, and paternalistic in their propagation of Christianity, but also because the Christianity they planted in Africa alienated their converts from their people and culture. Eboussi Boulaga argues that the "Christianity of empire," which the missionaries introduced in Africa, "imposes itself only by tearing up its converts by the roots, out of where-they-live, out of their being-in-the-world, presenting them the faith only at the price of depriving them of their capacity to generate the material and spiritual conditions of their existence."¹¹

This Christianity-of-empire religion no doubt liberated the souls of Africans from the bondage of sin but distorted their African identity by assimilating them into Western culture and civilization. Kwesi A. Dickson argues that the missionaries who preached the Christian message to African people failed to relate it to their lives and thoughts effectively. According to Dickson, because they were convinced God desired to take the African out of "unwholesome" system of life and thought, the missionaries taught them "God as a transcendent God, one whose concern was to lift the African from the world in which God apparently had no interest."¹² This, along with many other factors, led to the emergence of Black Theology, which challenged white racial domination; African Theology, which recast Western Christian doctrines for African Christians; and African Initiated Churches (AICs), which created a new form of African Christianity that integrated the essential elements of African culture.

But the de-foreignization and Africanization of Christianity in Africa was not started by African Christians, so to speak; the Western missionaries themselves began it. They began by learning indigenous African languages and using them not only to preach the gospel but also to translate the Bible into these languages. The translation of the Bible into the African vernaculars, which is the greatest legacy of the missionaries in Africa, gave impetus to the de-foreignization and Africanization of the Christian faith in Africa. Reading the Bible in their mother tongue enabled African Christians to make new, surprising, and exciting discoveries in the Bible. They discovered first the discrepancies between what the Euro-American missionaries taught them about Christianity and what the Bible teaches about it. They also found that the Bible condemns racial superiority, affirming the dignity and equality of all men created in the image of God. They discovered that the God of the Bible is identical to the God that Africans already know by name in their vernacular languages.

Again, it was astonishing for them to discover the practice of exorcism in the Bible, but also polygamy, which the missionaries condemned and imposed church discipline on any new converts who dared to practice it. Most importantly, reading the Bible, African Christians discovered that the missionaries did not bring God to Africa. No! The universal God of the Bible was already ahead of them in Africa. It was this God whom the Africans already knew and worshiped in their local languages,¹³ that brought the missionaries to Africa to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ, a gospel that was foreign to Africa.

⁹ For detailed discussion of Africanization of Christianity, see Dirk Van der Merwe, "From Christianising Africa to Africanising Christianity: Some Hermeneutical Principles," in *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* vol 2, (2): 2016, 559-587.

¹⁰ Samson A. Fatokun, "Christianity in Africa: A Historical Appraisal," in *VERBUM ET ECCLESIA* Jrg vol. 26 (2): 2005, 366.

¹¹ Eboussi Boulaga, *Christianity Without Fetishes: A Critique and Recapture of Christianity*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1984), 17.

¹² Kwesi A. Dickson, *Theology in Africa* (London: Dorton, Longman & Todd Ltd, 1984), 91-92.

¹³ The African people had the idea of this universal God of the Bible in their indigenous religion before the advent of Christianity. They worshipped Him through their indigenous religious intermediaries such as deities and ancestors.

In effect, the translation of the Bible into African languages set the revolutionary process of the indigenization of Christianity and its eventual traditionalization in Africa on course. Kwame Bediako is right in claiming, "The single most important element for building such an indigenous Christian tradition is therefore the Scriptures in the vernacular language of a people."¹⁴ Translating the Bible into the vernacular language implies the expression of everything about the biblical Christianity—message, theology, doctrine, and liturgy—into indigenous terms and categories, thereby liberating it from its dominant Euro-American monopoly.

