

# **ETHICS AND THE DEVELOPING AFRICAN THEOLOGY**

Keith Underhill

10<sup>th</sup>. May 1974

5323 Ethics  
For Dr. C. Van Til

I am thankful for the opportunity of writing this essay on a subject of such relevance for Africa today. Because of this, I have made a deliberate attempt to keep these thoughts simple and unphilosophical. There is such need for a Biblical polemic against the growing concepts of what is known as African Theology. By African Theology we are referring to a study of the pre-Christian and pre-Moslem African people's experience of their god.

When the missionaries first effectively brought the gospel to African soil there was a tendency, more marked in some than others, to despise and seek to annihilate anything connected with traditional African culture. For the most part, Christianity was introduced with very many unnecessary appendages of the West. But now the pendulum has swung to the other extreme, so that in the light of the new African consciousness, anything considered Western is suspect. Not just among Africans, but also amongst scholars throughout the world, it is becoming apparent that Africa does have a great heritage. The words 'primitive', 'savage' and 'heathen', for example, are vigorously rejected as not only inappropriate, but a complete misunderstanding of the true nature of African society and culture. The African has never known that modern Western disjuncture between life and religion. In Africa religion is life, and life is religion. Therefore, emergent Africa is turning its attention to the traditional religions, the old ways of life, to a culture many feared was irredeemable. It is now advocated that Christianity, as inherited from the missionaries, be re-evaluated on the basis of these African Traditional Religions. The implications and presuppositions of this type of thinking will be the purpose of this essay, particularly as they bear upon the study of ethics.

The new research into the traditional religions and a comparison of them with the Christian faith is represented particularly in the following four contemporary African Christian writers: E. Bolaji Idowu in Nigeria, Christian G. Baeta in Ghana, Harry Sawyerr in Sierra Leone and John S. Mbiti in East Africa. These men, and others who are their disciples, are mainly in the institutions of highest learning. Nevertheless, they are having a profound impact, particularly in the schools where textbooks on religion are being written in the light of African Theology. Using some of the writings of these men, and other shorter studies, our aim is to compare and contrast where necessary, these new developments of Christianity in Africa with the revelation of God in the Scriptures.

It may be asked why such a study is necessary at all! It is claimed that these men are Christians, believers in the Bible, and we do not want to dispute that they see themselves as such. However, the area of importance is our attitude towards African Traditional Religion, or more correctly, the Bible's evaluation of non-Christian religion. Is the place that these men give to the traditional religions a Biblical position? We will take the view that it is fundamentally unchristian and therefore must be attacked with the full weight of Biblical authority. It is not enough to refute their position simply by asserting that all African religions are pagan, in the sense that they and all other religions are deviations from the worship of the true and only God, for this is rejected outright. It is here that we are confronted with the very essence of what we are calling African Theology. Again and again, these scholars play the tune that African Traditional Religion is a positive preparation for the coming of Christ. In other words, Christ fulfils the religious strivings of the African, as of all men. Mbiti seems to put the Old Testament and African Traditional Religion on an equal footing as being

revelations from God, and regards them both as being fulfilled in Jesus Christ in the New Testament.<sup>1</sup>

Before the discussion further unfolds, we do not want to give the impression that we regard African Traditional Religion as totally evil or of no value at all. On the moral level there is much light and not total darkness, and for that we are thankful to God for His common grace. But admitting such formal similarities does not give us the warrant to compare African religion and Christianity without looking at fundamental presuppositions underlying these similarities. Yes, they both believe in a supreme, all-powerful creator God. But is Olodumare or Murungu<sup>2</sup> or whatever name is given to the supreme deity in Africa, to be identified with the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ? Is He that One who is revealed in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments?

