Authentic African Christianity: An Assessment of Christian Identity Problem in Africa

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Abstract:
Background: African Christian identity is in crisis. The exponential numerical growth of the religion that bears the Name of Christ presents itself with an image that is basically blended with elements of tenets of religions with which it hascontended in the continent. Three main religions that have painted the African landscape for a period spanning over a century include African Traditional Religions, Islam, and Christianity. These have contributed to how Christianity is identified in Africa today. Arrival of Christianity to the African soil during the European missionary expeditiondid not mark its first interaction with a different culture. The birth of historic Christianity was itself within a cultural context, and it was not long until it had to deal with the Greco-Roman culture before scaling cultures of the very missionaries who conveyed it to Africa. But in Africa, it has been depicted in various forms such as prompting the question of their authenticity. This study recognizes the existence ofAfrican Christian identity problem, and traces it to syncretic tendencies that grew from gaps left by Western missionaries.

Materials and Methods: The study was library-based in which precedent literature on the subject of Christianity in Africa was surveyed especially from the twentieth century to modern times. Due to the bulk of such literature, only select voices were purposively selected to reflect the general picture of the Christian identity problem in Africa.

Results: It was gathered that although Christianity has in itself the ability to interact with, and transform cultures, it has been marred by nearly the same factors that impededits first attempt in the continent around the 7th century. Just as the forces of colonization and civilization caused feelings of exploitation and mere pursuit of enlightenment, and subsequently, depicted Christianity as a foreign intrusion, the voices in Africa still express similar fears and feelings.

Conclusion: However, the African Christian identity problem is neither unique nor beyond repair. Such has been the experience of Christianity in its interaction with cultures wherever it has been propagated. The voices that call for Afrocentric hermeneutic as well as those that call for reconstruction and renewal ought not to be neglected but to be viewed as signs of maturation of Christianity in a journey towards authenticity. But this journey can be well guided if only theologians and stakeholders gained an interest in critical contextualization.

Key Word:**Authentic, Contextualization, Historic, Syncretism**.

I. INTRODUCTION

Exponential numerical growth of Christianity in Africa alludes to the fact that the once so called "Dark Continent" is gradually bracing for top position among regions that bear the light of Christ to the nations of the earth. However, diversity of the religious sects that confess the name of Christ in Africa raises concern. Differences in both orthodoxy as well as orthopraxy among those who have taken the name of Christ are glaring. One wonders whether maintaining the title "Christian" is still applicably valid or it has drifted to the plural "Christianities." There is an identity problem within the ranks of African Christianity. This study assesses the problem of African Christian identity as one of the major theological trends in Africa evaluating its major tenets in the light of biblical revelation, its impact on African theological development and reflection, and its significance for global theology. It is a theoretical research based on library sources, both print and electronic.

The term "authentic" is employed intentionally as an attempt to trace Christianity to its original form and decipher genuinity of its many forms that have sprouted in Africa. It is from that analysis that one can grasp the Christian identity crisis that is becoming prevalent in Africa. The term depicts, that which is "of undisputed origin and not a copy; genuine."[1] But Christianity cannot be defined devoid the One from whom it derives its name and meaning, that is, Jesus Christ the Son of God. Eckhard J. Schnabel, in his book Early Christian

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[1] "Authentic,"*Oxford Dictionary of English*, Kindle Edition.

Mission asserts, "In the beginning was Jesus. Without the person of Jesus of Nazareth, the messianic Son of Man, there would be no Christians."[2] Truly so, if the many religious sects that are rapidly rising in Africa, calling on the name of Christ, do not reflect Christ in their expressions then they have not been brought to a point of encounter with the One they confess. To miss the opportunity to develop a definite authentic Christian identity is to miss the incarnation of Jesus Christ into human culture. The Man-God who chose to identify with the Jewish culture in the first century and subsequently brought forth an authentic Christianity is, in the twenty-first century identifying Himself with the African people to produce not just a copy but Christianity of undisputed origin. John Mary Waliggo employs the use of the term incarnation asserting that "as Christ himself chose to become man in order to save humanity, Christianity has not [sic] alternative but to do the same in every culture and time in order to continue the salvation brought by Christ."[3] Assessing the strides that Christianity has made and/or continues to make in order to incarnate the gospel into the African culture informs this paper a great deal.

II. MATERIAL AND METHODS

This theoretical study was mainly a review of precedent literature on the subject of Christianity in Africa.It was library-based in which secondary data derived from books, journals, and databaseswere surveyed especially from the twentieth century to modern times. However, due to the bulk of literature from such an expansive location as African continent, only select voices were purposively selected to reflect the general picture of the Christian identity problem in Africa.

III. RESULT

The study gathered that although Christianity has in itself the ability to interact with, and transform cultures, it has been marred by nearly the same factors as those that impeded its first attempt in the continent around the 7th century. Just as the then forces of colonization and civilization caused feelings of exploitation and presented it as mere pursuit of enlightenment, subsequently depicting Christianity as a foreign intrusion, the voices in Africa still express similar fears and feelings.

IV. DISCUSSION

Attempting to measure the authenticity of Christianity is a daunting task. It borders encroachment into the spiritual realm and assuming divine prerogatives. This is not what this paper aims at. However, there are essential principles that have characterized the historic Christian faith from the time of its birth. Due to their timelessness, they are an aid to defining what authentic Christianity really is. Referring to the history of early Christianity as history of missions, Eckhard J. Schnabel makes a poignant statement that delineates some of these characteristics. He states:

The first Christians were characterized first and foremost by their convictions, centered on faith in Jesus of Nazareth as the crucified and risen Messiah, who inaugurated the kingdom of God that the prophets had promised, and who put into effect forgiveness of sins, salvation from death, and eternal life-this for both Jews and non-Jews because it is Jesus Christ, and "no one else," who makes salvation possible for all people (Acts 4:12).[4]

The central theme and focal point of Christianity thus, must be Jesus Christ. It is from Him alone that eternal lessons can be drawn for the purpose of extending the bounds of Christianity and proclaiming the everlasting gospel of salvation wrought by Him to all, "that dwell on the earth, and to every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people" (Rev 14:6 KJV). Through His incarnation, He became Jesus of Nazareth without ceasing to be the Son of God. To incarnate the whole truth about and of Jesus Christ in the lives of a people is therefore to propagate and establish authentic Christianity.