TRADITIONALIZATION OF CHRISTIANITY, A FOREIGN RELIGION IN AFRICA

African scholars dominantly perceive Christianity as a bunch of doctrines that are loaded with jaw-breaking Western theological jargon about the Triune God. This catalogue of doctrines, they claim, is what has made and continues to make Christianity a foreign religion in Africa. They insist that unless these doctrines are translated into African categories and thought forms, Christianity as practiced in Africa today is and remains essentially a foreign religion. In other words, Christianity in Africa remains essentially a foreign Western religion since African churches continue to maintain the Western Christian doctrine and style of worship. Expressing this sentiment, T.S. Malueke writes, "Africans must first cease to experience Christianity as alienating and foreign before they can start discussing Christianity as non-foreign and non-Western."¹⁵ Consequently, African theologians have deconstructed the doctrines and reconstructed them with African categories to de-foreignize Christianity in Africa. For example, reconstructing the person and work of Christ with African categories, they characterized Christ as an African traditional "Chief," "ancestor," "brother," and even "black" to Africanize him. As laudable as this reconstruction is, it has little to no impact beyond the confines of academic Christianity. It has not impacted and transformed lived Christianity in Africa. As Dirk Van der Merwe also accurately points out,

African theologians have endeavoured to show how the gospel resonates with the categories of the traditional African worldview. Numerous publications from all over the continent have sought to fulfil this task. Efforts at theological construction fail to consider and incorporate the popular level of living.¹⁶

In many ways, virtually every ordinary African Christian would find these African analogies of Christ unintelligible, confusing, and a distortion of his person and work according to biblical witness. They would rather be content with the perspicuous biblical witness to the person and work of Jesus as Savior of the world, Light of the world, Bread of Life, the Way, the Truth, and the Life, among other titles. The traditionalization of the Christian religion in Africa is more than just substituting its Western doctrines with African categories. Accomplishing it from the standpoint of an abstract academic discourse alone is an illusion rather than a reality. We argue that the traditionalization should be discerned and constructed from the concrete standpoint of Christianity as preached, believed, lived, and practiced by African Christians.

Therefore, what really constitutes the very essence of Christianity is not simply its dense theological doctrines about the Triune God and their translation into African categories. By no means! However, it is the confession of faith in the Triune God, as revealed in Jesus Christ, our personal Lord and Savior. I agree with William Ofori-Atta that "Christianity is a person. That person is Jesus, the Son of God."¹⁷ But where is Christianity where there is no professed living faith in Him? Indeed, there is none. Where there is faith in Jesus Christ, there is also Christianity. The two are distinct but inseparable. Where

¹⁴ Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non Western Religion* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1995), 62.

¹⁵ T.S. Malueke, "Half a Century of African Christian Theologies," in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* (99): 1997, 7.

¹⁶ Van der Merwe, "From Christianising Africa to Africanising Christianity: Some Hermeneutical Principles," 569.

¹⁷ William Ofori-Atta, "Uniqueness of Christianity," in *Tribute to the Late W.E.A Ofori-Atta* (Accra: 1988), 29.

Jesus is preached, there faith is also created in him. Christianity stands or falls with the free and delightful confession of unwavering faith in Jesus Christ rather than with its obtuse doctrines and complicated liturgy. In fact, without it, Christianity cannot stand even for a minute, let alone for centuries. It would certainly crumble! The faith in Christ precedes and takes precedence over doctrine, precisely because doctrine is a written expression of faith. Christianity is first and foremost a confessed faith in Christ Jesus before it is written down as a doctrine.¹⁸ Once this faith has been internalized, preserved, and transmitted from one generation to another through preaching of the gospel, it has no doubt become a dynamic and living tradition for the people even if it is imported from without.

Arguably, this faith in Jesus Christ, which is instilled in African Christians by the Holy Spirit through the preaching of the gospel, is deeply rooted in their lives, hearts, minds, thoughts, and actions. They have guarded, propagated, and contended for it even during severe persecution reminiscent of the early church and transmitted it as a tradition from one generation to another for over a century.¹⁹ Fatokun makes an even more compelling argument for the current traditional status of Christianity in Africa. According to Fatokun, since Christianity has been in existence in Africa since its inception in the Middle East, it is safe to say, "The Christian religion has not only been established in Africa against all odds but has succeeded to a great extent in indigenizing itself." He contends that the exponential growth of Christianity in Africa has further proved that "Christianity has indeed achieved the status of a traditional religion in Africa."²⁰ Henceforth, in the emphatic words of Van der Merwe, "Christianity has therefore ceased to be regarded exclusively as a Western religion."²¹ Christianity is now not just "Africans' religion" as Bediako argues, it is properly speaking Africans' own traditional religion.²²

However, this internalization and traditionalization of Christianity are not simply the work of African Christians themselves; rather, it is the work of the Holy Spirit in and through them as the Word is preached and the sacraments are administered on the continent. Christianity is now a traditional symbol of individual and communal identity for African Christians. Their identity as Africans is now so much bound up with the Christian religion that they cannot henceforth truly be African apart from their Christian faith.