Until recent decades, it has been commonplace for liberal scholars, under the dominating influence of the evolutionary hypothesis, to think of African religions as the lowest form of religion, out of which monotheism has gradually evolved. There are very striking similarities between the African religions and Christianity, just as with creation and flood stories and the Babylonians epics. We refuse to think that the Bible, as God's unique and final revelation to man, is dependent on these myths. Rather the dependence is the other way. Mbiti has put together various traditions explaining why man was separated from God, and it cannot be denied that there are many similarities with the Genesis account of the Fall.<sup>3</sup> The Bible clearly outlines the constant tendency in the history of fallen mankind for there to be degeneration from the knowledge of the true God and the substitution of idol worship for the worship of the Creator. Therefore these formal similarities can be seen as the remains of God's revelation before the dispersion of the peoples (Genesis 10 – 11), now much embellished and corrupted. No matter how far from God man is, he is still in the image of God. Alternatively, some have put forward the possibility of a later contact with Biblical revelation via the Jews. In either case the trend is devolution or degeneration. If this is true, we certainly cannot place African Traditional Religion in the same pale as Old Testament religion, that is, pointing to Christ. Rather, the reverse is true. Then African religions become the expression of rebellion against God, as are all other religions except that which is based on God's self-revelation in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. This is precisely Paul's point in Romans 1:18 and following, as he concludes that all men are under the power of sin (3:9), no one understands, no one seeks after God (3:10). Along with all of mankind, the Greeks included, the African has been groping after God, but not the true God, a god of his own imagination (1:21). Because of God's revelation in His creation (1:19-20) and the work of the law written on their hearts, they are without excuse in their sin (1:20).

This is a totally different conception of African Traditional Religion from that which is gaining influence in Africa today. We need to show that it is justified by examining the ethics of the

---

<sup>1</sup> Mbiti, John S., Christianity and Traditional Religions in Africa. *International Review of Missions*, 59, 1970, p. 436.

<sup>2</sup> See Idowu, E. Bolaji, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* (New York, 1962). Murungu is the name for God in Meru, Kenya.

<sup>3</sup> Mbiti, John S., *Concepts of God in Africa* (New York: Praeger, 1970), p. 176.

various religions considered generally together. The question that will concern us is how deeply a comparison can be made between Christian Theistic Ethics and the ethics of African Traditional Religion. We will first consider the African concepts of God, man and sin, and then in the light of these, evaluate the traditional religious ethic in terms of its goal, standard and motive power.

## AFRICAN CONCEPTS OF GOD, MAN AND SIN

### (a) God.

Imasogie attempts a definition of African Traditional Religion and concludes that the best term is 'bureaucratic monotheism'.<sup>4</sup> In this phrase two essential features of African religion are built in. It is monotheism because there is a fundamental belief in the Supreme Being, who as spirit, is self-existent, and thus the creator of all things. The complicating factor is that there are other deities, albeit subservient to and created by the Supreme Being, who are much more prominent in the life and worship of the people. The place of the Supreme Being has been described as follows:

... the sky, the abode of the Supreme Power, the "wholly other", who ... is above the pantheon of the divinities, and who is the father of all, from all life flows and to whom all returns.<sup>5</sup>

This Being has removed himself far from man because of man's behaviour. Only the 'bureaucracy', the intermediary deities, may be directly approached.<sup>6</sup> This is why it was so often thought that Africa was essential polytheistic. In some extreme cases, however, the Supreme Being can be invoked. The same remoteness of God is seen in the fact that although he is considered to be the upholder of the moral order, it is the other spirits below him who are immediately involved in the keeping of it.<sup>7</sup>

May we use this African belief in God as a foundation on which to build a Christian theism? Is this Supreme Being to be identified with the one and only God revealed in the Scriptures? The formal similarities of an essential monotheism, of a self-existent Creator and transcendent Being should not fool us. Nor should the inherent religiousity of the African. The situation is almost identical to that of Paul when he was faced with the great religious fervour of the Athenians (Acts 17:16ff.).<sup>8</sup> Paul spoke of His transcendence, His self-sufficiency and His rule over the nations. However, this God has revealed Himself in the person of Christ and can only be known and worshipped through Jesus Christ. There is no other way to Him (John 14:6, Acts 4:12) and there never has been, not even in the Old Testament. If the Pharisees, who knew the Old Testament, were because of their self-righteousness, worshippers of the creature rather than the Creator (Romans 1:25), how much more the adherents of African Traditional

---

<sup>4</sup> Imasogie, Osadolor, African Traditional Religion and Christian Faith. *Review and Expositor*, Vol. LXX, 1973, pp. 283-293.