In Africa, myriad voices within groups and sects have come to confess the name of Christ but the many forms by which it presents itself in Africa is confusing its identity. That notwithstanding, authentic Christianity is a possibility but only as far as Jesus of Nazareth is appreciated as of Africa as well as He is of other regions of the earth. As soon as the Messiah inaugurated the kingdom of God, all who received Him and who believed in Him (Jn 1:12) undertook to introduce Him to others within and without their bounds. It was their lifestyle that prompted the ordinary people of Antioch to refer to these followers, for the first time, as Christians (Acts 11:26). Their lifestyle was a product of faith commitmentfounded on Paul's statement that "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified" (1Cor. 2:2). Jean-Marc Ela puts it in no better words thus, "Such is the core from which we have to very our faithfulness to the basic sources of the faith and examine the

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[2] Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission* vol. 1, InterVarsity Press: IL, (2004), 3.

[3] John Mary Waliggo, "Making a Church that is Truly African," in*Inculturation: Its Meaning and Urgency,* St. Paul Publications-Africa, Kampala, (1986), 11-12.

[4] Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission* vol. 1, InterVarsity Press: IL, (2004), 4.

contents of any talk that claims to speak the gospel in African circles."[5] That discourse begins with probing the strides taken by Christianity from its first century to the time of its transmission to Africa, taking into account the various forms it has ever assumed within those varying cultural contexts. That process is illustrated in figure 1 showing three major strides.

Figure 1 Three Major Strides of Christianity in Human Culture
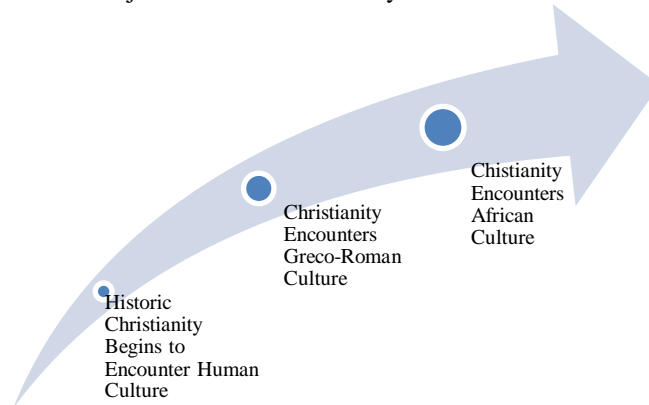
1. A Historic Christian Faith

A question has been raised as to whether there is anything as a "historic Christian faith." But when the term "Christianity" was first used, it was in recognition of the fact that something novel was happening, a "heterogeneous mass…that bound up 'Jew and Gentile, barbarian, Scythian, bond and free' into one vital unity,"[6] and this was a brand new occurrence. Although the name Christianity had been assigned the followers of Christ as a nickname or in mockery, it sprung up from certain distinctive traits that the people of Antioch observed of them. Andrew F. Walls impressively tackles the question of a historic Christian faith by painting an imaginary picture of a space scholar's periodic visits to the planet earth with the view to studying Christianity.[7] Although it is evident that every visit presents to the visiting scholar new and unique manifestations of the Christian faith, there are in-depth threads of connectivity that run through the contexts. These testify of the fact that Christianity is a historic faith. Two of these threads deducible at this juncture are; 1) a historical connectivity, and 2) a continuity of essentials of Christianity. However, in a quick rejoinder, he takes cognizance of the fact that the implied continuities "are cloaked with such heavy veils belonging to the environment that Christians of different times and places must often be unrecognizable to others, or indeed even to themselves, as manifestations of a single phenomenon."[8] In other words, Christianity has a power within it that allows it to garb itself in given cultural outfits of various people groups without diluting its content. It is the gospel that has caused Christianity to endure contextual conditioning and changed cultures without changing itself. It is uniquely multiethnic but a united faith.

The gospel has within it, a power that binds all key tenets of Christianity delineated in Scripture and makes them remain intact and timeless, hence a historic Christian faith. In essence although the gospel is culturally conditioned, it works as a sieve through which un-Christian elements are set loose to drop from its outfit and, consequently people's worldview is transformed. For that reason, in order to meaningfully commit Christianity to the African cultural milieu, an African agenda must be allowed to take center-stage. African Christian theologians are thus faced with the task of preparing for that future if authentic Christianity is to be realized in the continent. Preparation is crucial owing to the possibility of meeting blinkers that might mar authenticity of the Gospel. It is a call to take responsibility and, like their predecessors in previous historical dispensations, engage in translating and transmitting this historic Christian faith to the African people in ways that are understandable to them.

Authentic Christianity must be that faith system that is undisputedly original in the light of the standards of biblical revelation. The Christian faith, as far as depicted in the Holy Writ is incarnational. It has the capacity to penetrate into a given people's culture, become a people's way of life, and to eventually

[5] Jean-Marc Ela, "The Memory of the African People and the Cross of Jesus Christ," in *The Scandal of a Crucified World: Perspectives on the Cross and Suffering,* Yacob Tesfai, ed., Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, (1994), 17.

[6] "Acts 11:26,"A Nickname Accepted, *MacLaren's Expositions,* https://biblehub.com/commentaries/acts/11-26.htm (Accessed December 14, 2020).

[7] Andrew F. Walls, "The Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator of Culture," in *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, (1996), 3-15.

[8] Ibid. 7

transform it by shifting the good from the bad things in that particular culture thus, determining the worldview of a people. In essence, what authentic Christianity is, can only be deciphered through a keen scrutiny of the Bible from where elements that reveal distinctive character of God can be gleaned. Francis Schaeffer explains the uniqueness of Christian identity. He rightly asserts:

> One of the distinctions of the Judeo-Christian God is that not all things are the same to Him. That at first may sound rather trivial, but in reality it is one of the most profound things one can say about the Judeo–Christian God. He exists; He has a character; and not all things are the same to Him. Some things conform to His character, and some are opposed to His character.[9]

Fortunately, some of these conformities to God's character are found in all cultures and unfortunately, those opposed to His character are likewise, as a result of sin, found in every culture, including that of the missionaries, both of the past as well as those who plunge into God's missional agenda today. It is therefore imperative that Christian mission braces itself for intentional struggle to understand its worldview as well as that of the recipient culture in the light of the Bible. Because cultures are dynamic and subject to contexts, it is necessary that Christianity addresses questions that a given particular people are asking as opposed to avoiding and leaving them unattended and subsequently introducing elements that are not in tandem with the historic Christian faith.

