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God and Humanity in African Religious Beliefs and Christianity

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INTRODUCTION

A STUDY OF GOD and humanity in an African perspective cannot be done without referring to the findings of the basic elements of the African religious system known as African Traditional Religions (hereafter ATR). In recent times this has become even more true with the resurgence of the ATR that occurred in the aftermath of the African independence movement of the 1950s, and the explosion of the African cultural revolution movement of the 1970s. These developments have inspired a search for an African Christianity that takes into serious account the African religious experience. This has resulted in the production of a body of literature that has focused for the most part on the phenomenological study of the ATR.

Yet, concomitant with this resurgence of the ATR which African theologians regard as “a contemporary living reality”¹ is an explosion of

1. Idowu, “The Study of Religion with Special Reference to Africa Traditional

Christianity on African soil. Richard Gehman observes that “within a little more than a century Africa has turned away from ATR to embrace the Christian faith.”² To many, Christianity appears to pose a mortal threat to the ATR. But more serious than the question of religious competition is the dilemma the encounter of Christianity with the ATR poses for African Christians. Put bluntly, the issue is how to live the Christian life with the haunting legacy of a religious past.

While we have admitted that we cannot study God and humanity in an African perspective without an adequate understanding of the ATR, we also know that the identity and the acts of what that religious system refers to as Supreme Being have been a puzzle for Africans in their search for the truth about God and his relationship to humanity. In light of this, the purpose of this chapter is to explore what it means to be human, how Africans can come to know God and thus have a genuine relationship with him, and what it means to experience an identity that embraces both their cultural heritage and their faith in Christ.

Our inquiry will follow a threefold approach encapsulated by the following questions: How do Africans view God and humanity? How does the Bible describe what Africans conceive as God? And what are the implications for Christianity in Africa today of the encounter of the traditional African view of God with the biblical perspective. Although we are aware of the danger of syncretism that African Christianity faces, our inquiry will, nonetheless, take into serious account Africa’s pre-Christian religious experience as an important step toward the knowledge of the true God and his relationship to humankind.

Yusufu Turaki, to whom I am indebted for the perspective that I will share in this chapter, warns that the interpretation of the concepts and attributes of God in the ATR should be measured by the traditional religion itself. He goes on to state that, “They cannot be interpreted by using Christian categories, for then, they lose their traditional meanings and import.”³ In other words, according to Turaki, in order to accurately understand the African concept of God, our interpretation needs to be undertaken in the framework of the African religious worldview itself. But, since Turaki himself acknowledges that, “the traditional concepts of God as stated by . . . African . . . scholars are comparable with those of Christianity,”⁴ we will not seek to interpret the ATR as a religion. Instead, we will highlight those areas

Religion,” 1.

2. Gehman, *African Religion in Biblical Perspective*, 3.

3. Turaki, *Christianity and African Gods: Methods in Theology*, 28.

4. Ibid.

that it shares with Christian faith in order to come to an understanding of what it means to be an African believer in Jesus Christ. In light of this, our description of the ATR will be limited to the categories which bear on the themes of God and humanity.

Before considering the questions mentioned above, we will describe briefly the religious context in which the biblical revelation of God to humanity through Jesus Christ took place. This is extremely important for our purpose here. For the people to whom God revealed his plan of salvation came out of their own religious experiences just as the Africans. Yet, they were challenged to embrace the new message of salvation through Jesus Christ just as the Africans are challenged to do.

SETTING THE BIBLICAL RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND

The Bible shows that people of traditional religions were confronted by the revelation of the God of Israel as the true God who claimed the whole human race to himself by right of creation (Gen 1:1; Exod 19:5; Ps 100:1). From Abraham to the Jews, to the Africans via the Athenians, the challenge has always been to reflect critically on the original religions of the nations in light of the new revelation of the true God and his relationship to humanity. Abraham left his pagan family to respond to the call and mission of God to become a source of blessings to “all the families of the earth” (Gen 12:1–3). Later on, Joshua will refer to his pagan ancestors as idol worshippers, and choose, along with his family, to abandon their “foreign gods” and serve Yahweh alone (Josh 24:14–24). Paul, likewise, challenged Jews, Gentiles, and pagans alike to establish a proper relationship with God which requires a drastic adjustment of their previous concept of God and humanity (Acts 14:8–18; 17:16–34).

In his discourse to the Athenians, Paul rehearses the basic doctrines of Christian faith and challenges his hearers to re-examine the tenets of their religious systems in light the biblical view, and to respond accordingly. This comes out with particular clarity in his exposition of the doctrines of God and humanity. Paul states:

The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods

and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him.

In light of Paul's discourse, we contend that the Supreme Being of ATR can be identified with the "Unknown God" of the Athenians. Hence, adherents of the ATR, like the Athenians, are challenged to respond to the new message. What kind of knowledge of God and humanity do Africans have outside God's revelation of himself through Jesus-Christ? How do we integrate the revelation about the true God and his will for humanity into our African traditional religious beliefs? We argue that the search must begin with the Africans' own religious awareness and proceed with a spiritual journey that leads to a proper relationship with the true God.