<sup>5</sup> Omoyajowe, J. Akinyele, Human Destiny, Personal Rites and Sacrifices in African Traditional Religion. *Journal of Religious Thought*, Vol. XXX, Spring-Summer 1973, No. 1, p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> Sawyerr, Harry, The Basis of a Theology for Africa. *International Review of Missions*, 52, 1963, p. 274.

<sup>7</sup> Mbiti, John S., *African Religions and Philosophy* (New York: Praeger, 1969), p. 213

<sup>8</sup> Imasogie uses Acts 17 to confirm his interpretation of African religions. *Op cit*, p. 291. For the opposite view which we have taken, see Van Til, *Paul at Athens*.

Religion. Old Testament history is full of the very syncretism the African theologians are now advocating. The golden calf in the wilderness was not designed to supplant Jehovah (cf. Exodus 32:5), but was idolatrous worship nevertheless. Baal was so often worshipped along with Jehovah, but God is a jealous God and much worship is utterly unacceptable to Him (Exodus 20:1-5). So whether in ignorance or open rebellion, those who serve any other than the triune God as revealed in Scripture, must repent (Acts 17:30) of their rebellion against God. Such is the missionary task of the church of Christ which remains today!

**(b) Man and sin.**

African thought does not seem to be concerned with 'being' as such.<sup>9</sup> Being is morality. A man is what his character is. Therefore man cannot be described as a sinner for this would be an abstract state of being. In the typically communal African life a man's character can only be evaluated in relation to others, that is, whether what he has done has good or bad effects on the community. The community not only includes the clan or tribe but also the ancestors, the spirits and divinities. So sin in African Traditional Religion has been defined in the following ways:

... the breach of prohibitions imposed on man by his object of worship or the doing of anything that is displeasing to spirit powers with the result that the displeased spirit powers manifest themselves in human affairs.<sup>10</sup>

... actions and attitudes which are considered to bring harmful consequences to individuals and/or society.<sup>11</sup>

... sin as an evil, upsetting the equilibrium of society or of personal relationships.<sup>12</sup>

Something is evil because it is punished; it is not punished because it is evil.<sup>13</sup>

To take an example. It is not sinful for a girl to sleep with a man so long as they are not discovered by someone else. Their act of fornication or adultery becomes sinful from the point of discovery onwards, as it is then brought into the open in the eyes of society. So also the disobedience of a child to its parents is not sinful, considered in itself. What is wrong is that the proper balance of distance between them has been disrupted. There is thus no consideration of the ethical significance of the prohibitions themselves. The ethical measuring rod is rather the consequences of the violations and the prohibitions. Sin is not therefore regarded as disobedience in terms of relationship to the deity, and the regulations are thus on a man-to-man level. This conclusion is confirmed when we examine the content of the concern for deliverance among African peoples. It is not deliverance from sin but salvation from physical evils or dilemmas.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>9</sup> This at least applies to Yoruba thought. Dickson, K. A. & Ellingworth, P., eds., *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1969), p. 130.

<sup>10</sup> Gaba, C. R., Sin in African Traditional Religion. *The Ghana Bulletin of Theology*, Vol. 4, No. 1, December 1971, p. 22.

<sup>11</sup> Mbiti, John S., African Concept of Sin. *Frontier*, Autumn 1964, Vol. 7, p. 182.

<sup>12</sup> Dickson, K. A., op cit, p. 131.