2. Christianity Encounters Greco-Roman Culture

Cultural conditioning of Christianity is not uniquely African, how the faith of Christ dealt with the Greco-Roman culture provides hints about what might be expected in Africa. Fewer answers to African Christian theological questions are brooding a crisis in its attempt to define its identity. Christianity neither started in a vacuum nor thrives in oblivion. It has had to endure cultural conditioning right from inception. But its authenticity has withstood the test of time. Its story began unfolding in the country of Israel- the home of Christianity- in the eastern part of the continent of Asia, under the Roman Empire. This was a distinct cultural placement of a people, having a particular worldview, hence propagation of the gospel had to be cross-cultural and this has often ensued with immense difficulty, humanly speaking. Eckhard J. Schnabel's scrutiny of the early Christian mission points to the fact that, "the first challenge for the early Christian missionaries was the lack of models for an international religious operation that seeks to win new converts in new regions and establish new religious communities in new cities and towns."[10] In other words, while Africa has a kind of blue-print from which to borrow, the situation in the Greco-Roman world was different. An almost brand-new faith had just been launched with significant demands contrary to the cultures of the people. Christian call to conversion was, for instance, perceived as totally alien. One, Gustave Bardy, a French patristic scholar who studied conversion to Christianity came to the following conclusion:

> The notion of a conversion in the sense in which we understand this word today remained totally alien to the Greco-Roman mentality for a long time, perhaps even until the rise of Christianity. It had never happened, indeed one could not conceive of a person who would renounce the religion of his *polis* and of his ancestors in order to pledge exclusive and personal allegiance to a very different religion.[11]

The Greco-Roman culture was confronted with a strangeness that called for decisions equal to renouncing former loyalties that were gate-keepers of their worldview. Shifting allegiance to Christianity caused the early Christians persecution even unto death. But in their experience they did not undertake to impose an unclear faith upon the people, instead they sought to explain it to them. Schnabel states, "They proclaimed and explained that salvation is now bound up with acceptance of and loyalty to Jesus as Messiah and Lord."[12] As a result, despite discarding former deities and religions, the Greco-Roman culture also impacted Christianity in ways that have left lasting marks on it to date including theological jargons of the Greco-Roman philosophy. Attributes to the nature and characteristics of God like *omnipotence* and *omniscience*, to mention but a few were painted using an ink that has not faded over the centuries.

3. Christianity Encounters African Culture

Christian interaction with Africa can altogether be traced to its very formative moments. It too faced the difficulty of having to penetrate a new culture. However, the influence that Africa impinged on the development and spread of Christianity from the time of Christ to the period of the collapse of the Roman Empire, that is from the 1st to the 6th century A.D cannot be underestimated. Elizabeth Isichei affirms a historical fact that "in the first Christian centuries, northern Africa provided some of the keenest intellects and most

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[9]Francis Schaeffer, "Christian Faith and Human Rights," *Simon Greenleaf Law Review,* 2 (1982-3), 5. Cited in, John Montgomery, *Human Rights and Human Dignity* (Dallas, TX: Probe Books, 1986), 113.
[10] Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission* vol. 1, InterVarsity Press: IL, (2004), 536.
[11] Gustave Bardy, (1988), 17, cited in Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission* vol. 1, InterVarsity Press: IL, (2004), 537.
[12] Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission* vol. 1, InterVarsity Press: IL, (2004), 533.

influential apologists in Christendom."[13] At the very point of inception and before the African people set themselves to subjecting their cultural milieu to the historic Christian faith the African pot from which it set to brew Christian theology received a fatal concoction that threatened to confuse the identity of Christianity. The question to attempt but briefly at this juncture is; what is it that brought Christianity in Africa to its knees around the 7th century? The answer to this question points to the cradle of identity crisis in African Christianity that this paper explores.

Christianity that had hitherto seemingly taken root in Africa received a near-death blow, and this collapse of Maghreb's ancient Christianity can be traced basically to the attacks and invasions launched by the Berbers, Barbarians and Islam. It was not long after it was shown in the African soil before it began to show signs of identity problematic. Andrew Walls observes:

The over-extended frontiers of the Western Empire collapsed under the weight of the barbarians in a sequence of fierce and nasty little wars; and when the provinces of the Eastern Empire which could point to the tombs of the most glorious martyrs and to the brightest treasures of Christian spirituality and scholarship, took on a new existence as Islamic states.[14]

Reasons as to why such attacks could be launched toward a people simply proclaiming a message of peace and good tidings are glimpses that shed light to the fact that authenticity of Christianity was already at this point compromised to a level of being questionable, and this would reflect adversely to the African Christian identity.

Berbers, the indigenous people majority of whom were desert dwellers formed the 'bread basket of Rome.' Titus Flavius Josephus, a Romano-Jewish scholar and historian of antiquity concurs that "Africa supplied Rome with corn for eight months in a year, the rest coming from Egypt."[15] One probable reason the Berbers had for launching a perpetual attack on Rome could be because they thought the Romans used them as colonial people and exploited them. They considered Christianity as a foreign intrusion and an imposition. One thing is clear and astonishing, that "many Berber groups had remained untouched by the Gospel."[16] The Barbarians, on the other hand, must have woken up to the image they bore in the sight the Romans. They must have sensed that they were deemed uncivilized and not enlightened because they were not part of the Greek and Roman civilization. They, especially the Vandals, imposed Arianism on their subjects and persecuted Catholicism. It is reckoned that "as St Augustine lay on his deathbed, the marauding tribe of the Vandals stood at the gates of the city. Soon they would occupy the whole of North Africa."[17] What followed was Islamic jihad which was launched in a big way and in "697, Carthage fell to the Arabs… [who] won friendship of their chiefs who in turn accepted Islam."[18]

It is a collection of these factors that continue to haunt Christianity in Africa, producing a syncretic worldview that has further led to identity crisis. Isichei states that the "majority of African Christians have remained in the older churches, gradually creating their own maps of reality, interpreting their religion in terms of their own Old Testament of inherited culture."[19] This creation of own maps of reality is a struggle and a sign of the fact that the beholder is disgusted by the new order of values presented by the new comer. That notwithstanding, "the survival of the Christian faith as a major force in the world depended on its having crossed a cultural frontier,"[20] states Andrew Walls who further affirms that "against all expectations, the future of Christianity lay with the barbarians."[21]

Africa has had its share in the struggle partly, in my opinion, because she has not been adequately understood by some of the well intentioned Christian missionaries who have attempted to engage her from time to time. At the same time African societies have had to contend with the heavy load of influence exerted by Christianity, political powers that were, colonial and/or, by extension, modern democracies, and new cultures of the missionaries, generally Western.

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[13] Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa from Antiquity to the Present*, (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan,1995), 1.

