

African Spirituality: A Paradigmatic Study of Selected Christological Perspectives with Relevance to African Christianity

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Abstract

Specific Christological models help define the spirituality of African peoples. A Christianity that creates meaning for any people must be integrated anthropologically. This study investigates some selected Christological models that helped shape the spirituality of Africa and its integration in the Christian faith. Spirituality has a definitive role in defining African people. The socio-cultural life of Africa is the foundation that Africans relate to other spiritualities; therefore, both the corporeal and the divine are inseparable in the hermeneutical, anthropological narrative of Africans. Some aspects of African Christological models are consistent with Scripture and these functional Christologies unveil a culture of pragmatic relevance in ever-changing societies. Although critiques on the lack of missional contextualization of Christianity are overwhelming in academia, nevertheless, a study of some of these perspectives makes Christ the center of the history of African spirituality and interpretation, which makes Christianity interactive and relevant to the development of the African society.

Keywords: Spirituality, Paradigmatic, Christology, Perspectives, Africa.

Introduction

We live in a world of global complexity, and Africa is a theological workshop and the marketplace for global studies.¹ Africans themselves are questioning the Christian heritage and seeking answers to innovative questions that challenge their faith. This has ignited Christian academia and experts of African spirituality to explore further on the hermeneutical integration of Christianity anthropologically because of the unique theological condition that is peculiar to the African people. The particular condition peculiar to Africans is that of self-understanding and maturity that provides them with a legitimate ground for theological pursuit. This is because “Africans want to appropriate the riches of African insight into the human condition and the divine life, to enrich and

¹ Sebastian Jobs Mackenthun Gesa, *Embodiments of Cultural Encounters* (Munster: Waxmann Verlag, 2011), 119.

enhance Christian life and thought.”² While some significant submissions by these experts of African spirituality have been successful, there remain several unanswered questions in the theological sphere that require an urgent response. At first, in antiquity, Africa played a decisive role in the formation of the Christian cultures, and Christianity cannot have its present vitality in the Two-Thirds world without the intellectual understanding that was established in Africa between 50 and 500 CE.³ Different aspects of Christian theology and its impact on global Christianity have been singled out in the study of church history, but Christology is at the forefront of the educational framework of Christianity because Christ is the basis of the Christian faith, and without Him, Christianity itself becomes like a body without a soul.

Meanwhile, the models of the impact of Christianity on the African peoples have not been adequately explored. For many, the starting point of Christology is the belief of the people, but any Christology that will create meaning must begin with the life of Jesus Christ on account of who he was and is.⁴ Thus, the study of African Christological perspectives requires an understanding of the true personality of Christ and what He means to African Christians then and now.

In modern scholarship and the practice of Christianity, different ideas are springing up to reinterpret and recontextualize ancient Christian teachings and traditions so that they can make pastoral and practical sense in the 21st century. Jesus has been

² Emmanuel Martey, *African Theology: Inculturation and Liberation* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2009), 55.

³ The attention of Christian faith and theology is shifting from the West to the Third World and theologians are overwhelmed with this steady move. While it is surprising to many, it is important to draw our attention to the fact that this contribution of the Third World, especially Africa, is not a new thing. Africa has recorded tremendous contributions to the vitality of the Christian faith. Since 50 to 500 CE, the history of Christian theology cannot be complete without the works of some Africans like Tertullian, Augustine of Hippo, Cyril of Alexander and many more. These heroes developed Christian theologies to defend the church from different heresies and their treatises grew to be accepted as part of the forms that shaped the doctrines of the church. According to Pratt, African Christian theology is relevant for the ecumenical church because in its struggle to relate the Christian message to the traditional background, African Christianity is repeating in our own time the encounter that characterized the early centuries, between the infant faith and the pagan milieu and that African Christianity also helped in forming and shaping the Christianity of the patristic age. 1. John Parratt, *Reinventing Christianity: African Theology Today* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1995), 2. Cf; Thomas C. Oden, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind: Rediscovering the African Seedbed of Western Christianity* (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Books, 2007), 10.

⁴ Stuart G. Hall, ed., *Jesus Christ Today: Studies of Christology in Various Contexts*. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co. KG, 2009), 3.

perceived differently by different people in modern times, which has brought about the rise of various forms and approaches to Christianity, such as the rise of feminist theology, liberation, and black theology, which seek to view Jesus differently. In Africa, for instance, the threat posed by Islam and the persecution that Christians face forces them (Christians) to rethink the biblical Jesus differently. To many, Christianity is not the only solution to their everyday challenges; therefore, they turn to other means to seek answers to their poverty and pain. Hence, they argue that the gospel must be contextualized to meet those needs.

Africa, with its richness in cultures, has so much to offer for its spiritual development. There are models within its socio-cultural framework that can influence the Christological formulation of the people and promote the unity of purpose and understanding. It is in this scenario that this study attempts to evaluate some historical models of Christ through African eyes with relevance to 21st-century African Christianity.

