

# **FAITH IN THE ONE GOD IN CHRISTIAN AND AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGIONS: A THEOLOGICAL APPRAISAL**

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## **Abstract**

The Second Vatican Council has led the contemporary Church out of the desert of an arid doctrinal point of view, which sometimes rejects all questions and any kind of critical research. In contemporary Christian Catholic theology, any critical research or questioning is no longer seen as lack of faith in God and the Church, but as the part of the Anselmian programme of theologizing as an act of faith seeking to understand the depth of the mystery of God in salvation history. In the search for the mystery of God in salvation history, how should the African Christians understand the relationship between revelation of the one God in the Christian and African Traditional Religions? In response to this critical question, this paper examines the Christian revelation of the one God in the Bible, on the one hand, and the knowledge of God in African Traditional religions on the other hand. Finally, it draws a theological appraisal.

## **Christian Revelation of God in the Bible**

The Bible is popularly referred to as the sacred Scripture or the Word of God. The first lengthy part of the Bible is named the Hebrew Scriptures, or commonly called by the Christians the Old Testament. The Hebrew Scriptures reveal how the people of the Old covenant came to know the one true God in the history of man's salvation. The historical contents of the Hebrew Scriptures stretch over many hundreds of years, during which the Hebrew nation, the chosen people of Yahweh, awaited the coming of Messiah and the Saviour promised to them. The second segment of the Bible is known as the Christian Scriptures or commonly called the New Testament. The Christian Scriptures contain the events of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth and the activities of the early Christian communities or Jesus' followers, whose mission was to witness and to proclaim the Good News of salvation to the entire human family.<sup>1</sup>

The Christians believed that the Bible is the sacred and inspired Word of God. God guided human authors to communicate significant and powerful truths about Godself and about the destiny of the entire human family. The revelation of God comes to us *in* and *through* human language, and as such it includes an interpretative dimension and takes place within the context of cultural history and in a specific cultural tradition. In diverse ways and different forms, God spoke to the people of Israel, to the chosen people through the instrumentality of the prophets, but in the last days, God spoke to the entire human family through His Son. God spoke to us in His Son Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. God had to speak a language that the people could understand, perform action that human beings could find intelligible and sensible. God continues to speak to us mostly and directly through people, and in our situations in life.

The word “Testament” used to express the Jewish and Christian Scriptures has the meaning of covenants. The word refers to the two covenants – the old and the new – which God had established with humanity in the history of salvation. The Christian religion understood God as the One who has been manifested under both covenants – the Old and the New covenants, the Christian Bible. In both covenants, the Old and the New Covenants, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is the God and Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus knows and calls God, Abba, Father. The word Abba points to Jesus’ relationship with God and a network of relationships of all kinds among human beings. Dermott pointed out that as the Son of God, Jesus enjoys a unique union and relationship with the Father, a union which He opens to those who believe in Him.<sup>2</sup>

The Old Testament is generally spoken of as the *Scriptures* (Matt 21:42), in plural. Gradually, the word has been employed in the singular and the term *Scripture* came to be a synonym with the word *Bible* (Acts 8:32). The Bible contains the revelations made to the human family by God about Himself. In Christian religion, God reveals Himself to humanity as a Trinity – Father, Son and Spirit. For this to happen, God had to make Himself truly human to us. This God did ultimately by becoming incarnate in Jesus Christ. We know more about what God is in the life of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ reveals God as love. God is a person. God possesses attributes such

as perfection, mercy and compassion. God is unique, one, singular, with no other like Him. McCoy remarked that Jesus is the sacrament of God: all that He does and says carries divine significance. And that it is the humanity of Jesus that is the vehicle of divinity.<sup>3</sup>