[14] Andrew F. Walls, "Christianity in the Non-Western World," *Studies in World Christianity* vol.1, no. 1, Edinburgh University Press, (1995).

[15] Titus Flavius Josephus, *The Jewish War, II*, (A Modern translation, ed. G. Cornfied, issued by Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan 1982), 383,386 cited in Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa from Antiquity to the Present*, (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1995), 34.

[16] John Baur, *2000 Years of Christianity in Africa: An African Church History*, 2nd ed. (Paulines Publications Africa, Nairobi: Kenya, 2009), 29.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa from Antiquity to the Present*, (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan,1995), 2.

[20] Andrew F. Walls, "Christianity in the Non-Western World," *Studies in World Christianity* vol.1, no. 1, Edinburgh University Press, (1995).

[21] Ibid.

Prior to the coming of the missionaries Africa did not thrive in religious oblivion. African people had a robust and inclusive religious system that entwined all aspects of a person, thus a well-knit worldview that defined the religious identity of its people. John Mbiti, in his work on African religions, rightly observes that "religion permeates into all the departments of life so fully that it is not easy or possible always to isolate it."[22] African Traditional Religions intricately permeated the African worldview and embedded therein religious values and clear identity such that the arrival of a new religion, the white man's, would not easily dislodge it. Life without religion was not only meaningless but impossible. Professor Obiora Ike reflects Mbiti's assertion that "'they eat, drink and live religiously…' African religion is thus not an isolated abstract, but is embedded in culture, in people's very way of life."[23] However, this essential factor seemingly, had been missed or merely overlooked by most of the pioneer Christian missionaries. He further observes,

… much of what is 'known' or written about Africa stems from non-African 'experts': intellectuals, traders, anthropologists, travelers, missionaries. In their writings, most of these observers tend to look down on Africa and its peoples, who are considered as primitive, barbaric, uncivilised. Africans are deemed as lacking in any ability for rigorous philosophical, ethical or even scientific development comparable to the external paradigms offered by Westerners, by Islam or by writers from various Eastern traditions.[24]

This was an unfortunate situation, the unintended misconception of the African worldview risked rejection of the gospel before it could take root. A. H. Cisneros and S. Premawardhana rightly state, "The approach of some (but not all) missionaries in Africa was topdown. Those who knew told those who did not know."[25] Because she was so perceived, Africa had to find a way within her cosmology to accommodate and survive the impact of the white man's religio-political force. To that effect, the Igbo of Nigeria, for example, "does not distinguish between religion and the secular society, but creates room for an interdependent world where 'the secular is so interwoven with the sacred that one does not exclude the other, nor could one be conceived without the other, thereby giving religion an anthropocentric outlook.'"[26] Fragmentalized and departmentalized approach to the gospel risked develop a sense of partial salvation i.e. that God is only concerned with the heart. This conflicted ideal approach to the African people that embraced the whole person- all of the departments of life.

God's universal salvific agenda was from that point of contact denied its transformative and constructive power. Applying this to values that define ethics standards of a people, Cisneros and Premawardhana clarify that "universal values that are imposed from above will not be accepted from below. When the powerful universalise their particularity, the ethic of the powerless goes underground, to await an opportunity to resurface. It may erupt either constructively or destructively."[27] This is true of the African Christian dilemma,the universal gospel arrived in the continent of Africa clothed in the Western cultural garb and sailed in the colonial masters' bark. The seemingly powerless African worldview slipped underground. It is this eruption that now resurfaces with a syncretic worldview manifested in the African Christian identity crisis.

Christianity through the ages has had to contend with impediments that have positively or negatively shaped how it appears today. Three important areas of influence have persistently impacted its mission strategies globally. Such pillars from which Christianity developed in ancient times continue to impede it in the post-modern era, and the African continent has had no exceptional experience. These impediments that have confused the African Christian identity are traceable to the kind of contacts Christianity had with; 1) traditional religion, 2) political power, and 3) predominant culture. It is how Christianity maneuvers itself through these crucial realities that determines its identity, whether it is authentic or problematic. Intercourse between Christianity and the mentioned influencers especially in Africa has resulted in a situation of identity crisis. Some groups have rejected the gospel message as was brought by the Western missionaries while others have called for contextualized approaches however, others have chosen to maintain old African traditional thought albeit underground while at the same time confessing a kind of surface value Christianity which exhibits a syncretistic worldview.

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[22] John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy,* (Heinemann Educational Books Ltd: London, 1969):1

[23] Obiora Ike,"The Integral Nature of African Cultural and Religious Values as Ethical Values," *Sharing Values: A Hermeneutics for Global Ethics,* ArianeHentsch Cisneros and Shanta Premawardhana, (eds.), (Geneva: Globethics.net, 2011), Series No. 4: 317.

[24]Ibid.,311.

[25]ArianeHentsch Cisneros and Shanta Premawardhana, (eds.), "Group Reports from the 2009 Nairobi Conference," *Sharing Values: A Hermeneutics for Global Ethics,* (Geneva: Globethics.net, 2011), Series No. 4: 410.

[26] Obiora Ike,"The Integral Nature of African Cultural and Religious Values as Ethical Values," *Sharing Values: A Hermeneutics for Global Ethics,* ArianeHentsch Cisneros and Shanta Premawardhana, (eds.), (Geneva: Globethics.net, 2011), Series No. 4: 317.

[27]ArianeHentsch Cisneros and Shanta Premawardhana, (eds.), "Group Reports from the 2009 Nairobi Conference," *Sharing Values: A Hermeneutics for Global Ethics,* (Geneva: Globethics.net, 2011), Series No. 4: 407.
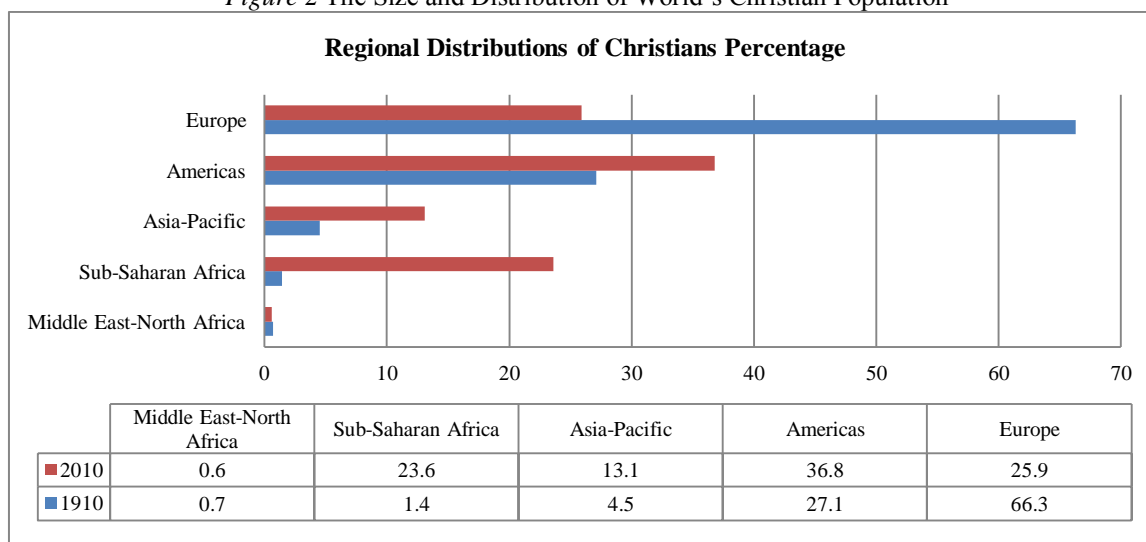
The Impact of Western Form of Christianity