Historical Development of Christological Models

Early Christian theology was almost exclusively Christology. Longenecker noted that:

What characterized early Christianity includes belief in a theistic God who is both Creator and Redeemer. The early Christians centered their attention upon the redemptive activity of God in the person and work of Jesus. No other consideration emerged so massively in their thinking than that, and all others, whether advanced in their apprehension of God, a consciousness of their place in redemptive history, or developments in their ecclesiology, sprang from this source.⁵

Christianity sprang up as a new religion within a Hellenistic culture and the Greco-Roman world. These two cultural foundations had a tremendous impact in shaping the development of Christianity. Christology deals with the unique person of Christ as the Logos of God – God/Man, who set himself apart, ultimately with a unique personality different from all of humanity. While Christian worship is centered around Christ and

⁵ Richard N. Longenecker, *The Christology of Early Jewish Christianity* (Vancouver, BC: Regent College Publishing, 1994), 25.

cannot do without the variety of titles ascribed to Him, Christological models are used to describe the reality of Christ with a pictorial representation that is reflective and promotes reliability for smooth articulation. These titles range from the list, which is part of the Old Testament advent lesson in Isaiah 9:6 and the Nicaea-Constantinopolitan Creed⁶ that is commonly used in the Christian church today. Some of these titles are a problem to Bible students, and therefore, readers must decide which of these terms have precedence over others. The adopted Christological models are used to give immediate interpretation concerning the phenomena for contextualization.⁷

Christological models in antiquity help develop how the followers of Christ appropriated, and function with the dynamic cultural settings of the time. There are those whose model of Christology sprang up five years after the resurrection of Christ. These Christological models are concerned with personal experience of the resurrection of Christ, which can be categorized into four categories; namely, experiential, theological (which is mostly soteriological), cultural, and finally, contextual.

The New Testament is not the first to employ images to convey the truth of God. Talbert describes a model as an element of a set of myths. These models are complementary images that are used in the Bible to describe God. In Old Testament times, images are used to portray God as king, judge, shepherd, husband, father, etc.⁸ In

⁶ “After the time of the New Testament Christians, there was the need to redefine the concept of Jesus as both Savior and Lord in a new context of misunderstanding. This led to the rise of theologians who committed tremendous amounts of time to rewrite and develop the theology of the church. The patristic era, for instance, records several controversies and debates; however, the Christological reflections of these patriarchs have greatly influenced the development of Christology throughout the centuries. The council of Nicea in 325 CE became the initial milestone for Christological development. The council was summoned to address the threat that was posed on the Christian faith by Arianism. Arianism promoted the view that Jesus who is the divine Logos was a preeminent creature rather than the eternal Son of God, therefore, limited to the Father. The Nicene council, in response and under the great fourth-century theologian Athanasius develop a theology to defend the divinity of Christ. “For Nicea, the qualities that constitute the divinity of the God of the Gospel are not absoluteness, incommunicability, and invulnerability. On the contrary, the God of the gospel is defined by the act of self-giving love.” Thus, the council declared that Jesus is truly the Son of God and that the Son incarnate in Jesus Christ begotten and not made, and is of one substance with the Father. Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2004), 169–173.

⁷ John McIntyre, *Shape of Christology: Studies in the Doctrine of the Person of Christ* (Scotland: A&C Black, 1998), 49.

⁸ Charles H. Talbert, *The Development of Christology during the First Hundred Years: And Other Essays on Early Christian Christology* (Leiden: BRILL, 2011), 6.

the New Testament, these models are not entirely used differently on Christology; however, their approach to Christology differs to some degree.

For instance, Meyer and Hughes submit that there are two Christological models that are employed in orthodox Christianity; Chalcedonian two-nature Christology and Kenotic models of Christology.⁹ However, in both models, Christ is literally affirmed as true God and true man, and that in Christ, God connects the world to himself. The difference between the two is their different understanding of how God the Son became incarnate in Jesus. Talbert went back to the time of the New Testament and observed that in the early thought of Christianity, the chief model of interpreting Christology was the Parousia,¹⁰ which associated God as the Revealer Christ, while in the pre-Gospel era it was the *resurrection of Jesus* that stood out.¹¹ What constitutes the foundational development of New Testament Christology include Parousia Christology, Palestinian Jewish Christianity, the exaltation Christianity, and the pre-existence Christology that Pauline theology emphasized.¹²

In the modern approach of some Christians to Christology, Christ is portrayed as a solution to everyday needs. Ezigbo noted that many of the Christological models that are adopted in modern times see Jesus as merely a solution either for existential or theological needs.¹³ Nevertheless, considering the Old Testament and the New, we see substantial and concrete imageries used that reveal a God that is greater than a mere human or spiritual solution. Images like the “Son of God,” “Son of man,” “Wisdom of

⁹ Marvin Meyer and Charles Hughes, *Jesus Then and Now: Images of Jesus in History and Christology* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001), 155.