According to Garrett, the unity of the Bible is not to be found in the identity of all its concepts, on the assumption that a conceptual sameness prevails throughout the books of the biblical canons; rather there is a diversity of expression and emphasis amid an underlying unity. The unity of the Bible is capable of being identified and expressed. Such unity may for instance, be found in the following realities: (a) The identity of the One who has been manifested under both covenants and in both testaments – Yahweh God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who is the God of Jesus Christ (b) the man Jesus, the promised and expected Messiah and the Messiah who has indeed come, who is also the incarnate Word of God and the eternal Son of God (c) the Spirit of God, who in both power and intimacy indwells and empowers persons under both covenants and in both testaments (d) the co-relatable completeness of the work of the One God – in creation, in sustenance of that created, in redemption of a people, and in the consummation of all things, whether in judgment or blessedness – to which aspects of the work of God both testaments bear witness.<sup>4</sup>

The Bible expresses the Jewish and Christian faith. The Jews and the Christians affirm that the Old Testament contains the wonderful deeds of God, which God performed in their midst, and this constitute the history of salvation. The Christians affirmed that this history had been brought to its fullness and definitive point in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as demonstrated by the New Testament. God is not inactive in the midst of all other nations and other religions outside the Jewish and Christian religions, but also very active in the midst of other people and their religions. God has revealed Himself to the people of other nations, civilizations, cultures and religions outside the Judeo-Christian religion. Other non-Christian religions are authentic part of God's plan for the salvation of the human family. It is not surprising, therefore, that the doctrine of the divine revelation is related to God's revelation in African Traditional Religions. As we trace the history of salvation recorded in the Dogmatic Constitution on the

Church, we find that the adherents of African Traditional religions came into view as the People of God, in *Lumen Gentium* 9.

### **Structures of Grace in African Traditional Religions**

We are beginning this section with the investigation of the criterion for a true religion. What is required for a religion to be a true religion? To what extent is African religion bound to agencies and polycentric structures of grace? The answer to the question of a true religion yields two results: the name of God and the presence of grace. A true religion contains the name of God. The criterion for a true religion is the presence of grace in the religion itself. In other words, the measure of a true religion is the presence of grace in that religion. African religion is a logical religion of grace. Considering the first and second points together, it is clear that the African Traditional Religion endorsed a redistribution and polycentric structure.

(a) *The Structures of African Traditional Religions*: Sometimes it is a difficult task among scholars to choose a unanimous name for the religious traditions and beliefs of the African people. Some scholars choose to call it the *African Traditional Religion*, while others prefer to name it the *African traditional Religions*. African scholars propose two categories: the monistic (the African Traditional Religion) and the pluralistic (the African Traditional Religions). My own position is pluralistic, and I admit this sensibility openly in this discussion.

African Traditional Religions are the religious systems that developed among the people of Africa in the course of the thousands of years that had rolled through the ages of history. Every folk in Africa has its own particular religion and religious system guiding their life and their human activities in the world from day to day. They are divergent sensibilities among these religions, which originate from ethnicity, class and gender, and which are still present in our contemporary Africa. The pluralistic category is very helpful and can even explain the origin of African religions.

There is, however, special resemblance that interacts among these religions and which had existed within them. In this perspective, there is a connection, identity and common elements

binding them together. The elements that bind them together are the recognition of a God, who is a Creator of all things that exist, the recognition of spiritual realities, which exist side by side with the physical world, and material realities such as the spirits, and the mystical forces. There is the recognition of the central place of human beings in the world, which is seen as the bridge between God and nature. There is the recognition of upright and ethical values on which the community of persons order their life, there is a recognition of the continuity of human life after the physical death. There is the recognition of religious practices such as sacrifices, prayers, offerings, ceremonies, rituals and festivities – these are occasions of grace. There is the recognition of religious persons such as priests and priestesses and the traditional medicine men and women – they are the instruments and bearers of grace, they can work to human good.

In the structure of the African traditional religions, there is the Creator God, who is good, almighty and powerful. The Africans believe that the Creator God is the High God and a Supreme Being. The Creator God, the Superior or Supreme Being has no equal. The Creator God and the Supreme Being is not subjected to any power, but controls the entire cosmos. The Creator God is not isolated from His creation, rather He is involved in the life of the human beings on earth. Many African scholars raised a major question for our understanding of the Supreme Being in African religions as the same as the God of the Christian religion. This is a difficult issue to understand, but the reality of creation proffers the solution.