Jesus Christ is the object and content of the Christian religion, in whose name salvation is exclusively found under the earth. The African peoples at first heard the message of Jesus' cross, and him crucified as an alien gospel, weird news, and total foolishness that was at variance with their indigenous religious beliefs when the missionaries first proclaimed it to them. But as the power of God, ever since Africans have accepted the gospel, Jesus has become a household name in Africa. Jesus is no longer seen as the name of a foreign, weird, and Western Deity in Africa. As the permanently adopted and internalized name, Jesus has now become the most ubiquitous, cherished, treasured, and exalted name of Deity in African Christianity. Jesus is now the most frequently mentioned name of God by African Christians in preaching, prayer, daily devotion, and everyday conversation at home, work, in business, and on social media 24/7, apart from at their church solemn assemblies and other Christian gatherings.

The impact of this spiritual practice (as we shall see in the next section) on the transmission, internalization, and traditionalization of the Christian faith in Africa is profoundly far-reaching. This practice has so much rooted and initiated the contemporary generation of African Christians into Christianity through their parents and churches that they have little to no idea of any African indigenous religion or deity. The only authentic African traditional religion they know, believe, and practice for their entire life has been the Christian religion, which their African Christian parents and their churches have

¹⁸ This mirrors the canonization process. . . first the apostolic preaching, then the need to get it down in writing so that the authentic apostolicity would not drift or get corrupted.

¹⁹ There are African theologians who contend that Christianity has been in Africa for 200 hundred centuries. This is at least true for certain eastern parts of North Africa where Christianity has been existence since the early church, but it is not for the whole of Africa.

²⁰ Samson A. Fatokun, "Christianity in Africa: A Historical Appraisal," 368.

²¹ Van der Merwe, "From Christianising Africa to Africanising Christianity: Some Hermeneutical Principles," 570.

²² Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 60.

handed down to them. Therefore, to talk to them about any African traditional religion and God other than the Christian religion and its founder, Jesus, will sound foreign, strange, and awkward to them.

THEO-ANTHROPOLOGICAL PROOFS FOR THE TRADITIONALIZATION OF CHRISTIANITY

The present traditional status of the Christian religion does not just happen in Africa. There are a myriad of spiritual practices that contribute to its creation, internalization, and traditionalization on the continent. These are the spiritual practices that express, prove, and reinforce their traditionality in Africa.

ROBUST BELIEF IN THE SUPERNATURAL

What has been aiding and sustaining the traditionalization of the Christian faith through the ebb and flow of time since its establishment on the continent, even in the midst of religious oppression and persecution, especially in northern Nigeria, is its unfaltering belief in the supernatural intervention of God in human affairs. This belief is crucial for the existence of the Christian religion in the world, but is either relegated to the background or entirely lost in the West. A famous American priest, Dwight Longenecker, argues that materialistic atheism, which denies the supernatural power of the Christian religion, has taken over the church in America:

Embarrassed by the supernatural, the Christian teachers and preachers have gradually and gently de-mythologized religion so that it no longer deals with man's interaction with the supernatural realm, but instead aims to simply save the natural realm. American Christianity is no longer about the salvation of souls, but self help and social justice. The preachers are increasingly silent about the other world, settling for the chance to improve this world.²³

The deep-rooted belief in the supernatural, which has been an indispensable part of the traditional religious worldviews of African Christians, has actually been strengthened by the advent of Christianity. As inherently religious people, African Christians often feel at home with the supernatural intervention of God in their lives. Rejecting the reality of the mystical realm is the worst embarrassment ever to them. To be human for them is to have the innate impulse to believe and to be impacted by the supernatural. As there is no dichotomy between profane and spiritual in the African worldview, including the Bible, virtually every Christian anticipates seeing and experiencing the supernatural intervention of God at work, at home, in their offices, businesses, on their journey, in their sickness, and in every facet of life.