One clear success story of the historic Christian faith is that it has undoubtedly proven universal. The faith that began in a Bethlehem manger in the first century has acquired a global prominence to the point of being a world religion. It has however, lately captured a significant position in the mind of the African leaders of thought. Andrew Walls recognizes a shift that has occurred in Christianity and depicts African Christianity as having the capacity to being representative world-over. He asserts:

It is widely recognized that there has occurred within the present century a demographic shift in the center of gravity of the Christian world, which means that more than half of the world's Christians live in Africa, Asia, Latin America, or the Pacific, and that the proportion doing so grows annually. This means that we have to regard African Christianity as potentially the *representative* Christianity in the twenty-first century.[28]

Indeed, from a global perspective, the arrival of Western Christian missionaries into the continent of Africa produced significant gains to Christianity. Exponential numerical growth is one such gain.

Numerical Growth

It appears as if the religion that bears the name of Christ has not merely conquered the African continent but is steadily relocating to it. Figure 2illustrates the Pew Forum report on the size and distribution of the world's Christian population.

Figure 2 The Size and Distribution of World's Christian Population

Regional Distributions of Christians Percentage

	Middle East-North Africa	Sub-Saharan Africa	Asia-Pacific	Americas	Europe
2010	0.6	23.6	13.1	36.8	25.9
1910	0.7	1.4	4.5	27.1	66.3

Source: Adapted from Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life Global Christianity

This study on global Christianity released by the Pew Research Forum in 2011 shows that Christianity hadthen achieved enormous numerical growth especially in the Sub-Saharan Africa to a near celebrative explosion within a span of only one hundred years.[29]

However, it is the quality of this form of Christianity that is subject to debate. The fact that it has resulted into a continent in religious scramble is undeniable. This scramble is not only between Christianity and African traditional religions but also within the realm of Christianity itself, a reality that continually causes shifting and syncretic worldviews threatening the Christian faith with extinction. Symptoms of rejection of the gospel began to surface in Africa, especially where the whole package of old beliefs, rituals and customs had been denied without keen analysis by the gospel presenter. The people were struck with disgust and the gospel viewed as foreign. In some areas African peoples and cultures were left to flourish in ignorance. Unfortunately, the African people's cultural milieu with its established identity had been so far affected.

Syncretic Worldview

It is regrettable that irrespective of the aforementioned numerical growth of Christianity in Africa the quality of its authenticity in the light of biblical revelation would be questioned. The collective pressure exerted on Africa by the religio-politico impact of the Western form of Christianity has but led to syncretism- the mother of the prevailing identity crisis of the time. Scott Moreau's definition of syncretism as, "blending of one

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[28] Andrew F. Walls, "Africa in Christian History: Retrospect and Prospect," The Journal of African Christian Thought 1, no. 1 (1998):2-16, reprinted in The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History, 85.

[29] Pew Research on Religion and Public Life Project, "Global Christianity- A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Christian Population," http://www.pewforum.org./2011/12/19/global-christianity-exec/ (accessed 1/24/2015).

idea, practice or attitude with another"[30] together with the concurrent assertion by Paul Hiebert and others that syncretism involves "combining elements of Christianity with folk beliefs and practices in such a way that the gospel loses its integrity and message"[31] speak to what Christianity in Africa, to an extent, wrestles with. It is not to condemn and diminish the work that is already done by pioneer Christian missionaries to Africa, but to highlight the fact that cross-cultural mission often attracts a level of syncretism either knowingly or contrariwise. This unconscious or conscious, "unintended but unavoidable consequence,"[32] as Larkin puts it, has bred and continues to perpetuate a problematic identity in African Christianity to the level of a crisis.

The intercourse that has happened between African Traditional Religion, Islam, and Christianity has conceived and given birth to a religious worldview that is uniquely syncretic. Combination of tenets from one is conspicuously observed in the others, such that one is hardly adequately addressed without making mention of the others. Innocent O. Nweke rightly delineates seven points of convergence that possibly bring the three religions to cohabit with each other in Africa, namely values, morals, circumcision, Scripture, means of protection, and God.[33]William Arens finds it suspicious to front an argument of either Islam or Christianity without considering a historical dimension.[34] Of course it is a historical dimension that unfolds in an arena of Traditional African Religion.Discussing the exponential growth of Christianity in sub-Saharan Africa, John Azumah equally highlights the growth experienced by Islam in the same region.[35]His observation is quite in tandem with the survey conducted by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life depicting the fact that religious landscape of sub-Saharan Africa has, in slightly over a century, changed dramatically. In 1900 Africa was only 9% Christian, 14% Islam yet 76% Africa Traditional Religion.[36]From the surface, this is a success story, however from a missiological perspective it is not yet a celebration! African Traditional Religions have resisted the impact of Western form of Christianity.

This survey demonstrates that large numbers of Africans despite being active participants in Christianity or Islam also incorporate and believe in tenets of African Traditional Religion like witchcraft, evil spirits, sacrifices to ancestors, traditional religious healers, and reincarnation, to mention but a few. Much of the daily life of an African, Christian or Muslim, is still steered by the African worldview. Whether such cases count themselves within the ranks of Christianity or not, speaks to a rooted identity problem, for instance, the report reveals that "in four countries (Tanzania, Mali, Senegal and South Africa) more than half the people surveyed believe that sacrifices to ancestors or spirits can protect them from harm. Sizable percentages …-a quarter or more… believe in the protective power of juju (charms or amulets)."[37] It is this strange mixture that has produced a worldview that is not in tandem with God's character revealed in the Scripture, hence unidentifiable to authentic Christianity.