THE MEANING OF THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD AND HUMANKIND IN THE ATR

How do Africans view or know God? The biblical worldview through which traditional religions are assessed is quite different from the African religious worldview. In this latter worldview, the concept of God is composed of three main elements: the Supreme Being, the spirit world, and the mystical powers which are subordinated to the Supreme Being. Most African traditional religions, while emphasizing one or the other of these divine powers, hold the existence of a Supreme Being as a common basis for spiritual and social reality. These powers operate either directly or indirectly under the power of the Supreme Being.

The Supreme Being in the ATR

Through myths, legends, and stories, Africans came to an awareness of God as the Supreme Being. In Yoruba belief he is depicted in terms that are similar to the Christian description of God. According to Opoku, the Yoruba views God as follows:

He is credited with omnipresence, omniscience, and omnipotence. He is the just and impartial Judge, sometimes meting out judgment in the next world. He is Olurun Adakedajo, God the silent but active Judge. He is Olurun Olore, God the Benefactor. He is Olurun Alamu, the Merciful God. The creation of the universe is attributed to Him, and He therefore bears the title of Eleda, Creator. Other titles given to Him are significant. He is Alaye, the Living one, Elemi, Owner of Spirit, that is, spirit

given to human beings, and Oga-ogo, the High One or the Lord of Glory.⁵

But more amazingly, a pygmy considered primitive and untutored, celebrates the Supreme Being as changeless and bodiless, from his remote forest:

In the beginning was God,
Today is God
Tomorrow will be God.
Who can make an image of God?
He has no body
He is as a word which comes out of your mouth
That word! it is no more,
It is past, and still it lives!
So is God.⁶

Typically, Western observers regard the African concept of the Supreme Being as primitive. Some, however, in agreement with African thinkers, view him quite differently. Richard Gehman, for instance, echoes Asare Kofi Opoku when he says that “Many of the African statements about God are startling in their splendor.”⁷ On this basis, he confesses being “impressed with the many ‘truths’ which Africans held before the coming of the Gospel.”⁸ And for him this phenomenon is cause for praise stating that: “Since all truth is God’s truth, we readily acknowledge with gratitude the gracious work that God has done in Africa by his Spirit before the preaching of the gospel.”⁹

The ATR’s traditional concept of God is variously assessed by Africans themselves. Given the complexity of the African traditional worldview, which includes the Supreme Being, the spirit world, and magical powers, it is difficult to single out specifically the activities of Supreme Being. Because he is viewed as remote, God does not seem to be actively involved in everyday life. The task of attending to the daily needs of humans is the purview of the divine intermediaries such as gods, divinities, and ancestors.¹⁰ Although

5. Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 27.

6. Mbiti, *Concept of God in Africa*, 23.

7. Gehman, *African Religion in Biblical Perspective*, 360.

8. *Ibid.*, 357.

9. *Ibid.*

10. Turaki, *Foundations of African Traditional Religion and Worldview*, 56.

there might be an effort to single out the Supreme Being and understand who he is, the prominent role that these lesser agents play renders the inquiry difficult. This explains why African theologians assess differently the concept of God in relation to the overall fabric of the African religious worldview. Turaki sums up this complexity with an elaboration on what he calls “the holistic or organic worldview”:

In the traditional worldview, the Supreme Being appears to be ontologically transcendent. He occupies a hierarchical position in the pantheon of the spirit beings and may assign roles and functions to the lesser beings. He himself is inactive or does not get involved in daily communal affairs. However, this transcendence and aloofness must not be interpreted in absolute terms. He is also present in the community and in the hierarchy. Sometimes the gods, divinities, spirits and ancestors are seen as mediators acting with the sanction and knowledge of God himself although at other times they act as independent agents.¹¹

Contrary to the conclusions of thinkers of an earlier period, in recent times, studies of the ATR have led Africans to believe in the universality of the Supreme Being revealed therein. Furthermore, modern thinkers tend to see appreciable similarities between the views of God found in the ATR and the Bible respectively. For instance, just as the Bible does not discuss the question of the existence of God, but simply assumes it, so the ATR merely affirms God's existence on the basis of his acts in creation. Insights such as this, lead us to agree with Gehman's conclusion “that there is a lot of divine truth revealed by God through nature and conscience, so that African peoples knew some true things about God, albeit, limited and corrupted. The minds of Africans were not void of divine truth when missionaries first came.”¹² If this is true, it seems that the question that needs to be addressed concerns the identity of the universal God of the ATR when viewed from the perspective of biblical revelation.

Humanity in the ATR

How do Africans understand humanity? We've already observed that in the African popular conception, there are hundreds of myths and stories about the concept of God. The same is true of the origin of humankind. These stories yield a view of humanity which includes the creation of humans by

11. Ibid.

12. Gehman, *African Religion in Biblical Perspective*, 358.

God, their original relationship with him, the subsequent loss of that communion with God, and his relation to community. We will consider each of these in turn.