African Christians are so obsessed with the belief in the supernatural and the need to be shaped by the transcendent that pastors have been challenged to take the supernatural work of God seriously to remain relevant in the church. As the belief in the supernatural is bound up with spiritual warfare, many African pastors do not brush aside the power of mystical forces such as witchcraft and demons; they confront them head-on in the power of the Spirit. Consequently, a preacher who demythologizes the Christian religion in Africa is bound to fail in their ministry. Such a pastor will embarrass himself or herself out of the church. One cannot toy with the supernatural intervention of God in the world, as evidenced by miracles, healing, and deliverance, and remain a relevant pastor of their congregation in Africa.

Therefore, many pastors who merely function, if even excellently, as the leader of worship and minister of word and sacraments, are fast becoming insignificant. The confidence that many African Christians have in them is waning. The type of pastors these Christians desire is not those who preach the gospel with mere words or with cerebral prowess, but pastors who preach the gospel with divine power, signs, and wonders in the fashion of the early church. They also yearn for a worship that is more than simply a cerebral response to the supernatural. They prefer an experiential worship in which they

²³ Dwight Longenecker, "American Atheistic Materialism, A Creed of Despair?" in *The Imaginative Conservative*, <http://www.theimaginativeconservative.org/2015/05/from-american-atheistic-materialism.html> (accessed January 6, 2016).

encounter the supernatural through various means, ranging from preaching and thanksgiving to drumming, singing, and dancing in the power of the Spirit. The hunger for the supernatural intervention of God, even among the mainline Church members, is so profound that their pastors/priests who cannot deliver these goods are not only becoming irrelevant but are also losing their members to Pentecostal and charismatic pastors. The belief in the supernatural power of Christianity is a great asset of the church in Africa that has the capacity to address human fear, anxiety, and depression, even though most Euro-Americans view such a belief in the supernatural intervention of God in the world with skepticism. Its contribution to the growth, vibrancy, and spread of the Christian faith cannot be overstated.

BELIEF IN INFALLIBLE BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

As the collective will of the traditional African community, handed down by the community's elders, the Bible occupies a central place in the faith and life of the church in Nigeria. J. Kwabena Asaah-Gyadu argues, "If Christianity is doing well in Africa, it is partly because African Christians do not compromise on the divinity and sacredness of the Bible. All Christians regard the Bible as holy, but for African Christians this holiness is paramount and fundamental to faith."²⁴ There is no doubt that the African church takes the Bible with utmost seriousness as the ultimate revelation of God, which commands absolute authority in matters of faith and morality. African Christians believe that what it says is authoritative, infallible, and hence immutable. As the supreme court of appeals, beyond which there is no other authority, the Bible is willingly obeyed as the final authority over their faith and life. In many ways, they believe that the authority of the Bible is relativized if it is not permitted to have the final say about Christian belief or conduct. Thus, they consider obedience to the Bible to be obedience to God and vice versa.

In Africa, the Bible is nothing less than the written Word of God; it is the power of God for the salvation of the world. It empowers African Christians with the strength they need to heal, exorcise, and overcome the forces of evil in the world. Hence, healing and exorcism are seen as an integral part of the gospel. There is no way one can exclude these supernatural elements from the Bible and still claim to be a faithful Christian in Africa! A critical interpretation of scripture, unless it is intended to foster faith in Christ and equip members for good works, is practically useless. In Nigeria, where there is a profound respect for the authority of the Bible, the existence of many poisonous reptiles, such as snakes and scorpions, lends credibility to the ending of Mark's gospel and renders critical arguments about its authenticity irrelevant. In Nigeria, where the members of your congregation have the time and voracious appetite to listen to the Word of God, they will find it quite disappointing to hear you preach only for fifteen minutes.

Such astonishing respect for the authority of the Bible as the infallible Word of God is one of the reasons why the church is growing rapidly in Africa. Because the Bible in Africa is not simply a book to study academically, but a holy book imbued with inherent spiritual power, it is always handled with profound reverence, awe, fear, and even trembling as the primary symbol of the Christian faith. Describing the attitudes of Igbo Christians towards the Bible in Nigeria, Anthony Nkwoka says, "[T]he Bible is a living book, the unique Word of God Almighty and Controller of the universe. Apart from the fact it is *Bible Nso* (The Holy Bible), it is the Messenger-gift of an awfully holy and terrible God and is therefore very different from any other book! An irreverent handling of it is regarded as an insult to God, which no sane person should engage in."²⁵ The failure to read the Bible for spiritual nourishment is considered an offense to God.