¹⁰ The word *Parousia* in Greek means “presence.” Parousia is the physical reappearance of Christ. For Christians, it is a matter of remaining faithful to the teaching of Christ’s presence on to the last day. The Parousia is described in the scriptures as the expected return of the Lord. Christians are not left in ignorance to assume its actualization. Over the years, the meaning of the word has changed from its literal meaning, however, it still reflects the conscious presence of the Messiah to return for his own. Gianni Vattimo, *After Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 130.

¹¹ Talbert, *The Development of Christology During the First Hundred Years*, 3.

¹² The Christology of the early community of faith was based on the good news of the resurrection of Jesus and its significance to their Christian life. Though the tradition of the “Son of man” was promoted in the early life of Jesus, there is no proof it became the source of Christological development. Chris Tilling, *Paul’s Divine Christology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2015), 36.

¹³ Victor I. Ezigbo, *Re-Imagining African Christologies: Conversing with the Interpretations and Appropriations of Jesus in Contemporary African Christianity* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2010), 297.

God,” “the Last Adam,” and the “Word of God” are characteristics that reveal aspects of ecclesiastical, soteriological Christology for better understanding and articulation.¹⁴

Foundation of Orthodox Christological models

Christianity appeared and proliferated in antiquity with the message of salvation through Jesus Christ. The book of Acts records the tremendous passion of a people that had a conviction of Christ’s resurrection from death. Thus, the success of this Christian movement was rooted in the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. Norris opines that the earliest Christological proclamations centered on Jesus as the human being who was revealed through the resurrection as the coming messiah, which presents Jesus as one called and set apart for a particular function in God’s purpose.¹⁵ However, as Christianity grew, certain aspects of church theology were confronted, and new questions began to overwhelm the Christian church. Efforts were made to respond to every doctrinal and theological issue, among which was the unity of the two natures of Christ.

Chalcedonian Two-Nature¹⁶ Christological Models

¹⁴ Son of Man Christology remains a permanent part of Christian tradition because of its usage by the Synoptists. Turning to the Christological titles of the New Testament, they indeed played a significant role in influencing the Christian thought of the church. Such titles include Son of God, Christ, and the Last Adam. One of the reasons that Christians were persecuted was because of the use of such titles. For instance, the title, “Son of God,” was a term that was used for Roman Emperors. All the titles had significant meaning to a particular group which helped shape their understanding of the Christ-Event; “Anointed one” (*Christos*) had great significance in Judaism, whereas “Son of man” describes the gifted men of the Hellenistic-Roman world, and “Last Adam” could connect perfectly with the philosophical speculation on the origins and destiny of humankind, while “Wisdom” and “Logos” struck up strong resonance with Greek thinkers who were interested in cosmology and salvation. Though they had a significant impact in a Jewish-Hellenistic background, they also had an impact on non-Jewish Christians. Brian O. McDermott, *Word Become Flesh: Dimensions of Christology* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1993, 139).

¹⁵ Richard A. Norris Jr, ed., *Christological Controversy* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1980), 3.

¹⁶ Among many councils that were called to address the issue of the two natures of Christ, the Chalcedonian-Nicea council is significant. According to Ramm, the Nicene Creed affirmed that Jesus was both man and God, thus, He was God incarnate. This left several unanswered questions in relation to the humanity of Christ and how to understand the unity of His divinity and humanity. There were speculations that led Emperor Marcian to call a council at Chalcedon in Constantinople to address the issue. The convergence of that council was to find a foundational ground upon which the two natures could be adequately explained for the understanding of Christians. It was at that council that the Chalcedonian creed was proposed which later became the official creed of the church. It was affirmed that Christ is true God in relation to the Godhead and true man in relation to manhood. The council did not meet to change the Nicene creed that the church had but to offer an explanation of what the church already believed. However, from mid-nineteenth century, this two nature Christology has been under severe attack because of a number of issues raised. See Bernard L. Ramm, *An Evangelical Christology: Ecumenic and Historic* (Vancouver, CA: Regent

The council of Chalcedon in 451 CE marks a defining moment in the history of the Christian church. For Janos, the fourth council is regarded as a partial rehabilitation of Antiochene Christology and a compromise between Alexandrian and the Antiochene perspectives.¹⁷ Price and Gaddis contend that Chalcedon played a significant role in the theological and political division and rivalry of the church noting that, whether seen as a milestone in the development of orthodox doctrine, or as a divisive and misguided occasion of schism, Chalcedon can be remembered for her doctrinal product and the definition of faith.¹⁸ The political and religious chaos, together with doctrinal controversies that engulfed the church and brought about persistent division, necessitated the council between 449 and 51 CE.