In the perspective of the ATR, human beings are created by God. Mbiti reports that among the people of the Nile Valle, the general idea is that God created humans in the heavenly realms and then lowered them into this world.¹³ Because of their divine origin, humans are seen as spiritual beings; however, they are endowed with bodies which are subject to decay, and a soul which is immortal. These parts of the human person are ascribed various functions in life or in death. In relation to God, the Igbo of Nigeria believe that the soul of each human being, called *Chi*, is derived from *Chukwu*, the Creator God.¹⁴ Ikenga-Metuh highlights three prominent features of the human person. First is the vital breath which is a life force that links humans with other life forces in the universe and ensures vital relationship with them. The second feature is the soul which is an emanation of the Creator. And the third is the bodily representation of the human person.¹⁵ As can be seen, most of the myths and stories, emphasize the direct origin of humans from God, either as a divine part of God himself (i.e., *Chi*), or an act of divine creation from another matter.

Turning to the issue of humanity's original relationship with God, we find that in the view of the ATR, in their original state, humans lived in happiness and peace with God. But something happened that resulted in the loss of that relationship and the idyllic life that stemmed from it. Various reasons are advanced for this unhappy turn of events, including humans' disobedience to God, God's annoyance with them, and the distance that exists between heaven and earth.

Because God became distant and remote, humans tried through religious activities to re-establish a relationship by drawing God closer to themselves. Thus, according to Idowu, religion "results from man's spontaneous awareness of a Living Power, 'Wholly Other' who is infinitely greater than himself, a power of mystery because unseen, yet a present and urgent reality, seeking to bring man into communion with Himself."¹⁶ If Idowu is correct, it appears that it is God who is seeking to bring humans into communion with himself. However, others observed that in the ATR the search is initiated by humans and is done for their benefit. Turaki, for instance avers that in the

13. Mbiti, *Africa Religions and Philosophy*, 92

14. Ilogu, *Christianity and Igbo Culture*, 34.

15. Ikenga-Metuth, *God and Man in African Religion*, 108, and Turaki, *Foundations of African Traditional Religion and Worldview*, 56.

16. Idowu, *Africa Traditional Religion*, 75.

ATR “beliefs, practices, rituals, offerings, sacrifices, and ceremonies seem to suggest that Africans are preoccupied with their security, needs, and well-being in their dealings with the spirit beings and the mystical, mysterious, and unseen powers which surround them.”¹⁷ As we will see below, we have here a utilitarian view of God which poses a serious problem to a genuine relationship with him. For as Mbiti observes:

when communities get satisfactory amounts of food, children, rain, health and prosperity, they have approached something of original state. At such times they do not generally turn to God in the utilitarian acts of worship as much as they do when these items are at stake.¹⁸

But despite this obvious utilitarian use of religion, there is still a hidden longing for the original communion that existed between God and humankind. Yet, as we intimated before, the ATR seems devoid of an avenue to satisfy such longing. As Mbiti observes, “out of these many myths concerning primeval man and the loss of his original state, there is no single myth, . . . which attempts to suggest a solution or reversal of this great loss. Man accepted the separation between him and God.”¹⁹ Here lies one of the blatant shortcomings of the ATR. The search for a solution to the problem of humanity’s separation from God cannot be conducted inside the system but outside it. Here then is a clear entry point for the presentation of the gospel to Africans who are in search of “lost paradise.”

What about humans’ relationship to community? On this point Turaki echoes the thinking of many scholars when he asserts that “it is impossible to think of a human being in isolation. Humans are always conceived of in relationship with others: those who are alive, those who inhabit the spirit world and the mysterious powers of nature.”²⁰ In similar vein, Ikenga-Metuth asserts:

The African doctrine of man strikes a balance between the social and individual dimensions of man. Man is essentially seen as a member of a community of beings as well as a uniquely individual person. He is a force in a universe of living forces, a member of the community of men and at the same time a unique individual endowed with a unique destiny which only he himself can realize.”²¹

17. Turaki, *Foundations of African Traditional Religion and Worldview*, 17.

18. Mbiti, *Africa Religions and Philosophy*, 96.

19. Ibid.

20. Turaki, *Foundations of African Traditional Religion and Worldview*, 109.

21. Ikenga-Metuth, quoted in *Trinity of Sin*, Yusufu Turaki; 66.

According to Ikenga-Metuth, humanity's social nature is aptly encapsulated in the Bantu word "Ubuntu." Ubuntu describes, "what it means to be a member of humankind. . . . It applies to all human beings and describes humans as created by God."²² Based on this social understanding of the human person, some African thinkers suggest that the African response to the Cartesian "I think therefore I am," is "We are therefore I am."²³ Another popular dictum goes like this: "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am." The fundamental value of humanity and a high esteem for interpersonal relationships are opposed to anything else, particularly material possessions.