Therefore, many African Christians deliberately study the Bible daily at home with family members and apply its teachings to their everyday domestic life and piety. It is not uncommon for parents

²⁴ J. Kwabena Asaah-Gyadu, *Contemporary Pentecostal Christianity: Interpretation from an African Context* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013), 166.

²⁵ Anthony O. Nkwoka, "The Role of the Bible in Igbo Christianity of Nigeria," in Gerald O. West and Musa W. Dube, *The Bible in African: Transactions, Trajectories, and Role of Trends* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 327.

to assign daily passages of the Bible to their children to memorize. Though such "conservative" attitude of the African church towards the authority of the Bible may sound irrational, impracticable, and even oppressive to the Western Church, the spirit behind that approach is quite compelling.

The Bible is now translated into virtually every African local language. The translation has democratized the reading and interpretation of the Bible, which were previously inaccessible to the vast majority of African Christians. Reading the Bible in their own mother tongues rather than in any foreign, Euro-American language, African Christians have therefore ceased to regard the Bible exclusively as the Western sacred religious book. They have taken ownership of the Bible as their own African Word of God. The daily reading and preaching of the Bible as the Word of God in their local African languages, without ceasing, is what continues to create, nourish, internalize, and traditionalize the Christian faith in Africa.

STRONG IMPULSE FOR LOCAL EVANGELISM

The mainline, African Initiated, and Pentecostal Churches in Africa accord the highest precedence to evangelism, which means going out to reach the "lost" for Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. The Christian faith is growing exponentially in Africa, primarily due to the strong desire of African Christians to share the Gospel with their immediate community. African Christians are profoundly passionate and enthusiastic about executing the Great Commission. Firmly believing that the Great Commission authorizes every Christian to be a missionary, African Christians spontaneously proclaim Christ everywhere they go in public. As a society that is *quite receptive to the Gospel*, many Christians are not ashamed of public preaching of the Gospel. It is not uncommon to find them preaching in buses, trains, on street corners, motor parks, and other public places. These mobile preachers also engage in door-to-door evangelism, inviting people to accept the gracious gift of God's salvation in Christ. The biblical *reality of sin, life after death, hell, and heaven*, which Western society often dismisses as "medieval stuff," is what informs this robust passion for local evangelism.

In Nigeria, for example, many local church congregations intentionally organize "revival" programs and evangelism trips. The members of the youth fellowship, women's fellowship, and seminary students never tire of embarking on mission trips to places where the gospel has not yet been shared. They would spend a week in these places sharing the gospel on a one-to-one and one-to-many basis. These groups often return with fascinating reports on how many people have received the gospel, which led to the planting of new churches in these mission fields. The Lutheran church would then send trained catechists to provide spiritual leadership and care for the new churches.

As an important practice, this robust impulse for local evangelism has not only spurred the African Christians to go out there in public places as "crazy guys"²⁶ seeking to bring lost souls to Christ, but has also spread the Christian faith in Africa and beyond, and transmitted it from generation to generation. It is fascinating that in Africa, where the gospel message used to be preached by white Westerners to Africans, African Christians themselves now preach the gospel in Africa in their mother tongue! This explains why the profound growth of the Christian church over the last 100 years in sub-Saharan Africa is the most dramatic in the history of Christianity. According to Philip Jenkins, "between 1900 and 2000, the number of Christians in Africa grew from 10 million to over 360 million, from 10 percent of the population to 46 percent."²⁷ By 2010, the number had risen to 823 million and is expected to increase enormously to 1.9 billion in 2050.²⁸

²⁶ This is how one European-American stereotyped those who go about sharing the gospel in public in America. The person said this in a conversation we had over a community meal at Luther Seminary during my school days.

²⁷ Philip Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 9.

²⁸ Pew Research Center, "The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections 2010-2050," <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/sub-saharan-africa/> (accessed December 29, 2015).