Among the many goods of the Chalcedon's resolution is the objection to adoptionism, emphasizing that Christ is more than a mere man for salvation to be effectual. The council of Chalcedon is known for the view that Christ assumed the form of human nature, and therefore, the divine and the human are united in one person. Metzger asserts that the Chalcedonian model itself speaks of the distinct though inseparable relation of the divine and the human nature in the person of Jesus Christ, without separation yet distinct, noting that the connection between the divine and the human is not a hypostasis of Christ having come into existence because of the two unions but as the assumption by the Logos of the human nature in addition to the divine that he had possessed from all eternity.¹⁹ This two-nature Christological model stood out for centuries as the model of church orthodoxy and foundational throughout the Protestant era.

Kenotic²⁰ Christological Model

College Publishing, 1993), 33. and Knut Alfsvag, *Christology as Critique: On the Relation between Christ, Creation, and Epistemology* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2018), 261–217.

¹⁷ Damien Janos, ed., *Ideas in Motion in Baghdad and Beyond: Philosophical and Theological Exchanges between Christians and Muslims in the Third/Ninth and Fourth/Tenth Centuries* (Leiden and Boston: BRILL, 2015), 52.

¹⁸ Richard Price and Michael Gaddis, *The Acts of the Council of Chalcedon*, vol. 1 (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005), 1.

¹⁹ Paul Louis Metzger, *The Word of Christ and the World of Culture: Sacred and Secular Through the Theology of Karl Barth* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2005), 56.

²⁰ The word “kenosis,” was a word used to describe the self-emptying of the Son in Philippians 2:6-8. In this passage, Paul affirm that the Son in the very nature God chose not to consider Himself equal with

The kenotic view upholds the interpretation that the divine nature of Christ abandoned his divine nature by self-emptying to become a complete man; hence, Christ is the God that becomes a man. Kenotic Christology comes in many forms, but the most articulated view is the one that Christ is one person, who is truly divine and truly human.²¹ The kenotic theology is based on a reading of Philippians 2, and Christ has been explained in the light of self-emptying concerning the divine association to human lowliness rather than as entailing any real change to the divine nature itself.²² While the kenotic model is argued throughout the history of the church, it has no doubt played a significant role in shaping the Christology of the church.

Meanwhile, the fourth century was a period that records the controversy of the person of Christ as to whether He is divine or not, which brought to the scene the Arian controversy that denies the divinity of Christ. Athanasius suffered exile five times for his stance and belief about the nature of Christ as fully divine. But soon after the Arian controversy was put down came another challenge to the church that questioned the relationship of the human to the divine nature of Christ.²³ Nevertheless, as McCall noted, the kenotic proposal of the two natures of Christ did not solve the whole problem of the union of Christ but drew criticism with the most significant being that it does not do enough to secure the unity of the person.²⁴

God but “emptied himself.” This emptying connotes the idea that the divine and human were united in the incarnate Christ without any compromise of the integrity of each other. Though the New Testament affirms the divinity and humanity of Christ, there have been controversies throughout the church history on how to comprehend the uniqueness of each person. This controversy brought about the rise of several Christological interpretations that brought division in the church. As a result, councils were formed to address the issue of the different controversies among which the council of Chalcedon between 591 and 455 stands out to be the most influential. The Caledonian council affirms the uniqueness of each person – human and divine yet, the council left a number of unanswered questions. In the kenotic, the council did not provide an explanation for key terms like *physis and hypostasis*. Its explanation of the unity of the humanity and divinity of Christ remained influential throughout church history. See explanation by David R. Law, *Kierkegaard’s Kenotic Christology* (Oxford, OX: OUP Oxford, 2013), 34–42.

²¹ C. Stephen Evans, *Exploring Kenotic Christology: The Self-Emptying of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 139.

²² David Brown, *Divine Humanity: Kenosis Explored and Defended* (London, UK: Hymns Ancient and Modern Ltd, 2010), 1.

²³ David T. Williams, *Kenosis of God: The Self-Limitation of God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit* (New York: iUniverse, 2009), 6.

²⁴ Thomas H. McCall, *An Invitation to Analytic Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 98.

Concerning the fact, the church from antiquity has employed practical models, and several councils called upon to explain the reality of Christological implications to the human need, both spiritual and physical; however, it has always left behind several unanswered questions for the church to wrestle with. Noteworthy is the fact that the church should continue to use other models to explain the basis of Christology for the benefit of humanity.

African Christological Viewpoint

While Africans have their understanding of God, many in academia argue that the African viewpoint was not given due consideration by the post-missionary era. Christology deals with the incarnate Son of God who took on human nature to restore man into a relationship with God. However, the African mind is curious to know what this work means for African Christians. The use of images to interpret truth is vital in African spirituality. According to Bediako, the primal religions of Africa provided the substratum of the African knowledge of God, which the post-missionary church did not pay attention to. However, the pre-Christian religious memories are beginning to rehabilitate this religious heritage in present-day Christianity.²⁵ Recently in the studies of African Christianity, the role of African tradition in the integration of Christianity to the African people is receiving appraisal with priority to vernacular languages as indispensable vehicles for the integration.