What is the theological value of the ATR for an understanding of God and humanity? We note two responses. First, based primarily on a phenomenological study of the ATR, some African theologians conclude that the traditional religious system provides a sufficient avenue for a full knowledge of God and the experience of a satisfying relationship with him. This assessment, which some see as an overrating of the ATR's theological cash value is detected by Kwame Bediako in the following comments by Archbishop Desmond Tutu:

It is reassuring to know that we have had a genuine knowledge of God and that we have had our own ways of communicating with deity, ways which meant that we were able to speak authentically as ourselves and not as pale imitators of others.²⁴

It is, of course, reassuring that the ATR has helped to discover the African ways of communication with God. But is this, indeed, a "genuine knowledge of God"? This question seems to call for a re-examination of the value of ATR in relation to humankind's knowledge of a transcendent God, the restoration of relationship with him, and the meaning of life as Mbiti so painfully observed above.²⁵ This is what characterizes the second response to the theological value of the ATR.

The theologians who represent this approach seek not merely to describe ATR but to engage in a theological reflection on ATR in light of the Bible. This latter approach seems to be what the apostles adopted as they engaged contemporary pagan worshippers in light of God's plan and way of salvation. Thus, Turaki pleads for a theological approach that can

22. Kapolyo, *The Human Condition. Christian Perspectives through African Eyes*, 34.

23. *Ibid.*, 21.

24. Bediako, "Understanding African Theology in the 20th Century," 50.

25. See also Ndjérou, "Theology as the Hermeneutic of Identity" (paper presented at a colloquium sponsored by LES AMIS DE LA THEOLOGIE, Abidjan, Fateac, March 1999).

“takes the valuable knowledge available and weave it into a theological and methodological framework to guide the study of traditional religions and cultures from a biblical perspective.”²⁶ Such an approach, we believe, allows us to remain true to the biblical teaching while being sufficiently attentive to African culture. We need to make full use of the biblical word if we are to evaluate more accurately the ATR.

THE BIBLICAL DESCRIPTION OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GOD AND HUMANITY

How does the Bible describe what nations (including Africans) outside the Christian faith believe regarding God and his relationship to mankind?

The Bible’s view of the religions that fall outside the purview of Christian faith is essential to our assessment of these faiths. When we search the biblical text we encounter two important insights. On the one hand, Scripture concurs that these religions do contain nuggets of truths that are parts God’s general revelation, and as such, can be useful in leading people to the fuller truths of special revelation. On the other hand, the Bible describes the beliefs of these religions as the imagination of the human mind which is devoid of the full truth concerning the divine being. For instance, while the Bible clearly states that God “did not leave himself without witness” (Acts 14:17), it challenges the people to “turn from these vain things to a living God who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them” (Acts 14:15). Furthermore, while it teaches that the nations have a general awareness or knowledge of God, they desperately lack the proper knowledge of the true God (Rom 1:18; 1 Cor 8:1–6). These affirmations are based on other biblical passages which make a good case for an accurate assessment of the ATR’s knowledge of God and humankind (Gen 1:26–28, 12; Josh 24:14–24; Acts 14:8–18; 17:16–34; Rom 1:19–32; 1 Cor 8:1–6; 10:18–21).

For instance, to the Corinthians Paul stated they might imagine knowing God but they do not know as they ought to know (1 Cor 8:2). He says: “If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know.” So the issue is not “knowing” as such, but the *proper way to know* the true God and his will for humankind and the world. Likewise, we submit that the ATR lacks the “proper way” to know God. Jesus told the Samaritan woman that both Jews and Samaritans miss the proper way of knowing and worshipping God. That is, “God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth” (John 4:24). Furthermore, since God is spirit, no location is allocated to him, “neither on this mountain nor

26. Turaki, *Foundations of African Traditional Religion and Worldview*, 9.

in Jerusalem” (John 4:21). Because the nations lack the proper knowledge of God and the proper way of worship, “what they sacrifice, they offer to demons and not to God.” (1 Cor 10:20). Paul did not want the believers in Corinth “to be participants with demons” (1 Cor 10:20).

Prior to the Aeropagus discourse, the Gentiles and Jews in Lystra took Paul and Barnabas as divinities and likened them to Zeus and Hermes, their local divinities, because of the healing they had performed (Acts 14:8–16). The temptation to worship human beings and to represent divinities in human forms seems inherent to most non-Christian religions as described in the Bible (Rom 1:18; Acts 14:15; Rev 21:8–9). Scripture consistently maintains the distinction between humanity and God, and establishes proper relationship between humans and God—the creature and the Creator.