From the perspective of creation, it is clear that the Creator God in the African religion is the same as the Creator God in the Christian religion. Creation is a single reality or a single existence. We have a single cosmos. To understand the Christian God in contradistinction from the African concept of God will inevitably lead us to dualism, that is, to the conception of two worlds – the world created by the Christian God and the world created by the African God. Creation as a revelation of one God is the binding wire that ties the concept of God in African traditional religions and the concept of God in the Christian and classical religions. There is, ever and always one Creator God.

The Africans believe that they live in a world where immortal and mortal, heavenly and earthly, divine and human are rather

transcendentally separated from one another. Their world was filled with the lesser gods, goddess and spirits who assume divergent shapes and figures, who assumed and changed bodies as human beings assume clothes and change styles. They help the human beings in the business of the day. Sometimes they can appear in any material, animal or human form appropriate for the occasion. They are the special messengers of the Supreme and transcendent God.

*(b) The Name of God as a Father:* Of course, no one can question the fact that a religion of grace such as ATRs possess no name for God. For the Christian faith, the doctrine of grace is indispensable. According to the earliest tradition, grace is God's own life – the *uncreated grace*. Grace is a participation in the divine life of God and in God's indwelling among human beings. The first truth about grace is that grace is, in the first instance, God's own life, which God wants to give to humanity for salvation and fulfillment. The secondary dimension is how human beings actually receive God's grace. For Rahner as for Henri de Lubac, the existential reality of human life is one in which God's grace is in fact always being offered to human beings. For Karl Rahner, there is a universal presence of grace in the world, since God's saving will is itself universal. Grace, understood in this sense, can enrich human life by showing it to be worth living, and, indeed, by showing it to be worth living, can actually make it worth living.

In every religion, God invites human beings to seek Him, and at the same time God goes out constantly in search for human beings. In search for God in ATRs, there is a belief among the people of Africa, in the existence of a Supreme Being. The people of Africa had always believed that God is present in the world *in and through* creation. Throughout history even to the present day; there is found among the people of Africa a certain awareness of a hidden power, which lies behind the course of nature and the events of human life. There is a presence and strong recognition of a Supreme Being, or still more of *a Father*. This deep awareness and recognition results in a way of life that is imbued with a deep religious sense.<sup>5</sup>

The belief in the existence of God and the experience of a Supreme Being belong to the basic religious experience of persons belonging to African Traditional Religions and cultures. There is in

all the traditions of Africa a sense of spiritual realities, and “a very important and common factor of this sense of spiritual realities is the notion of God as the first and ultimate cause of things...In reality, a living sense of God as the Supreme personal and physical Being, pervades the whole of African culture.”<sup>6</sup>

One must recognize that the African experience of God as the Supreme Being still challenges theology and Church in Africa today. At the same time, one must acknowledge that all theological reflections in Africa *before* and *after* the Second Vatican Council had profoundly impacted our theological understanding of God from African perspective. In the theological perspective of Fulle, there is a concrete belief in a Supreme God who created everything else (the middle powers, people, animals, and the physical universe). Among the people of Africa, since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities, His eternal power and divine nature has been made known to them, as a revelation. The end result is that “God is always revealing His existence to the Africans, as to other people, through creation.”<sup>7</sup>

In African Traditional Religions, when we are speaking about God, as a Supreme Being, we are not calling on *abstract name*, but expressing our *faith in the One God* who created the universe. The ATRs recognize the deeper role that the naming of God plays in transmitting the values of revelation. The Africans understand the concept of Supreme Being quite broadly. In a general sense, the Supreme Being refers to the Creator God. Still, the people of African Traditional Religions have relatively concrete views of the Supreme Being, “each group in Africa has a name for the Supreme God, and each has its own ideas about Him. Some tribes see God as related to the sun, (for example, the Rubassa, Berom, Chamba) and some to the rain (eg. Igede). Although they have the same name for sun and God, they don’t think the sun is God. The sun is like a manifestation of God. Some see God as a husband with the earth as his wife, resulting in fruitfulness.”<sup>8</sup> The search for God in African Traditional Religions has not taken the same form and expression in all ages. The search often takes vastly different forms of expressions for people in different cultural backgrounds.