<sup>13</sup> Mbiti, John S., *African Religions and Philosophy* (New York: Praeger, 1970), p. 207.

<sup>14</sup> Mbiti, John S., ὁ σωτὴρ ἡμῶν as an African Experience, in Lindars, B. & Smalley S. S. eds., *Christ and Spirit in the New Testament* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1973), p. 408, 411.

Can we add this African understanding of sin as being rooted in its evil effects to the Christian personal and inward idea, as Adegbola suggests, and still have a thoroughly Christian view but with an African slant? By no means! Nowhere in the Bible is sin defined in terms of the community or its evil effects alone. Sin is primarily in relation to God and His law (1 John 3:4, 5:17). Where in African belief is the idea of man's sinfulness in himself, his being in a state of rebellion against his Creator? Or where is it suggested that man is totally unable to please God? If man were seen not only as a creature, but as a creature dead in trespasses and sins, then there would be no more confusion that such men in and of themselves are able to worship the true God. Not only are they not able, they hate Him, and will continue to do so, until He by His grace changes their hearts. It is this aspect in particular which is so conspicuously absent from the writings of the African theologians. If all men are considered as striving towards the same goal, having the ability within themselves, then it is not surprising that so much positive use is made of African Traditional Religions. A truly Biblical understanding, however, paints the picture of all men striving against their Creator and all their religiosity being but an expression of their perversity.

These considerations underly the African concept of ethics to which we must now turn.

## THE AFRICAN CONCEPT OF ETHICS

African ethics has been described as dynamic ethics because it concerns what a man does rather than what he is.<sup>15</sup> A person is what he is because of what he does, rather than that he does what he does because of what he is. This parallels what we saw about sin, for a man is not by nature good or bad, except in terms of what he does or does not do. Thus the most serious aspect of ethics has to do with the concrete acts particularly in relation to taboos.

### (a) The Goal (Summum Bonum).

The participant in African Traditional Religion sees himself and his own well-being within the community as the goal of his life. He thus has secular goals, to ensure a livelihood, to satisfy his needs, and to obtain protection especially from the spirit world. Recognizing that he is part of a large community including his dead ancestors, the cultivation of the latter's fellowship and good-will is at the heart of all that he does.<sup>16</sup> Tempels put it this way:

... to acquire life, strength or vital force, to live strongly, that they are to make life stronger, or to assure that force shall remain perpetually in one's posterity.<sup>17</sup>

This is why he is so concerned with sickness and trouble, for he wants to be in a good relationship with the divinities who control nature and the affairs of men. As this pattern of ethics begins to take shape, we begin to see its true character. It turns out to be a sort of 'situation ethics', particularly as it relates to the world of the spirits. Crudely put, anything goes as long as the spirit world is on our side. Peace and harmony must be maintained at all costs. It is not strictly situation ethics in that there is a definite code of ethics laid down and handed down by tradition. The goal is therefore not really outside himself for as long as part

<sup>15</sup> Dickson, K. A., op cit, p. 117. Mbiti, John S. op cit, p. 214.

<sup>16</sup> Roberts, J. Deotis, African Religion and Social Consciousness. *Journal of Religious Thought*, Vol. XXIX, Summer-Spring 1972, No. 1, pp. 54-56.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Dickson, K. A. op cit, p. 117.

of the community he will experience the fruit of any wrong-doing. How does this compare to the goal that the Scriptures set before us? Our aim as Christians is to so live that God might be glorified in all that we do (1 Corinthians 10:31), that we might please our Saviour (1 Thessalonians 4:1). Although this is also the path of blessedness and conformity to Christ, it is not the path of ease, free from sickness and troubles. It is the narrow way, more hazardous than any other. The Christian's first and final reference point is the Triune God, and his desire is to obey His will as revealed in the Scriptures no matter what the situation might entail as a result. It is God-centred rather than man-centred ethics. Thus the two systems of ethics are mutually exclusive as to their goal. Originally there was no contrast between one's own happiness and pleasing God. But sin has caused men to drive a wedge between pleasing themselves and God, so that what pleases them is always in direct opposition to God as it is not done specifically to please Him, as it is not done in the way He has prescribed, no matter what religious orientation it might have.