Christianity in Africa, due to such prevalent syncretistic worldview, is facing extinction. Christian theologians in African have an urgent missiological task- to pursue worldview evangelism with the view to penetrating the core determinant of cultures and communicating the gospel in ways that lead people to understand it as does God. The concept of worldview evangelism derives from the premise that all people have cultures hence worldviews defined by foundational assumptions about reality which underlie their belief systems and behavioral patterns. At the same time, while all cultures have been affected by sin they have elements that are contrary to biblical revelation. Similarly, all cultures have elements that depict the image of God. To achieve God's salvific agenda of reaching people for Christ in ways that bring lasting transformation, an approach of sieving the divide must be mooted. When people understand God as He is, they will tune their worldview to His, it is untill then that identity crisis in African Christianity can experience a death blow. As at now, voices from Africa continue to call for solutions.

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[30]"Syncretism," *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, A. Scott Moreau ed., (Baker Books, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2000), 924.

[31] Paul G. Hiebert, R. Daniel Shaw, and TiteTiénou, "Responding to Split-level Christianity and Folk Religion," *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, 1999.16(Winter):177.

[32] William J. Larkin, "Syncretism: An Unintended but Unavoidable Consequence of Early Christian Witness--Case Study from Acts 8:4-25,"A Paper presented at the IFMA/EFMA/EMS *Triennial Conference,* (St. Louis, MO, September 23-25, 2004), 1-3.

[33] Innocent O. Nweke, "African Traditional Religion in the Context of Christian and Islamic Encounter," *Spiritan Horizons*, (2020), 15 (15). Retrieved from https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-horizons/vol15/iss15/10 (April 25, 2021).

[34] William Arens, "Islam and Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa: Ethnographic Reality or Ideology," *Cahiers d'Étudesafricaines* (Année, 1975, 59 pp. 443-456), 444.

[35]John Azumah, "The Church and Islam in Africa," https://fullerstudio.fuller.edu/featured-article-the-church-and-islam-in-africa/ (Accessed April 25, 2021).

[36] "Tolerance and Tension: Islam and Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa," Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, (Washington DC: Pew Research Center, 2010).

[37]Ibid., 4.

Select Voices on African Theological Identity

Myriad voices from African leaders of thought have been raised especially in search of Christian theological identity. Although they spring forth from one main agenda, the quest for identity, it is appropriate, due to the scope of this paper, to highlight select African Christian theological experience as a double-pronged paradigm, particularly for the purpose of assessing the identity problematic level. One group of voices is that which calls for reading Africa and its perspectives in biblical interpretation. Another group of voices, on the other hand, has called for reconstruction and renewal of Christian theology by re-reading and re-thinking it in the light of the African context.

Call for Afrocentric Hermeneutic

The voices that have called for Afrocentric hermeneutics include that of Justin S. Ukpong who observes a parallel biblical hermeneutic developed by biblical scholars in Africa, a parallelism occasioned by discontentment with the Western methods. "To be sure," Ukpong asserts, "there are two currents of academic readings of the Bible in Africa, one follows the Western pattern, while the other follows the African pattern of linking the text with the African context."[38]African leaders of thought read from the Western theologian an exclusive faith community bent to oppression and disregard to what truly concerned the African. What resulted from such treatment was a call to liberation.

David Tuesday Adamo is another significant voice calling for decolonization of the Old Testament teaching in African universities. Employing the term "Africentric," he challenges African scholars to publish books that can replace the so-called classics which are basically Eurocentric.[39] His concern revolves around the fear that as long as Eurocentric books are still in major use in teaching the African theologians who are also trained by the Western theologians using such Eurocentric books, then African Christianity will simply die out. It will be a situation of perpetuation of Western perspectives at the expense of the African.

Such voices seek to bring to the forefront understanding of the African Christology from which Jean-Marc Ela decries the African condition saying:

How can one rediscover God from the perspective of a "crucified messiah" (1Cor 1:23) while at the same time covering up the other scandal that is at the center of the human adventure of our era? Here is this scandal: for five hundred years, the West has chosen the Christ without the cross, while the people of Africa live the cross without the Christ. It is this passion without redemption in which Africa continues to live that must question our understanding.[40]

Marc-Ela's use of the word "scandal" here might seem strong but it is realistic. The memory of the African people's past, especially from the entry of the missionary enterprise and so because of its close connection with the conquest and colonization of Africa, is suspicious and confusing. Considering such vices as slave trade, Apartheid, the Negritude, to mention but a few, what stands out prominently is that Afrocentric voices sense a shortchanging by the West. However, they are able read and liken their situation to the biblical Exodus motif and perhaps the concept of reading themselves in such biblical symbols keeps the African deeply attached to the Bible. Their quest, as Marc Ela puts it is, "how can we reread in our own way the narratives of the Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ taking into account the situations of our memory? Such is the question that comes out of the black continent, where- if one really dares to admit it-God speaks to the world and to the church."[41] In essence, they have a consciousness of a connectivity with God and that through them God is communicating. At least the very fact that it is God who has caused a surge in numerical growth of Christianity in Africa is testimony to the fact that God loves and is interested in the salvation of His people, and Africans too are His people.

Call for Reconstruction and Renewal

Another level of voices of the African leaders of thought include those that appreciate the dynamism of theological thought as well as culture thus recognize the fact that it is unnecessary for Africa to brood over its past but to chart a way forward. Christianity's heights of phenomenal numerical growth seems to have only brushed through the tip of an iceberg of the African worldview but failed to break through the crust of the African primal religious perception and cultural heritage for a critical engagement. Christianity thus failed to take root in the soil of the African worldview. To plant a genuine faith that will be truly African and authentically Christian, there must occur a reconstruction. Jesse Mugambi's is one such voice that serves as

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[38] Justin S. Ukpong, "Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa: Historical and Hermeneutical Directions," in *The Bible in Africa.* Eds. Gerald O. West, Musa Dube, 11–28. Leiden: Brill, (2000), 11.
[39]David Tuesday Adamo, "Decolonizing the Teaching of the Old Testament in Africa," *Bulletin for Old Testament Studies in Africa* 19, (2005): 8.
[40] Jean-Marc Ela, "The Memory of the African People and the Cross of Jesus Christ," in *The Scandal of a Crucified World: Perspectives on the Cross and Suffering,* Yacob Tesfai, ed., Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, (1994), 19.
[41] Ibid.