In the process of the search for God, the Supreme Being in African Traditional Religions, the people of Africa become conscious of their spirituality, which relates them to that Being in a

very particular manner. The Africans are bound to the Supreme Being, who is the source and destiny of their being. They are conditioned by their image of God within their different cultural situations. Concerning religions in Africa, one has vividly pointed out that within traditional life in African communities; “human being lives in a religious universe...names of people have religious meanings in them; rocks and boulders are not just empty objects; the sound of drum speaks a religious language; the eclipse of the sun or the moon is not simply a silent phenomenon or nature, but one which speaks to the community that observes it, often warning of an impending catastrophe.”<sup>9</sup> In search for God in African Traditional Religions, each faith community has developed its own ways and systems to give account for whatever insight each is enabled to gain into the deep mystery of the Supreme Being.

In different African cultures, there are evidences of the idea of God and the existence of that spiritual realm, even interpretations and practices may be different. In search for an authentic worship of God in ATRs, Mbiti pointed out that “in many and various ways, African people respond to their spiritual world of which they are sharply aware. This response generally takes on the form of worship which is internalized in different acts and sayings. These acts may be formal or informal, regular or extempore, communal or individual, ritual or unceremonial, through word or deed. They vary from one society to another, and from one area to another.”<sup>10</sup>

In African religion, the reality of human salvation is closely related to the experience of life. The African people place a great emphasis on life: the continuity of the family life and the continuity of life after death must be seen in the perspective of salvation. Here lies the theological nutrients of salvation in African religion. At least this forms the basic faith of every traditional African person – the continuity of life. For the Africans, faith and life are inseparable. Faith has a communal character in African religious traditions. In African religious setting, faith is essentially experienced in a community – the community character of faith is emphasized and lived by the members. Faith in African religion is experienced in corporate and communal expressions, for instance in community festivals, sacrifices, worships and in every religious gathering of the people. In African context, faith is not simply a rational

understanding of what you believe, but faith has a corporate and communal character.

The African community celebrates its life of faith in numerous feasts, for instance, in name-giving, initiation, reconciliation and in large-community feasts. In African culture, religion is existentially life and not simply an aspect of life. Culture is part and parcel of human beings, and it is difficult to dispense with its demand or part company with its reality. Culture fills our life from the time we got up in the morning until we go to bed at night. Religion is a basic element of culture. At the core of culture lies the religion of humanity, whether Christianity, Judaism, Islam or African Traditional Religions. The only way to destroy the religion of a particular group is to destroy them as individuals or cultural groups.

Culture is a way of life of a group of people. The African people have cultures that are reflected in the words of life. A closer observation to the African ways of life shows that African culture is integral to experience of *word-logos*. The African people express their experience of the divine in words of life. This can take the place of verbal blessings, daily prayers and invocation, in oral myths in their respective religious beliefs and practices. Life is a feeling of well-being, fulfillment and satisfaction resulting from factors in the internal and external socio-cultural environments of a human person. In African community, life stands at the center of a human person. The principles of African religion protects human sexuality, marital life, respect for life, including prenatal life and the meaning of human fertility. Life is a symbolism in African religion, which speaks to the contemporary men and women much about the culture of preservation of life, especially in an age when human life is highly depreciated and abortion is being legalized.

### **Theological Appraisal and Conception of God for Our Time**

Africa is a continent where people search for communication and communion with God. The African mind is a searching mind: searching for truth: searching for grace: searching for life: searching for meaning: searching for fulfillment: searching for the Absolute and searching for the Transcendent. Africa's religio-cultural traditions are indispensable working materials for the naming of God in our time.

*(1) The Questions Raised By the Search for the one God in ATRs.* In the light of African traditional religious experience, the words of the inspired scriptures, and philosophical reason, what must one say or what could one say about God in our time? Who defines the concept of God and determines the framework for contextualization – the Bible or the African Traditional Religions? In laying a theological foundation for conception of God in our time, we necessarily recall the words of Wilmore, every group of people on earth, every race of the human family, and every community of faith thinks about God out of its own state of being, its own understanding of itself, its created environment and out of its own condition of life.<sup>11</sup> How far are we to interpret the specific relationship between the confession of the Christian faith in the one God, the Father Almighty, and faith in the one God in African Traditional Religions?