PRACTICE OF COMMUNITARIAN CHRISTIAN FAITH AND LIFE

Eugene Hillman argues loosely that the extreme form of individualism, which Euro-American missionaries introduced to Africa and propagated through a narrow concept of sin with a bit of social consciousness, is not only a disruption to the African communal life, but also a significant distortion of the Christian religion's primordial sense of corporate solidarity and collective destiny of humanity. Hillman writes, "This individualistic interpretation of Christianity's good news amounts to a privatization of religion; it tends to legitimate the atomization of the traditional social order, undermining cooperative practices, promoting competitiveness, and fostering an attitude of 'each individual for himself.'"²⁹

But arguably, African Christianity has rediscovered the communal understanding of the Christian religion, which resonates with the African traditional communal life. The conventional communal sharing of life, problems, property, power, and events among the members of the African community reflects the communal sharing of life, divinity, suffering, and resurrection among the divine persons of the Triune God. It is, therefore, not an overstatement to say that African understanding of life, marriage, problems, the church, and above all the Christian faith in Africa, is shaped by such an African communal worldview.

Unlike in the West, where the Christian religion is a personal faith, in Africa Christianity is more than simply a private matter. It is both personal and communal faith. The dictum that defines the identity of a Christian in Africa is "I am who I am by faith alone because of who we are by faith in Christ."

Seen in this light, the church in Africa is more than just a functional community of separate members, where the word is preached, and the sacraments are duly administered; it is an *obuntu*³⁰ community in relationships where African Christians find the true meaning and purpose of life in their relationships with God, one another, and all of God's creation. No one is morally and spiritually autonomous; the members are mutually dependent on one another for moral and spiritual discernment, formation, nourishment, and empowerment. It is only in communal relationships and collaboration that the members discover the ultimate truth of what it means to be the concrete body of Christ in the world.

The interdependence, solidarity, and togetherness that African Christianity emphasizes promote the communal understanding of evil and salvation. Evil and salvation have always had a communal dimension. Consequently, any evil that befalls one member of the community invariably affects every member of the community. Similarly, salvation is not merely a private, undeserved divine favor, but a communal grace that affects the community as a whole. Thus, Christianity in Africa is preached, taught, and transmitted by African Christians to the succeeding generation not only as an individual but also as a communal faith.³¹ Even though the latter transmission tends to undermine the individual's fundamental human right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, the communal insignia, which the church has assumed in Africa, is a powerful strength of African Christianity that may recreate a value of shared life in the West, where extreme individualism has become the normative way of life.

PRACTICE OF DYNAMIC PRAYER LIFE

The practice of the dynamic prayer life is one of the distinguishing marks of Christianity in Africa. Indeed, all Christians consider prayer to be vital to the Christian life; however, the solemnity with which many African Christians pray is truly remarkable. If there is anything tangible that expresses the vitality of the faith of the church in Africa at all, it is the tenacity with which the members seek the face and the

²⁹ Eugene Hillman, *Towards An African Christianity: Inculturation Applied* (New York: Paulist Press: 1993), 22.

³⁰ *Obuntu* is an African concept that means a person is who they are only in relationships to the other members of the community.

³¹ Although according to Sarah H. Wilson, a peer reviewer of this essay, many Westerners also desire very much for their children to share communally in the faith. It is not only personal or private faith that is the problem but many other loyalties tearing children from their parents' religion.

will of God through prayer. Many African Christians consistently maintain an active prayer life, praying for protection from spiritual forces, a safe journey, and success in their jobs and businesses. Believing in an all-powerful God who has answers to every human predicament, they beseech God in the face of barrenness, unemployment, persecution, accidents, and other issues that affect their daily lives.

To Christians in Africa, "A prayerless Christian is a powerless Christian," as the saying goes, because prayer is viewed as that which gives a Christian the divine power to live out their daily Christian faith. As the divine source for deriving all the supernatural power needed to defeat the forces of evil in the world, powerful, extemporized, and unwritten prayers for the healing and deliverance of physical and spiritual illnesses form central themes in most prayer sessions. In Nigeria, there is almost in every church a prayer cell, which goes by the name of "prayer band" or "prayer warriors," who meet weekly to "wrestle in prayer" with the personal, social, and spiritual issues impeding the spiritual and material well-being of the church members and the larger community. The prayer cell also organizes prayer/fasting retreats, as well as all-night prayer vigil programs, where participants spend an entire night in prayer to God. At such long, sustained, and spontaneous prayer hours, people afflicted by every kind of life predicament are invited to seek solutions through prayer from God.