In the studies of modern African theology, many argue that it must have meaning in the everyday lives of people, which Okafor affirms on two theoretical mediations; social-analytic arbitration and hermeneutic mediation.²⁶ These two theoretical mediations see Jesus as Savior and the Word of revelation. By implication of this conceptual mediation, the divinity of Christ must be expressed in the human and temporal experiences of all aspects of Christology to African reality. The aim is to understand within the existing culture of Africans how Christology can be relevant to people.

²⁵ Kwame Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa: History and Experience* (Orbis Books, 2004), 4.

²⁶ Ikenna U. Okafor, *Toward an African Theology of Fraternal Solidarity: UBE NWANNE* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2014), 175.

Times are changing, and there is a continual task to understand Christology in the present context. Though the meaning of Christ does not change, the way we communicate the significance of Christ does. Therefore, there is a need to understand this significance and meaning for our own time. The person of Jesus Christ stands at the center of Christian faith, and the reason for the study of Christology and its meaning to Christian life and theology must reflect on this basis; this is because for any theology to make sense, it should reflect upon the life of the people.²⁷

Selected Paradigmatic Christological Perspectives

In this section, we shall examine some Christological models that remain significant in the contextualization of African Christianity. The paper is not establishing new models for African Christianity but aims at giving an overview of some of the existing models that help shape Christology in Africa, such as divine, revealer, healer, provider, and deliverer Christological models.

It is not every aspect of African Christological models that are limited in explaining Christology to Africa. While there is no one perfect archetypal method for examining Christology, some selected paradigms reflect the biblical perspective of it in an integrated hermeneutical framework in exploring Christology. Christology with African flavor must aim at engaging concretely with both the Christ-Event and the complex cultural and religious diversity of Africa simultaneously both as a question and answer to the theological, religious, spiritual, cultural, anthropological, and socio-economic issues that confront and shape the immediate contexts of the people.²⁸ Thus, for Christology to be meaningful to African peoples, it must be studied within the socio-cultural, religious identity of Africa.

a. Divine Christological Model

While Christian theology must seek to remain faithful to biblical truth, it must, at the same time, reflect the godly values and beliefs of the people it aims to reach without

²⁷ Veli-Matti Karkkainen, *Christology: A Global Introduction* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2003), 9.

²⁸ Ezigbo, *Re-Imagining African Christologies*, viii.

compromise. Stinton, a grounded theologian in African Christianity, noted that African Christians struggle to appropriate Jesus Christ authentically; however, they need to perceive and respond to Jesus in ways that are meaningful and relevant to their mentality and experience.²⁹ The African context is an opportunity for theological and spiritual reflection as it seeks to enlighten the influence of the understanding of the African people.

Christianity and African tradition have some relations. Michael opines that the magnificent response accorded to Christianity by traditional African religious categories already shares a defining steadiness rather than insincere discontinuity; hence, Christian theology must seek to appreciate the various cultural and religious forms that make such continuity possible. It is in line with this that Christian theology must, therefore, seek out to understand the force of the so-called external discontinuities to create a permanent home for Christianity on the African continent.³⁰

Before the fourth century CE, the controversy in the church was that of the equality of the Son to the Father. However, from the fourth century, there was a shift from that of equality to that of a connection or union of the humanity and divinity of Christ. This opened the door to a series of issues in the church. But the role of Cyril of Alexander and other church fathers in their Christological contribution in the council of Chalcedon and centuries later stood out and remained a legacy for the church for many centuries. Different methods were developed in the attempt to explain Christology, such that include Ebionite Christology, Docetism, and Logos Christology.

Meanwhile, Christological models in Africa took the long walk of titles and names of traditional African gods. Names and functional roles of local gods were adopted in the translation of the Bible into vernacular in the search for relevance of biblical interpretation. These models became the conventional paradigm that was adopted by

²⁹ Diane B. Stinton, *Jesus of Africa: Voices of Contemporary African Christology* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 2004), 4.

³⁰ Matthew Michael, *Christian Theology and African Traditions* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2013), 2.

Protestant reformers during the 15th and 16th centuries. Africans could use the names of their traditional gods to convey the same meaning of the true God.³¹

In African traditional religions, the relation of the people to the spirit reflects the understanding of the people in the supernatural — African thought and cultures often believe in life after death and what is termed today as regeneration or rebirth. As a result, it reveals the ontological process that reflects the relationship of the supreme being-God and the socio-cosmic universe. Thus, the life of Africans is defined in the context of communion with other beings. Nwaogaidu observed that the response to spirituality in Africa has the conception of reality through religious worship, which provides specific methods of religious worship concerning the sacred, cosmological, and anthropological intrinsic life of the people.³² The understanding that God is omnipresent reflects Africa's consciousness of the existence of spirit beings, which helps in the knowledge of the person of Christ as a divine being who can be consulted at all times similar to how the African gods could also be consulted.