Romans 1:18—3:20 is a clear description of the lack of a proper knowledge of God on the part of people. It is also a demonstration of the truth that all have fallen short of the righteousness of God. Because of such deficiency, they fail to discern God’s general revelation in creation. Paul goes on to highlight the universal depravation which is the predicament of all people (Rom 1:18–32; 2:1—3:8; 3:9–20). The core depravation of all is that, “although they knew God, they did not honor him as God, an give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish heart were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things” (1:21–23). Likewise, the psalmist echoed the golden calf event (Exod 32) when he recalled Israel’s history that “they exchanged the glory of God for the image of an ox that eats grass” (Ps 106:20), stressing the first of the ten commandments to be violated shortly after they were given to establish the terms of covenant relationship between God and Israel. The consequences of these idolatrous acts were disastrous in the Old Testament as well as in the New Testament. Israel and the nations were brought under God’s judgment.

Although there are elements of truth in religions outside of Christ, Paul stated that, “in past generations he [(God)] allowed all nations to walk in their own ways. Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruit seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness” (Acts 14:17). As our brief survey shows, the biblical story focuses on the opportunity that general revelation provides to proclaim the gospel, which is centered in the life and work of Jesus Christ. The gospel is a new message that challenges the way humans have sought to relate to the true God. The gospel clearly challenges people to “turn from these vain things to a living God who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them” (Acts 14:15; 1 Thess 1:10).

With regard to the complex religious systems of the world, including the ATR, Turaki rightly asserts that, “The Bible clearly categorizes all the traditional religions of the world as idolatry. The numerous lesser gods, divinities, powers, and spirits who receive worship fall under biblical category of unclean spirits, demons, idols, and the ‘gods of the nations.’”²⁷ He further challenges Christians to ensure that their understanding of the various aspects of traditional religion within their cultural contexts is “brought under the authority of the Bible.” In keeping with this, we highlight four basic claims that the Bible makes about God and humanity. They pertain to the uniqueness of God, the nature of the creation, the locus of salvation, and the necessity of humanity’s proper response to God.

As we do so we will bear in mind Turaki’s warning’s that while there are theological ideas that the ATR shares with Christianity, “it is important to stress that the commonality of the theological framework does not mean that the theological foundations are the same or that the two religions have the same theological message or meaning.”²⁸

God Alone is the Living God

As we saw earlier, Joshua denounced the religious practices of his ancestors as idolatry and challenged the Israelites to choose to “serve Yahweh alone” (Josh 24:14–24). Though the ATR is a living reality today, the Supreme Being, like the deity Joshua’s ancestors worshiped, may not be the living and God of biblical revelation. He cannot be fully identified with Yahweh owing to the difference that obtains between the biblical worldview and the worldview of the ATR. As in the case of Joshua, the Supreme Being of the ATR may well be a “foreign god” to Yahweh. As prophet Jeremiah declares to the worshippers of the gods of the other nations “Yahweh alone is the living God” (Jer 10:1–16, ESV)

Creation

The creation motif frames the biblical narrative. The Bible begins with the creation of “the heavens and the earth” and concludes with the creation of a “new heaven and a new earth” (Rev 21:1). There are two basic truths that we must always bear in mind when we think of the creation. First, God is the creator of everything that exists, and he remains distinct from his creation

27. Turaki, *Foundations of African Traditional Religion and Worldview*, 71.

28. *Ibid.*, 53.

(Gen 1:1). Secondly, after God created humanity, he gave them a mandate (Gen 1:26–28).

He Is the Creator of Everything.

On this first point, the ATR concurs with the biblical assertion that God (the Supreme Being) is the creator of everything. This is a fundamental belief that is common throughout Africa. However, the creation stories that permeate African popular culture fall short of the biblical portrayal the living God and his purpose for humankind. Just like the Athenians, the view of God and the creation that these creation stories embody reveal a distortion of the truth about both (Acts 17:22–15; Rom 1:18). The most one can acknowledge is that they are points of contact to teach the biblical account of creation.

As Creator, God Gave Humanity a Mandate.

Just like the creation motif, the note of a fulfilled humanity enjoying the presence of God frames the entire Bible. The Bible begins with the creation of man in the image of God in a condition of bliss in the Garden (Gen 1:26–28), and concludes with human beings in worship before God's throne (Rev 22:8–9). God's decision to create humankind was a sovereign decision which establishes his ownership of humanity. In keeping with this the Bible likens God to a potter who does what he likes with the clay in his hand. Humanity therefore is a vessel made by God, the potter. One of the ways God shows his sovereignty over humanity is in delegating to them responsibility for the rest of the creation (Gen 1:26–28). But this mandate was not a license given by God for the abuse of the rest of the creation as it has been interpreted in many cultures of the world including African culture. As Joe Kapolyo rightly observes:

Human beings . . . are the pinnacle of God's creative activities. [But] this is a position of responsibility rather than anthropocentric indulgence abusing the rest of creation" (Kapolyo 2005:25). Most cultures in the world fall short of this noble responsibility, by oppressing destroying other human beings community particularly in man and woman relationship. Women are not only subordinate to men in society; they are inferior too

and as a result suffer all manner of deprivation, disrespect, and sometimes humiliation.²⁹

Only the right biblical understanding of Genesis 1:26–28 can limit human-kind's mistreatment of other human beings who bear the same image as them. For as Kapolyo comments :

Unlike these derogatory statements about women and womanhood, the Scriptures unequivocally give men and women dignity and an exalted but equal status. Men and women bear the image of God in equal proportions. . . . Since the image is described as "male and female" it must mean at least that femininity is represented in God the Creator. . . . The mandate to represent God on earth was given to men and women together, not just man. Genesis 1:28 is very inclusive indeed. God gives both man and woman the same tasks: there is no differentiation based on biological make-up. . . . As recipients of the salvation Jesus offers, there is neither male nor female (Gal 3:28).³⁰

Now we turn to the salvation of humankind.