In the Lutheran Church of Christ in Nigeria, the prayer for healing, deliverance, and exorcism does not supplant modern therapy, but rather complements it. Nigerian Lutherans believe that all healing, whether faith or modern, comes from God. The two are seen as God's works of compassion in the world. The one is inadequate without the other. Therefore, they deploy the two together in their search for holistic healing of those who are ill in body, mind, or spirit. This dynamic and robust ministry of prayer for healing and deliverance of the contemporary African church is a worthwhile practice that may enhance modern therapy for those who battle with alcoholism, depression, cancer, and other illnesses.

What is fascinating about the African Christian practice of prayer is that most of these prayers are said in local languages. Praying in their local languages, African Christians have understood and believed that they are not communicating to one remote foreign, Western white man's God who understands only prayers said in English, German, Danish, or Latin, but to a domestic, local African Christian God who understands and hears prayers in their mother tongues.

CONCLUSION

Christianity, as introduced to much of Africa by Euro-American missionaries, was first perceived, received, and practiced by African people as a foreign, Western white man's religion, mainly because everything about Christianity, ranging from the theology, doctrine, liturgy, to leadership hierarchy at the time and for many decades, was virtually Western and foreign to African Christians. To make matters worse, the new African Christian converts were taught to renounce their indigenous religion and culture and embrace the Euro-American culture and civilization as their new Christian identity and way of life. But Christianity, having been here for more than a century with African people in the hierarchy of leadership and other concrete efforts to de-foreignize and de-Westernize it, is safe to argue that Christianity has now assumed the status of an African traditional religion. This traditionalization of Christianity in Africa is not so much about radically or totally altering its foreign, Western Christian theology, doctrine, and liturgy, and replacing them with African theology, categories, and style of worship, even though enormous, impactful attempts at accomplishing it have been made on the continent. Instead, it is the internalization of the free confession of faith in Jesus Christ, who is the content and substance of Christianity and its transmission from generation to generation as a dynamic and living tradition in Africa.

The internalization and traditionalization of the Christian faith in Jesus Christ are not simply the human efforts of the African Christians, so to speak. It is the divine work of the Holy Spirit in and through them as they preach the gospel and administer the Sacraments unceasingly in Africa. The familiar spirit that engenders and emboldens the process of internalization and traditionalization of Christianity in Africa remains the deep, innate spiritual hunger for God that is entrenched in the people, a hunger that seems to be diminishing in the West. This spiritual hunger, which God continues to satisfy primarily

through the preaching of the gospel and other myriad spiritual practices, is what empowers African Christianity to be an effervescent Christ-centered, Bible-based, courageous, resilient, prayerful, traditional, and most growing religion in the global south, even amid severe religious persecution and suffering on the continent.

But get me right. I am not saying that the traditionalization of the Christian faith in Africa means that African Christianity is more authentic, superior to its parent, Western Christianity. By no means! Like Western Christianity, African Christianity has its own problems. It is bedeviled by hypocrisy, legalism, biblical literalism, anti-intellectualism, the prosperity gospel, the Big Man syndrome, and a lack of effective public prophetic witness. What I am saying is that the Western missionaries gave Africans the Christian religion, which truly satisfies their inherent spiritual hunger for God in more profound and extraordinary ways that are largely distinct from how the religion was handed down to them and is even currently practiced in the West, something that their parent missionaries had never imagined! "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be satisfied." There is no doubt that such a spiritual hunger, which owes its origin to God and not humans, is deliberately valued, inspired, and satisfied by the church in Africa through God's Word. The insatiable hunger for God and the firm faith in Jesus Christ as our lord and savior among African Christians, which are evident in and emboldened by their belief in the supernatural intervention of God in their lives, infallible biblical authority, robust missional impulse, shared communal life, and dynamic prayer life, have made this imported religion, Christianity genuinely an African tradition religion.