In the fear of the unknown and the search for spiritual security, Africans turn to the supernatural for a solution through faithfulness, purification, and rituals. Thus, the life of Africans is tied to religious beliefs and practices, which in turn influence the African understanding of the true God. Chitando affirms that if Christianity is not a “rain of curse” upon Africans, and if the “story of Christianity” is to become the “African story,” the divine presence embodied in the Christ-Event must be appropriated in the manner that properly accounts for the reality of African indigenous religions as “an integral part of the people's way of life which they cannot do away with.”³³ The relevance and contextualization of Christianity to Africa, therefore, depends on how the Christ-Event and not Christianity, is allowed to function as the arbiter of divine presence that is reimagined in the light of the person and teaching of Christ.

³¹ Etien Koffi, *Paradigm Shift in Language Planning and Policy: Game-Theoretic Solutions* (Boston & Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2012), 84.

³² John Chidubem Nwaogaidu, *Jesus Christ - Truly God and Truly Man* (Zurich: LIT Verlag Münster, 2016), 27.

³³ Ezra Chitando, *African Traditions in the Study of Religion in Africa: Emerging Trends, Indigenous Spirituality, and the Interface with Other World Religions* (Routledge, 2016).

b. Reconciliatory Christological Model

This section deals with the model of Jesus as a reconciler. The role of an intermediary in indigenous African societies comes to the scene as a result of problems like crime and sickness whereby Africans look for someone to mediate their issues with the spirits, ancestors, or the gods. The role of the intermediary is to ask on their behalf to know what their predicament is about and to seek restoration. Thus, it was the responsibility of the intermediary to restore and maintain harmony and the right relationship in the community. Murphy and Stefano opine that the retrieval of congruence is channeled through intermediaries. The custom and the political forms of Africa dictate that high-status entities are approached indirectly through a middleman or third party. This is applied to God: though Africans do pray to God directly, they are also socially inclined to approach God through the mediator of those thought to be closer to him, to reconcile them and intercede on their behalf.³⁴

The focal responsibility of the mediator is to settle, thus, fulfilling the role of biblical priest, sacrifice, prophet, and peacemaker. To an African, these role models are well grasped in the mind and are significant. However, the African practices of reconciliation require continuous giving and making sacrifices before reunion takes place, while Christ, the perfect reconciler, reconciles us back to God before we come to salvation. Hence, as Bediako observed, the understanding of Africans about the spirit world in relation to resurrection and ascension gives African people an upper hand of understanding the gospel quickly and the Christological point is that their action in regards to the spirit world is an essential testimony to the depth of their perception of Jesus, both as Savior and Lord (see Jn. 4:14; Philippians 3:20-21; 1 Cor. 8:5-6; 2 Cor. 4:5). The spiritual worldview of the people is, therefore, a preparatory ground for the African mind to also perceive Jesus as the better and only mediator with God.³⁵

³⁴ Francesca Aran Murphy and Troy A. Stefano, *The Oxford Handbook of Christology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 437.

³⁵ Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden, eds., *Sharing Jesus in the Two-Thirds World: Evangelical Christologies from the Contexts of Poverty, Powerlessness, and Religious Pluralism : The Papers of the First Conference of Evangelical Mission Theologians from the Two-Thirds World, Bangkok, Thailand, March 22-25, 1982* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1984), 148.

c. Revealer and Healer Christological Model

Life in Africa is essential and valued communally. A biblical image of Jesus as a life-giver fits perfectly in the fulfillment of African aspiration. The aim of seeking an understanding of Christology from an African perspective is to translate Him into the nature, character, and tradition of Africans so that the people can have a conscious and meaningful relationship with God based on real experience. Faith is not something that can be expressed through a formula or theological statement to an African. It is something that is experienced through daily encounters with the reality of the supernatural.

The Christ-Event considers the “Word becoming flesh” as the revelation of God as well as the revelation of both the divinity and humanity. Ezigbo emphasizes that the uniqueness of the Christ-Event is not a mere revelation of the ontological composition of the person of Jesus, but also His significance for the relationship that exists between human beings and God.³⁶ In the Christ-Event, God manifests himself so that he makes himself accessible to humanity and so that humanity can learn and know the significance of both humanity and divinity. In John’s Gospel, Jesus is revealed as both the healer and the revealer of the Father (Jn. 4:43-54; 5:2-6, 14:1-9, 17:25-26). It is observed that the description of Jesus as Life is apparently noted in almost every chapter of John, and the implication of this life finds its most sublime expression in the story of Lazarus which has a tremendous impact on the life and experience of Africans.³⁷

Africa is overwhelmed with bloodshed, poverty, diseases, oppression, corrupt governance, among many other things like exploitation and tyranny, which requires the presence and the power of Christ in a powerful and practical way in responding to these challenges. For an average African who needs to understand Jesus in the day-to-day reality of life, Jesus must fit in as a life-giver, a rebuilders of life, a healer, and a protector and supplier of life-necessities. Note that one way in which Africans integrate Christological reality is through liturgy and the conduct of prophetic services of healings,

³⁶ Ezigbo, *Re-Imagining African Christologies*, 154.