Salvation

We stated in the introduction that the African search for truth about God and humanity in light of ATR has been a puzzle, especially when it comes to the appraisal of what it means to be African and Christian. While ATR has clarified many religious issues for the Africans' own understanding of their religious past, it has not provided a solution to the question of humanity's relationship with God. The ATR's inability on this front is well expressed by John Mbiti:

Yet behind these fleeting glimpses of the original state and bliss of man, whether they are rich or shadowy, there lie the tantalizing and unattained gift of the resurrection, the loss of human immortality and the monster of death. Here African religions and philosophy must admit a defeat; they have supplied no solution. This remains the most serious cul-de-sac in the otherwise rich thought and sensitive religious feeling of our peoples. It is perhaps here then, that we find the greatest weakness and poverty of our traditional religions.³¹

29. Kapolyo, *The Human Condition. Christian Perspectives through African Eyes*, 70.

30. *Ibid.*, 71–72, 86.

31. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 99.

Mbiti uses strong terms to express the shortcomings of the ATR. He sees some glaring lacks in the ATR system. Its redemptive deficiency includes “unattained gift of resurrection,” “the loss of human immortality,” powerlessness in the face of the “monster of death,” its “weakness and poverty” as a “traditional religion,” etc. Here the ATR reveals the same salvific impotency that besets all the other non-Christian faiths. Like them, it is incapable to offer redemption because, as Paul stresses, genuine redemption is a transcendental provision that is made by God himself and hence cannot be found anywhere else: “the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. That is to show God’s righteousness because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins” (Rom 3:22–25, ESV).

It is interesting to observe that although the law and the prophets bear witness to the righteousness of God (Rom 3:21, ESV), it has been manifested in a unique way in Jesus Christ, beyond the expectations of these witnesses. Likewise, by analogy, one may say that the ATR bore a witness to general revelation in a pedagogical function similar to the law, to lead Africans to the full and unique manifestation of God’s provision of salvation. God filled the vacuum of all expectations in a very drastic and original way: an innocent man was crucified in order to reestablish the lost relation between God and humanity. The cross, then, is a nonnegotiable “area of Christian belief.” For as Kwesi Dickson puts it:

No matter what the cultural perspective of the Christian might be, the matter of Christ’s death and its significance cannot but be considered more central; Christians everywhere, from whatever cultural background, must react to this central belief.³²

Africans often liken death to going on a journey on the other side of life. This concept can help to deepen the faith of the African Christian about the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Death does not end life in African thought, says again Dickson; it “leads to life.” In Africans, the resurrection of Jesus Christ has ready listening ears .

But more than that, in embracing the cross, Africans can find a solution to the ATR dilemma regarding the gulf that separates God and humanity due to the latter’s sin. If this is understood by Africans, African Christianity can become rooted in what God himself has accomplished for

32. Dickson, *Theology in Africa*, 185.

them, not what a system of religion, such as the ATR offers. In so doing the knowledge of the ATR as a pre-Christian experience can to be taken into account; but its contribution and shortcomings will come under the searchlight of Scripture. When this is done, the African Christian can affirm: “I know where I have come from” (religious past), “I know what I believe” (the new revelation of God in a new person), and “I know whom I believe” (Jesus Christ, the way of reconciliation to God). Unless the African believer becomes cognizant of the gaps and shortcomings pointed out by John Mbiti as a part of his religious pre-Christian heritage (or religious identity according to Bediako), he will embrace Christianity just as another system of religion that does not provide any solution to problem of salvation that he faces.

The cross is a unique link between God and humanity. As Gehman stated so well, “ATR stands in solidarity with mankind as a whole outside Christ”³³ and thus needs salvation. Those who feel that vacuum in the ATR system will see that they need salvation through Jesus Christ just as any other people of traditional beliefs.