**(b) The Standard.**

The standard is the accepted code of behaviour of the community or tribe. This is the tradition that has been passed down from generation to generation, which has to be kept because of the ancestral spirits who are still part of the community. In this way moral values are ultimately derived from the nature of God, as Idowu claims in the case amongst the Yoruba. Parrinder claims the same thing more generally, that the knowledge of God as revealed through God's rule in creation forms the norms of good and evil.<sup>18</sup> That standards manifestly vary from community to community and tribe to tribe, shows the influence of sin on man's originally perfect moral consciousness. Sarpong claims that since conscience is central as an infallible rule by which to measure ethical behaviour, the African ethical system is worthy of consideration by Christian moralists.<sup>19</sup> That conscience is central is not surprising, for the conscience is always moulded by practice and the total environment, and thus directly linked to the standard of the community or tribe. Again we must note that because African ethics, as with all non-biblical ethics, has left out the influence of sin on the conscience of man, its standard is basically man-centred. Even where conscience in African ethics agrees with the Biblical ethics, it is for different reasons. Murder is not wrong because God said it is wrong, but because it will upset the balance of life. So there is no common consciousness of man, on which we, with Charles Hodge, can build a peculiarly Christian ethic.

The standard for the Christian is the Scriptures since they are the only infallible revelation of the will of God. God's revelation in creation and the dictates of conscience are always to be measured by the standards set forth in the Scriptures. Thus there is only one way in which a man might be pleasing and acceptable before Him, that is by obedience to His will, which is only possible through Christ. It is true that those outside the pale of special revelation will not be judged by it, but by the work of the law written in their hearts (Romans 2:14-15) and the knowledge derived from the display of God's glory in the work of creation (Romans 1:20),<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Parrinder, G., Ethical Standards in World Religions: V – Africa. *Expository Times*, March 1974, LXXV, No. 6, p. 168.

<sup>19</sup> Sarpong, Rt. Rev. P., Aspects of Akan Ethics. *The Ghana Bulletin of Theology*, Vol. 4, No. 3, p. 44

<sup>20</sup> Murray, John, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Vol.1 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1959), p. 78.

but none have ever lived up to this standard because all are under the power of sin. Their only hope is the regenerating influence of the Spirit of God through the word of God.

**(c) The Motive.**

Why are there continuing ethical standards among African Traditional Religions? There are many reasons which cause traditional standards to be continued: God sees all that happens; the spirits are placated; it is for the good of the individual and community. But these do not provide the motivating power to do what is demanded of him. If a person understands what he ought to do, after due thought, this understanding can in itself enable one to change one's character.<sup>21</sup> This follows from the doctrine of sin, for men are sinners only in the sense of being 'capable' of sinning against others. This man has the ability to pull himself up by his own boot-straps, to act according to his sinful nature.

The whole ethical system is seen to be basically man-centred, and not God-centred. The creature is worshipped rather than the Creator. African Traditional Religion is no foundation on which to build a Christian super-structure. Nor is any fruitful conclusion to be obtained from a comparison of them. They are antagonistic and mutually exclusive systems at the core, despite the many formal similarities that have been noted. The Supreme Being is acknowledged but is detached from every day life. Life is not really lived in relation to Him. This analysis will now have to be more clearly applied to African Theology as it is being developed today.

## **AN APPRAISAL OF AFRICAN THEOLOGY**

The theologians of the developing African Theology are no doubt sincere when they claim adherence to God's revelation in the Scriptures, and therefore the uniqueness and foundational character of Christianity. But their appraisal of African Traditional Religion is in conflict with this claim, as has been shown. Christianity and African Traditional Religion are not good friends helping each other along the way towards God. They are basically antagonistic, since they rest on mutually exclusive presuppositions.