links between the eras of liberation theology to a full blast authentic African Christian theology. This link is that of reconstruction. He says:

In Africa, Christianity has been used for too long to destroy the cultural and religious foundations of African peoples. In the 1990s and beyond, African Christian theology…should have a reconstructive function comparable to the role of Protestant theology during the European Reformation and Renaissance; Africa deserves to celebrate its own Reformation and its own Renaissance.[42]

Mugambi too sounds Afrocentric but he scales up the plight to another level. A level that sounds new but, if closely scrutinized, reveals close-knit parallelism to the European experience during the period of reformation and renaissance. To deny reconstruction is equivalent to ignoring facts engraved in Christian heritage, thus denying the Africans a script about the movement of God through the ages. Mugambi shifts from the Exodus motif to that of Nehemiah and identifies his paradigm with Nehemiah's call to rebuild Jerusalem.[43]

Another related voice that offers constructive critique to that of Mugambi is raised by Valentin Dedji who calls African church leaders and theologians to "have the humility to recognise the superficiality of church membership statistics in Africa."[44] Pointing to the Rwanda and Burundi genocide situation in a population of 85% Christianity, Dedji equally echoes concern about the kind of Christianity that plays out in Africa and asks a significant question, "How Christian is a nation where priests, bishops and other church members find cynical pleasure in massacring their fellow citizens?"[45] This is a situation that prompts a rethinking, redoing of not only theology but also a sociology, what he is quick to note will not be possible until African leaders of thought take the "courage to start afresh… and the Christians in Africa learn afresh the logic, the grammar of Christian culture of forgiveness."[46] To maintain that those who were involved in the heinous act of massacring one another were Christians is to confuse the identity of African Christianity even further. On that note Mugambi's reconstructive agenda is an option that graduates theology in Africa to a higher level towards authenticity.

Critical-Contextualization

Jean-Marc Ela's profound Christological assertion that "if one wants to summarize the contents of the gospel in one word, one needs to say Jesus Christ… [that] Jesus Christ is not only the subject announced by the message of the gospel; he is also the subject of the message proclaimed by the church"[47] is a significant move towards appreciating what Christianity really is. The way forward towards an authentic Christianity is to call the church to proclaim Jesus Christ, and His lordship. That proclamation must take into consideration the fact of contextual conditioning. The fact that Christian theology is taking a reconstructive paradigm in Africa is a major step forward towards solving the identity problem that has haunted Africa since the time of the Western missionaries. This, if not appropriately handled, will possibly plunge the continent into yet another ditch of identity crisis wrought by syncretism.

It is Christ's life and ministry that sets stage for the "how" of mission strategy. Like Jesus, the service of a missiologist needs transcend cultural orientations, for the eternal truth that is to be communicated knows no bounds of such structures and symbols. This however, is not without challenges. Issues will often arise from the point of view of the gospel presenter's attempt to penetrate a foreign culture with the eternal message. As soon as one considers a particular people group, he is confronted with the indigenous world view of that particular culture. He is faced with the issues of under contextualization which is one extreme pole of contextualization. Paul G. Hiebert has put it right as a, "denial of the old; where the cultural values, beliefs and practices of the community are rejected as a whole…regarded as evil and pagan hence unacceptable for Christianity."[48] This approach, to say the least, is more hypothetical and judgmental, running a risk of resistance before any attempt of articulation is made. To maintain the opinion that everything in a people's culture is wholly evil and pagan is to misrepresent God. It would be a matter of selective hermeneutic to assume the profound fact that God subjected Himself to a Jewish cultural garb through incarnation to save humanity, yet still maintain that He was and is holy eternally. Bruce Bauer rightly asserts that, "We must admit that we can more easily see the pagan splinter in other people's culture while we are blind to the pagan plank in our own culture."[49] Therefore, to do justice to the African Christian identity it is important to see those pagan splinters in other people's culture but also be conscious that the judgment might be hindered by own imposed pagan planks.

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[42] J.N.K. Mugambi, *From Liberation to Reconstruction: African Christian Theology After the Cold War*, East African Educational Publishers Ltd.: Nairobi, (1995) xiv.

[43] Ibid., 13.

[44] Valentin Dedji, *Reconstruction and Renewal in African Christian Theology*, Theology of Reconstruction Series, (Acton Publishers: Nairobi, 2003), 85.

[45] Ibid., 85-86.

[46] Ibid., 86.

[47] Jean-Marc Ela, "The Memory of the African People and the Cross of Jesus Christ," in *The Scandal of a Crucified World: Perspectives on the Cross and Suffering,* Yacob Tesfai, ed., Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, (1994), 19.

[48] Hiebert G. Paul, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries,* (Michigan, Grand Rapids, Baker book House, 1985), 184.

[49] Bruce L. Bauer, "Avoiding Comfortable Syncretism by Doing Critical Contextualization." Journal of Adventist Mission Studies Vol.1 No. 2 (2005): 25.

This approach of under-contextualization is slimly advantageous due to its quick exposure of the falseness of the indigenous. But because propagation of the Christian mission is about relationship building the disadvantages here far much outweigh such perceived advantages. For instance, apart from creating communication barrier between the gospel presenter and the receptor, the perhaps forcefulness in denying the past will risk slipping such tenets underground only to resurface in a syncretic way. Further, it poses the risk of turning the missionaries and church leaders into police guards.[50]

Another extreme end of contextualized approach to mission is that of over-contextualization. It accepts wholesome, the old beliefs and practices of the indigenous into the church without analysis. Although Bauer, drawing from an Adventist Church experience, affirms that it "is largely lacking in the Adventist mission experience,"[51] it is worth addressing since it can surface as unintended consequence of attempts to build bridges of across religions.This is what Jon Paulien takes note while addressing syncretism, that it is "the unintended consequence of a healthy desire to make the gospel relevant."[52] Over contextualization seems a soft approach for building bridges of love, maintaining good relationships, and avoiding confrontation however, mission is not only about 'bridge building.' The relationships developed must create a conducive environment for sharing the gospel of Christ. But over-contextualization has the potential of leading to compromise on the side of the indigenous apart from demeaning Scripture due to its lack of sound hermeneutical principles. Further, it too leads to syncretism since the gospel is denied the opportunity to be the standard measure of the contextualization process while the demands of the recipient culture are given special attention.[53]

The recommended way-forward that will fairly deal with the identity problem is critical contextualization. The cosmic nature of sin calls for a more critical analysis of the cultural orientation of any given culture if it has to be reached with the gospel. This is because humanity bears a sinful nature irrespective of whatever culture from which one may subscribe. There is no culture which is pure, all are marred by sin.[54] There is no culture that is superior to the other. Critical contextualization strikes a balance between the two extreme poles of engagement incross-cultural mission. Through it, the message is communicated under the banner of love as well as truth. Love, because it is the constraining power behind the missiologist that humbles him to study a culture which may seem 'uncivilized' in the light of postmodernity and truth, because he is thus convicted of the power of the gospel that brings salvation to everyone irrespective of cultural setting (Rom 1:16).