Human’s Response in Worship

Humanity’s most important response to God is first and foremost to worship God, their Maker. In agreement with the psalmist (Ps 95:6; Acts 14:15), Erik Thoennes says that, “Human beings are intended to live as God’s created analogy for his own glory. God did not create humans because of any need within himself (Job 41:11, Ps 50:9–12, Acts 17:24–25) but primarily so that he would be glorified in them as they delight in him and reflect his character. We were created primarily to be in relation with our Creator and find our greatest joy in him.”³⁴

Mbiti is concerned about the lack of the pursuit of God in worship in the ATR. According to him, “the African image of the happy life is one in which God is among the people, His presence supplying them with food, shelter, peace, immortality or gift of the resurrection, and moral code.”³⁵ It seems that this awareness of God’s presence should naturally drive the African to worship. However, it appears that the utilitarian use of religion inhibits the worship of God simply for his presence! There is a lack of a thirst to worship God for his own sake. Aware of this feature of the ATR, Mbiti wonders: “would it be legitimate to suggest, perhaps, that African acts of worship are basically utilitarian, searching primarily for the lost

33. Gehman, *African Religion in Biblical Perspective*, xii.

34. Thoennes, “Biblical Doctrine: An Overview (Mankind),” 2527.

35. Mbiti, *Africa Religions and Philosophy*, 96

paradise rather than for God himself?”³⁶ The call is to worship God for his own sake and with the legitimate requests for the many human needs that God can provide.

According to the Christian faith, therefore, the salvation that God provides in Jesus Christ is more than a recovery of “African identity, historical consciousness, or cultural salvation.”³⁷ It is the way of the cross which provides forgiveness and restores fellowship between God and humankind. Certainly, a forgiven and a transformed African can influence positively his cultural environment and advocate for human dignity as he or she fulfills the cultural mandate entrusted to them by their Creator (Gen 1:26–28). African Christians must particularly reflect God’s character in all their undertakings. As the Bible declares: “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor 10:31).

WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS FOR CHRISTIANITY IN AFRICA TODAY.

Elisabeth Isichei says that “Christianity in Africa is of global significance, and the directions it takes are of importance to Christians everywhere.”³⁸ What does this mean? I see four areas where the African church can share the global significance of Christian faith with believers everywhere.

The Pre-Christian Experience

At the eve of cultural and religious revolutions that swept Africa in the 1970s Renato Berger wrote, “before colonialism and missionary activity African religion was lived as an absolute truth and undisputed belief.”³⁹ Based in this, many African theologians advocate the continuity of some ATR beliefs with the new Christian life. Some feel that to overlook the pre-Christian experience is to experience a painful discontinuity which renders Christian faith artificial, shallow, and readily dismissible as a foreign religion.

As we have already shown, although the ATR reflects the religious nature of the human race which has the law of God written in their heart, it lacks the provision of “redemption from sin.”⁴⁰ This evokes the question

36. Ibid.

37. Musopole, *Being Human in Africa*, 6.

38. Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa*, 1.

39. Berger, “Is Traditional Religion Still Relevant?” 15.

40. Gehman, *African Religion in Biblical Perspective*, 367.

of the value of Africa's religious past in relation to Christianity. With John Mbiti, Kwame Bediako, and several other African theologians, I hold that answer is found in an approach that affirms both continuity and discontinuity between the ATR and Christian faith. Mbiti displays great insight when he says: "ATR was a valuable and indispensable lamp on the spiritual path . . . but it cannot be made a substitute for the eternal Gospel which is like the sun that brilliantly illuminates that path."⁴¹ For his part, Bediako who labored hard to integrate responsibly Africa's pre Christian experience with Christian faith asserts forcefully that "theological consciousness presupposes religious tradition and tradition requires memory and memory is integral to identity: without memory we have no past and if we have no past, then we lose our identity."⁴²

Bediako's stress on African identity has caused some misunderstandings as he seems to elevate African identity over Christian identity. But the critics seem to have misread him for elsewhere he makes plain that our common identity in Christ takes precedence over our cultural identity. He says:

But the primary history that gives fundamental dignity and self worth to every Christian is our history rooted in God through Christ. Jesus Christ is at the heart of our identity as Christians, whatever our nationality may be. Our joy and pride is not in ATR but in Christ. Paul said, "May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ . . ." Gal 6:14.⁴³

However controversial Bediako's plea may be, the point is that African pre-Christian experience constitutes a starting point for religious consciousness for the knowledge of the true God in his revelation through Jesus Christ. The church in Africa can become more vibrant when believers understand where they have come from and critically integrate in their lives, the useful insights contained in their traditional religions with the truths of their newly found faith. The challenge is to examine our traditional beliefs biblically and theologically, and "to hold fast what is good, and abstain from every form of evil" (1 Thess 5:21–22). This seems to be an effective way to avoid syncretism, on the one hand, and to progress in Christian maturity on the other. This process to Christian maturity was tested in several countries in Africa (e.g., Chad) when believers were persecuted for their faith as they refused to bow down in idol worship in the name of cultural revolution which wrongly depicted Christianity as a white man's religion. Those who stood firm and were ready to die were those who knew where they have

41. Mbiti, "Christianity and Africa Religion," 282.

42. Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 16.

43. Ibid.

from with regard to their pre-Christian life enlightened by the new revelation of Christ for mankind (not for one single nation nor ethnic group).

African Spirituality as a Driving Force against Secularism and Human-centeredness.