The basically uncritical outlook of these men to the African Traditional Religions is highlighted in the following quote from Mbiti:

Traditional religion has made African peoples disposed by nature towards things religious, since it has permeated all areas of human life, activities and understanding of the world. It has acquired its own system of beliefs and practices, its values and institutions, its interpretation of the universe in terms of creation, the place of man, human destiny and man's relationship with nature, all of which are largely compatible with Christianity itself (my emphasis).<sup>22</sup>

The basis for this statement and so many others like it seems to be the neo-orthodox interpretation of Christianity, whereby Christ's cosmic redemption embraces all men without exception. Thus all religions are at bottom in Christ, positively preparing men for Christ, as all men's religiosity is pointing to Him. All religions are not basically in conflict since they are

---

<sup>21</sup> Dickson, K. A., op cit, p. 126.

<sup>22</sup> Mbiti, John S., Growing Respectability of African Traditional Religion. *Lutheran World*, 19, 1972, p. 57.



working towards the same ends.<sup>23</sup> While such men do want to sift from African Traditional Religions those elements which are clearly anti-Biblical, having done this, they still in effect build a sort of nature-grace system.<sup>24</sup> First there is the common consciousness of all men leading them to live somewhat in accord with the will of the deity. The fulfilment of this, its completion, is in Christ, but the two are partners.

We have already persistently pointed out the reason for this fundamental mistake; that is, there is no Scriptural doctrine of the Fall and its effects, particularly in the noetic sphere. We do not disagree that God has revealed Himself to all men through His creation in a sufficient way so as to leave them without excuse. The question is what has African Traditional Religion done with this revelation? Has it suppressed it or adhered to it? From a consideration of the general ethical situation we have shown how completely opposite to Christianity African Traditional Religion is. Yes, all men know God, but they are at heart covenant-breakers, not acknowledging the God thus revealed. So we cannot agree with Idowu when he postulated that God has revealed Himself in the past pre-history of Nigerians, for example, through their religion, which is their life.<sup>25</sup>

If the point of contact between Christianity and African Traditional Religion is not their similarities when seen as compatible, then what is it? Van Til has repeatedly pointed out that there are only two types of men in this world, covenant-breakers, and those who by God's grace in Christ, are covenant-keepers. The point of contact thus becomes that knowledge of God which all men have, but which by nature, all have suppressed. To take an ethical example: the idea of sacrifice is common to both Christianity and African Traditional Religion. In Traditional Religion it is recognized that higher beings need to be appeased or pleased, to avert evil or to bring good. But these sacrifices are totally unchristian because they are not made with faith in Christ, and with the recognition that such are God's gracious provisions for man in his sin. The Christian evangelist may use the common notion of sacrifice as a point of contact, but only to show how the Christian gospel alone fulfils those longings which have actually been directed towards idols. Christ must not be presented as an addition to a former religion, in the sense of surpassing it, but One whose work is unique, who alone brings men to the Father, and without whom no man truly worships God nor does anything to please Him.

We must therefore conclude by again pointing out in the strongest terms the implications and presuppositions of African Theology. It says that God was pleased with the pre-Christian religions in Africa, which is a denial of the gospel of Christ. It presupposes the inherent goodness of men who are seeking God and thus on the way to heaven whatever religion they practice. It need not be pointed out that neither position has any warrant from the Scripture and there must be completely rejected.

---

<sup>23</sup> Mbiti, John S., *African Religions and Philosophy* (New York: Praeger, 1969), p. 244.

<sup>24</sup> Mbiti, John S., Christianity and Traditional Religions in Africa. *International Review of Missions*, 59, 1970, pp. 433-434.

<sup>25</sup> Idowu, E. Bolaji, *Towards an Indigenous Church* (London: O.U.P., 1965), pp. 24-25 & *African Traditional Religion* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1973), pp. 56f.