³⁷ Johannes Nissen and Sigfred Pedersen, *New Readings in John* (London and New York: A&C Black, 2004), 44.

which portray him as the revealer of God's will through human instruments and a fulfiller of the same through the same medium. The revealer Christology offers African Christianity the opportunity to commit to the critique of Christology and redirect the African view of God without disregarding their context.³⁸

The Christ-Event became meaningful because Christ in his contact with his people impacted their lives through his character, and the impact he made in human suffering, sin, and death in so many places and conditions that He made an impact both as a healer and as a revealer of truth. Murphy and Stefano further noted that Africans grow in faith, and Christianity becomes meaningful only when it is evident in healing and wellness to individuals. Thus, overcoming sickness in Christianity means that Jesus is higher than the evil forces that evoke those sicknesses.³⁹

d. Provider Christological Model

The study of the provider-Christological model enables African Christians to engage the study of Christology that is relevant to the African context which provides the African Christians with the opportunity to explore specific Christological models from history, religion, and culture so that African Christians can integrate biblical Christianity within the framework of biblical interpretation. This aspect of the study examines the biblical heritage within the scope of African tradition in order to explore the contribution of Africans to the religious thought of global Christological study.

Muzorewa opines that though African religion does not talk of a black God or an African God, yet, they do not know a God that does not provide for them, nor a God who does not identify with the creation around them.⁴⁰ In the African way of worship, prayer plays a significant role where the people come to God in their most profound conviction seeking help from their desperate situations. They leave with the expectation that a compassionate God will make provisions soon. The understanding of compassion, as

³⁸ Gene L. Green, Stephen T. Pardue, and K. K. Yeo, eds., *Jesus without Borders: Christology in the Majority World* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015), 58.

³⁹ Murphy and Stefano, *The Oxford Handbook of Christology*, 436.

⁴⁰ Gwinyai H. Muzorewa, *African Origins of Monotheism: Challenging the Eurocentric Interpretation of God Concepts on the Continent and in Diaspora* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2014), 59.

noted by Mligo, is a useful means to enlighten Africans about the relationship that is between the attitude of Jesus and that of those who suffer and require the most profound care and attention.⁴¹

e. Eschatological Christological Model

It is right, to begin with, the African view of the end of times. Nel, in his observation of African eschatological Christology, noted that their view of the next world is pictured exclusively in materialistic terms with the look of that world similar or carbon copy of the present world.⁴² Africa's eschatological viewpoint is evident in the daily affair of life; Christology is meaningful in the future if it is meaningful now. Nel further opines that Christian eschatology uses object-oriented languages to convey the realities of life beyond the symbolic and providing it with Christological contents. For the whole Christological language to be fathomed, it must translate the eschatological imageries (symbols) into the literal language of the people.⁴³

The exclusive New Testament imagery of eschatological Christology presents the suffering Son of man, which reveals the exalted Christological expectations of the Jewish people. Jesus represents the complete presence of God revealed now in history while the expression of the Son of the blessed defines the messianic title of 'Son of God.' In the narrative of the New Testament, Jesus' responses always reflect His capacity as an eschatological judge.⁴⁴

To African Christians, Christological eschatology serves as a mediation of a theology of hope, which reveals a concept of God's righteousness, which will finally heal the relationship between God and His creation. In evaluating the Christological eschatology of Moltmann, Swoboda observed that eschatological Christology is messianic, noting that this messianic Christology leads to a messianic ethic whereby the present has already

⁴¹ Elia Shabani Mligo, *Jesus and the Stigmatized: Reading the Gospel of John in a Context of HIV/AIDS-Related Stigmatization in Tanzania* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2011), 375.

⁴² Marius Nel, *African Pentecostalism and Eschatological Expectations: He Is Coming Back Again!* (Newcastle, NE: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019), 91.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Jacobus H. Petzer and Patrick J. Hartin, *A South African Perspective on the New Testament: Essays by South African New Testament Scholars Presented to Bruce Manning Metzger During His Visit to South Africa in 1985* (Leiden: BRILL, 1986), 90.

been gripped by the eschatological future which opens up to the outpouring of the Spirit for the world to come. This hope is anchored by Christ's resurrection and looks to the future new creation with anticipation for an effective change and transformation in the present.⁴⁵ This hope ignites a passionate relationship of the African Christian to the eschatological promise.