Today, many theologians believe, the African religions and cultures can offer a meaningful understanding of God in our time. The divine gift of culture is particular to every group of people, race, religion and community. From a theological perspective, African cultures have gradually survived, because it is the will of God to keep them alive, in time and space. Practically, the African cultures have survived because in them men and women have been able to identify God's voice speaking to them about God's love, peace and justice. Who then is God in African Religions and cultures? In African religions and cultures, human beings conceive God in terms of what God has done and continues to do for them, in history. God is Father. In the philosophy of African religion, the object of truth is not so much important, but the subjective attitude is the primary determining factor of being and existence, that is, the thing that really matters. In African thought, the objective truth, what God is like, is not decided by the head nor the human reason, but by the human heart. What God is like comes from the human heart. The heart is the seat of Love. The heart is the seat of Love as well as the symbol of Love. The heart as the symbol of Love has some merits. The symbol implies the African sense of relationship. Theologically, the symbol of heart as a seat of Love allows personal relationship with God and evokes a dynamic movement of conception of God is Love and the sense of God as Father conveyed by Jesus Christ, the Second Person of the Trinity.

In African religions, confidence in God's love encouraged a community-centred faith that are tied with moral and ethical actions. Within this context, faith in the one God in African Traditional Religions is in the heart and not in the head. The primary understanding of the Person of God does not consist in pondering the question of God as a purely theoretical one that, in the final analysis, has no impact on the events of the world or of one's own life. The African thought does not consider it impossible, like the positivistic philosophy, to prove the propositions of God either true or false. In African society, everything about God permeates into human life. God is seen as a Father, who does not abandon His children. He is a Father, who is always there for the children, who is there to protect them and who is available in all the events of their daily lives.

The sharpness of the sense of the Father in African religions immediately introduces a relationship to God, that is, a relationship to the fundamental ground of our being and a real union with the fundamental truth. The relationship is expressed in God's care. As a loving father cannot abandon his children, so God cannot abandon his people. The relationship expresses security and is reassuring. In this relationship, we become sons and daughters of God and see ourselves protected from all evils that threatened human life. In this sense, the African traditional religions are radically monotheistic religions – God in ATRs and culture is precisely what God appears to be in all other monotheistic religions.

In such a dynamic and religious system in Africa, there is no point in taking into account the influence of the cultures of the Old and New Testament times, in understanding of God in African Christianity, because God the Creator is above the cultures of the Old and New Testaments times. The Bible is the word of God touched by human cultures, strictly speaking, the word of God in human language. At the heart of this point, the Bible is the word of God in human language, but God is above every human language – Hebrew, Greek, Latin, German, English or Igbo language. God speaks in various languages and speaks to people in their respective languages and cultural situations. In and through African language and culture, it is possible to develop a new symbolic understanding of our relationship with God, “in order to evangelize Africa, we must establish a relationship with the living revelation, where God begins

to speak through an apostle of a base community, using an African style to speak to Africans. We must talk about God in lands where the miller granary is the very image of the world and says far more to people than the vine or the wheat field. We dream of a Church where God speaks to these people with images and symbols rooted in the hard soil of grassland and the trees of the forest.”<sup>12</sup> The art of the African story-teller must be of service to theology in Africa.

### **Conclusion**

Faith in the one God in Christian and African Traditional Religions, as the title of our paper insisted, expresses itself in and as (i) worship (ii) knowledge and (iii) action. We speak of faith in the one God in our theological knowledge, to God in prayer and worship and for God through prophetic action. There is in the cultures of the African people a certain perception and the recognition of a conceived divine power that the people name the Supreme God and address as a Father. The process of contextualization must acknowledge that cultures differ in their conception of God and life, requiring other forms of expressions and understanding.

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- <sup>5</sup> Vatican II, Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, *Nostra Aetate* (28 Oct, 1965) n<sup>o</sup> 2.
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