The invasion of Africa by Western values seems for a time to have done away with belief in a supernatural power—a belief which has been basic to African life. At one point, the leaders of the newly independent nations seemed to think that they could improve the life of their people without God's help. They took this stance notwithstanding the fact that Africans, on the whole, have always been sensitive to a sense of God's presence, as is evident in the numerous references to God in the national anthems of the new nations.

However, faced with the reality of economic stagnation that continues to plague many of these nations after some fifty years of independence, surprisingly, some of the same leaders are now calling for a return to God. This about-face seems to argue against Gehman's suggestion that the attitude that these leaders previously exhibited toward God represented a denial of his existence.⁴⁴

It seems that in spite of an intruding secularism, which for a moment, seemed to threaten belief in the existence and power of God in some sectors of African societies, the positive elements of the pre-Christian religious experience that are embedded in the ATR helped to maintain alive an atmosphere of belief in the supernatural which serves as a source of sustenance for social and political life.

Humanity as Family and Community

It was stated above that for Africans, humans discover their full personality in group relationships such as family and community as expressed by the concept of Ubuntu. This means that God places human beings in families, communities, people-groups or tribes, and in nations. In the family, since children ensure a link between generations, the life of the child, both the born and the unborn, is protected. Here the African concept of Ubuntu upholds the sanctity of life in order to ensure continuity and leave a legacy to the community.

44. Gehman, *African Religion in Biblical Perspective*, 386.

With regard to community, the African meaning of life is understood in terms of kinship. But at times, the ATR seems to take the role of the community too far. As Turaki has pointed out:

The community makes life and gives purpose and meaning to life. It is both the lawgiver and the judge. Outside of the community, there is no life, no hope, no identity, no destiny and no existence, in short no salvation⁴⁵

There is, here, a sort of “personification” of the community which does not seem to make room for an identifiable individual to incarnate the values of the community. At this point, the life and work of Jesus Christ for our salvation is needed to correct the misguided views which are inherent in the African concept of community. Jesus Christ is the one who has been building the ideal community. This new community consists of family, Church, and the Kingdom and includes all those who respond to the gospel that he incarnates. He is the one who provides life, hope, peace, identity, destiny and existence. He is the one who establishes a covenant relationship with the individual and the community of which he or she is a member—be it the Church or a particular social group. Here Mbiti is correct when he invites us to “understand the world and African humanity from his viewpoint of his identity with Christ who is the embodiment of the new humanity . . . As culture is preparatory to the Gospel, so the philosophical and cultural understanding of humanity is preparatory to the new humanity in Christ.”⁴⁶

CONCLUSION

This chapter may seem to be a comparative study of ATR and Christianity about God and humanity. The African perspective might give this impression. But it is really an effort by an African to understand the biblical claims about God and humanity by taking into account our spiritual milieu and cultural heritage. I would like to conclude my argument by highlighting three key elements:

1. African Traditional Religion is still a live religion in Africa today. We appreciate the abundant literature that has been produced on it by many pioneering African theologians and missionaries. Their work has paved the way for further theological reflection in Africa. The Supreme Being of the ATR religious system can be likened

45. Turaki, *Foundations of African Traditional Religion and Worldview*, 118.

46. Musopole, *Being Human in Africa. Toward an African Christian Anthropology*, 6–7.

to the “Unknown God” of the general revelation, worshiped by the Athenians. The African Supreme Being cannot, however, adequately represent Yahweh, the Creator of heaven and the earth and humankind. There is no doubt that the biblical view of humanity, as God’s unique creation, and the African communal understanding of humans can foster a better perspective on the meaning of social, national and church life. Having said this, however, because God created human beings in his image, their primary identity, though disfigured by sin, remains the starting point for religious consciousness and the apprehension of biblical truths.

2. This means that the difference in worldview between the ATR and Christianity needs to be taken into account in theological dialogue about God and humanity. The value of common theological themes is that they provide contact points for fruitful interaction among contending perspectives with a view to arriving at a more accurate knowledge of God and his relationship to humanity as revealed in Scripture.
3. Above all, from whichever perspective we seek to approach God and humanity, Genesis 1:26–28 remains foundational. There has been no other religious system which has fully claimed nor developed the truth that God created man and woman in his image and gave them responsibility over the creation as his representatives. Because of sin which perverted our identity shortly after our creation, God himself provided a way to re-create humankind through the new man (Adam), Jesus-Christ. Thus, the uniqueness of Jesus Christ, his death on the Cross and his resurrection for the salvation of the world is foundational for the African’s Christian faith and identity. The uniqueness of the Christian faith is “to love God and to be known by God” 1 Co 8:2–3. It is worth quoting Mbiti to conclude:

The only identity that counts and has full meaning is the identity with Christ and not with any given cultures. Cultural identities are temporary, serving to yield us as Christians to the fullness of our identity with Christ.⁴⁷

47. Mbiti, “African Indigenous Culture in Relation to Evangelism and Church Development,” 79.