It is a well-balanced hermeneutical approach that exegetes the Bible and scrutinizes culture in the light of biblical teaching. It ensues through a four-pronged process which involves (1) research on particular beliefs and practices of a given culture, (2) evaluation of the said cultural beliefs and practices in the light of Biblical truth, (3) hermeneutical study of the Bible about such beliefs and practices, and (4) creation of a new contextualized Christian practice. Critical contextualization answers the question of approach to mission which subsequently has the capacity to deal with the problem of identity in African Christianity. Its rigorous process in dealing with the indigenous practices in the light of the biblical truth does justice to the whole agenda of mission. It is an approach that avoids compromise by building bridges of cultural sensitivity with a truthful content and ensures the message retains a firm and sound biblical foundation.

Pursuantly, the Christian church in Africa needs embrace the following three approaches so as accomplish her/God's missionial agenda (Matt 28:19-20; Rev 14:6-12) and play her role in solving the prevalent identity crisis. Firstly, the African leaders of thought need to intentionally seek to understand the culture of each target people group. This requires an understanding of the fact that Africa's worldview is no longer influenced by one single cultural milieu. As pointed out earlier, African Traditional Religions, Christian denominations-mainstream or independent, and Islam competitively play out majorly. These are some of the influencers that exert pressure on African people's perception. It is necessary because each people group has a way of how they actually process what is communicated to them.

This knowledge can possibly be gained through the use of the following missiological tools: 1) Developing an understanding through cultural relativism; trying to understand the meaning and function of the specific practice/belief in its own cultural context. 2) Evaluation through theology: evaluating whether the new information from cultural relativism about a particular practice/belief is acceptable from a theological perspective. 3) Discernment through prayer: considering the fact that mission is God's own agenda.

Secondly, make every effort to always engage in critical contextualization. Contextualization takes place when the old worldview is dealt with by analyzing and subjecting it to scrutiny in the light of the Bible. If such justice is done to each of the cultural domains then critical contextualization, resulting into a biblical

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[50]Hiebert G. Paul, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries*, (Michigan, Grand Rapids, Baker Book House, 1985), 185.

[51]Bruce L. Bauer, "Avoiding Comfortable Syncretism by Doing Critical Contextualization." Journal of Adventist Mission Studies Vol.1 No. 2 (2005): 23.
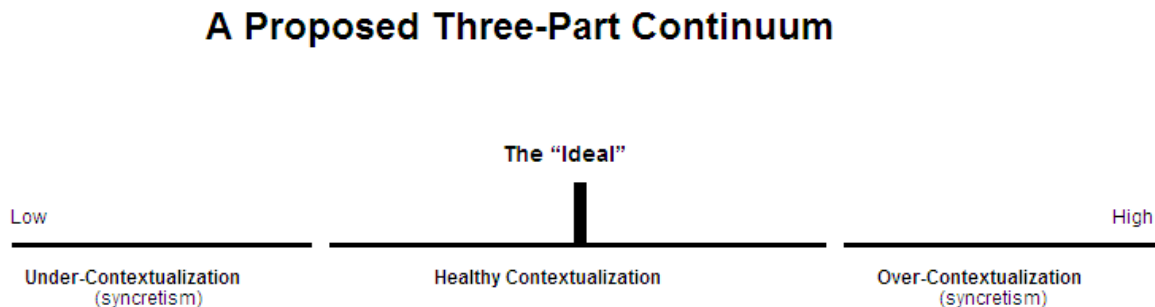
[52] Jon Paulien, "Dealing With Syncretism in Insider movements: A Working Paper for the Symposium on Adventist Muslim Relations," January 2005, 4.

[53] Ibid.

[54]Hiebert G. Paul, Anthropological Insights for Missionaries, (Michigan, Grand Rapids, Baker book House, 1985), 185.

worldview, ensues. It is through this mid-level missional approach depicted in Paulien's three-part continuum that will help develop a healthy way of dealing with syncretism. This is illustrated in figure 3. Without this, culture will often overwhelm the gospel and/or there will be inadequate engagement with the recipient culture.[55]

Figure 3 Jon Paulien's modification of the contextualization/syncretism continuum

A Proposed Three-Part Continuum

The "Ideal"

Low   High

Under-Contextualization   Healthy Contextualization   Over-Contextualization
(syncretism)   (syncretism)

Source: Jon Paulien, "Dealing With Syncretism in Insider Movements."

Thirdly, produce more scholars and professionals with competence in all areas of mission. It is appreciable that God has blessed His work such that the Christian church in Africa has survived the impact of traditional religions as well as the influence of Eurocentric force. Undoubtedly, the future beckons for more professionals and scholars who will help shape approaches to mission and define a clear and authentic African Christianity.

V.   CONCLUSION

Assessing the strides that Christianity has made and/or continues to make in order to incarnate the gospel into the African culture with the view to tackling the prevailing identity crisis in African Christianity has been the key concern of this paper. Although the continent of Africa is seemingly awash with a unique diversity of religious sects that confess the name of Christ, the title "Christian" is still profoundly applicable. The African Christian identity problematic is a sign of a maturing faith and its situation is not in any way different from what happened in other cultures since the time of the birth of the historic Christian faith.

This piece of work has therefore endeavored to assess the problem of African Christian identity as one of the major theological trends in Africa bringing to light some of its major tenets in view of biblical revelation, its impact on African theological development, and significance for global theology. From the near-narrative assessment it can be concluded that African Christianity is geared towards an authentic Christianity that translates and transmits Christ and His message to the African people in ways that are meaningful to them. In essence, it is the task of African Christian theologians to present Jesus who became of Nazareth as of Africa. To deny Africa the opportunity to develop definite authentic Christian identity is to deny the incarnation of Jesus into human culture. The Man-God who chose to identify with the Jewish culture in the first century and subsequently brought forth an authentic Christianity is, in the twenty-first century identifying Himself with the African people to produce not just a copy but Christianity of undisputed origin. To reap lasting fruits this paper recommends that the way to go is to engage a critical contextualization gear.

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