The Relevance of Paradigmatic Christological Models to African Christianity

Christian theology ought to be Christocentric, and for theology to be meaningful depends on how one understands, interprets, and explains the Christ-Event at a given human situation.⁴⁶ African Christological models came out of two significant concerns: inculturation theology and liberation theology. Inculturation aims at exploring the cultural heritage of Africa to give each of its cultures a sense of identity, while the liberation theology deals with integrating liberation into the whole cultural background of Africa.⁴⁷

African Christologies have received the attention of both African and non-African theologians, but most of the imageries that are adopted have a reliance on the Bible, which may sometimes be a loose one; and the use of indigenous African symbols which gives significant consideration to the socio-cultural context and the situation of life in Africa. African Christologies are described as contextual as they vary from one another depending on the denominational, political, social, cultural, ethical, and linguistic influences and affiliations within the diverse African societies.

Nevertheless, the African flavor bridges the gap between the Hellenistic understanding of redemption and the traditional teaching of Africa. The attempt to rely on the Bible and church tradition described the significance of the sociocultural context and the real contextual situations in which the African peoples live.⁴⁸ The use of these

⁴⁵ A. J. Swoboda, *Blood Cries Out: Pentecostals, Ecology, and the Groans of Creation* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2014), 122.

⁴⁶ Mariasusai Dhavamony, *Jesus Christ in the Understanding of World Religions* (Roma: Gregorian Biblical BookShop, 2004), 22.

⁴⁷ Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*, 49.

⁴⁸ Daniel Patte, José Severino Croatto, and Teresa Okure, eds., *Global Bible Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2004), 329.

imageries has also helped to relate Christ to an average African in a simple but understandable manner, thus giving Africans some sense of identity and being integral to God's divine plan for the redemption of all His creation.

Limitations of African Christological models

As African theologies try to integrate Jesus into some conventional cultural models, questions are raised as to the accuracy of the referral of Christ as a brother, ancestor, king, among others. Maina is of the view that though the use of these African symbols forms the basis of African Christology and that many African theologians are suggesting that Jesus should be looked upon as brother, ancestor, or proto-ancestor because Jesus can be understood if He is interpreted in an African context, the accuracy of justifying these theological stands is a question to wrestle with.⁴⁹ Though the adopted methods for biblical interpretation using the conventional understanding of people allow the African theological enterprise to see the relationship between biblical revelation and the worldview of Africans, it no doubt is confronted with first, the problem of divergence between biblical testimony and culture of reception. Second, the exclusive use of comparative reading of Scripture and its effect on short-circuit remains abstract to the African mind. Finally, the problem of hermeneutics does not allow the culture of reception to benefit from the excellent and corrective use of the Scripture.⁵⁰

Also, when these models are stretched, several controversies arise in relation to methodology. These models allow the danger of generalization of African beliefs, thus leading to syncretism. Another threat is related to the vernacular languages used to interpret the Christological models, which may not adequately portray the accurate interpretation of the biblical truth; hence, it could mean a different thing less than representing the fundamental character of Christ.⁵¹ It also does not separate in the mind

⁴⁹ Wilson Muoha Maina, *Historical and Social Dimensions in African Christian Theology: A Contemporary Approach* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2009), 85–6.

⁵⁰ James Henry Owino Kombo, *The Doctrine of God in African Christian Thought: The Holy Trinity, Theological Hermeneutics, and the African Intellectual Culture* (Leiden and Boston: BRILL, 2007), 199–200.

⁵¹ Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*, 115.

of the people the difference between the supremacy of Christ as the perfect sacrifice and Savior and the role of these imageries.

To assign titles to Jesus in addressing Christological models does not adequately represent the primary Christological issues that affect Africa. The significant problems that affect Christianity in Africa are the significance of Jesus to the religious and spiritual questions of Africans, which requires a constructive Christology that allows Jesus to engage these quests by redirecting them to his vision of God's expectations from humanity.⁵² African Christianity must be interpreted in the light of Jesus' understanding of the values of tolerance, which requires a knowledge of being a follower of Christ beyond the rhetoric of human expectations but integrating into the vision of God's intention for his creation rather than what the human mind wants to achieve in the present.

Conclusion

Africa encompasses a myriad of socio-culturally, politically, and religiously diverse societies. However, African spirituality must reflect a commitment to the scriptural teaching of God, in that through Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit, He is perceived as one reconciling and remolding humanity. Nevertheless, for Christianity to be meaningful to Africans in their diverse settings, it must learn to engage the Christological and theological questions that are generated within the context of Africa. A Christianity that was established over two thousand years ago, preached and taught in foreign languages and cultures, can create meaning in the transformation agenda of Africa when it is contextualized to give the people their identity and significance. However, the call for contextualization of Christology must grasp the fact that the fundamental problem of man with God is sin, and salvation is in no one but in and through Jesus Christ, as revealed only in the written and the Living Word of God. Thus, to seek salvation elsewhere, apart from the shed blood of Christ, is heretical. It is preaching another gospel.⁵³

⁵² Green, Pardue, and Yeo, *Jesus without Borders*, 55.

⁵³ Byang Henry Kato, *Biblical Christianity in Africa: A Collection of Papers and Addresses* (Achimota, Ghana: Africa Christian Press, 1985), 22.

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