



TOWARDS DEVELOPING AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY: AN OVERVIEW ON HOW THE CHRISTIAN FAITH WAS HANDED DOWN BY WESTERN MISSIONARIES TO AFRICANS

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ABSTRACT: *The Christian faith continues to enter different cultures and finds its clothing in the new land it enters. This has resulted in what is known as Jewish Christianity, Greco-Roman Christianity, and European Christianity. It does so by re-interpreting and transforming the culture and traditions of the new environment in the light of the Christian faith towards a “home-grown” Christianity. However, it is observed that African Christianity is yet to critically engage with the culture and traditional values of the African environment in order to develop an indigenous African Christianity. This could be due to the fact that Christianity was introduced into Africa by Western missionaries, who perceived African religion and traditional practices as demonic. Consequently, Christianity in Africa presents Christ as a European rather than an African, thereby creating Christianity in Africa, instead of developing an African Christianity. Using historical studies approaches, the paper posits that Africans could develop an indigenous Africa Christianity when the gospel critically engages and transforms the traditional beliefs, myths, stories, idioms and cultural life of the African people.*

KEYWORDS: African Christianity, Christian faith/Gospel, Western missionaries, Africans.



INTRODUCTION

Andrew Walls defines African Christianity in two main ways. First, African Christianity is “a new development of African religion, shaped by the parameters of pre-Christian African religion as the Christianity of the Jerusalem Church of the Acts of the Apostles was rooted in the religion of old Israel.”¹ That is to say, African Christianity, unlike the traditional African religion, is a new form of religion with Christianity in focus, which is bound by the culture and worldview of the African as the Christianity of the Jerusalem Church in the Acts of the Apostles was anchored in the religion of ancient Israel. This form of Christianity is said to be clothed with the culture of the Africans; hence, it is rooted in the traditions and culture of the African soil. Second, African Christianity is also “a new development of the Christian tradition produced by the interaction of that tradition with the life and lore of Africa, as complex and distinctive in their way as those of the Greco-Roman culture which determined so many of the features of Western Christianity.” This also implies that African Christianity is complex and unique from other forms of Christianity because of the African life and lore the Christian faith interacts with.

From the two definitions, it is identified that African Christianity as a new religion is shaped by the parameters of African religion before the coming of Christianity, and produced by the interaction of that tradition with the life, myths, stories, beliefs, and cultures of Africa. Thus, there cannot be an African Christianity without the life and lore of the African being considered; the Christian faith is planted in the soils of Africa. This will make Christians in Africa to be “African Christians”² who can reach God through their own culture or worldview, for a culturally naked Christianity will never exist.

However, there seems not to be the representativeness of what we are witnessing; Africans are cut off from their traditions and culture, making it difficult to realise an African Christianity. The Christian faith which was handed down by the missionaries was done without the consideration of African cultures and worldviews, on the basis of being fetish, animist, pagan, etc. This, according to Opoku Onyinah, has made Africans to become defenders of the traditional culture, have dual allegiance, or mission-oriented Africans [or Christians in Africa].³ Kwame Bediako refers to the missionaries’ engagement with African culture and traditions as “inadequate theological premises” because the Christian faith fails to engage with their culture.⁴ The missionaries put aside the [African] culture and tradition by replacing it with theirs, which the Africans could not relate to. This has led the Africans to be cut off from their roots in their attempt to become Christians.⁵ To curtail this and help Africans become Christians while maintaining their culture, Africans are now looking at how the Christian faith

¹ Andrew F. Walls, “African Christianity in the History of Religions,” *Studies in World Christianity* 2(2), (1996): 183-203.

² African Christianity talks about how the Christian faith introduced by the missionaries to the Africans is understood and accepted in the African culture and worldview. This explains how Africans relate with God in their language, songs, idioms, artefacts, etc.

³ Opoku Onyinah, “Pentecostal Exorcism: Witchcraft and Demonology in Ghana,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology Supplement Series* (Dorset: Deo Publishing, 2012), 105-106.

⁴ Kwame Bediako, “Biblical Christologies in the Context of African Traditional Religions” in 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: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983), 88.

⁵ Emmanuel Foster Asamoah, “The Bible and Akan Traditional Religious Values: A Search For Dialogue,” *Journal of Mother-Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics and Theology (MOTBIT)* 2(2), (2020): 78-86.



could be practised in an African setting (environment and worldview) to make them become African Christians by way of developing African Christianity.

This paper discusses the meaning of the Christian faith, and the historical antecedents of the Christian faith from Jerusalem to Europe. Because the work is to know how the Christian faith was handed down by missionaries to the Africans, history of the Christian faith in Africa is discussed. The “inadequate theological premises” identified on the part of the missionaries for handing down the Christian faith to the Africans are discussed. The paper concluded with suggested solutions toward developing African Christianity with lessons from how the Christian faith engaged with the cultures and traditions of other environmental settings the gospel has engaged with.

METHODOLOGY

This work employs qualitative study using historical studies to evaluate the findings of how the Christian faith was handed down by the missionaries to the Africans. Historical studies relate to the identification, location, appraisal, and synthesis of past events. It attempts not only to find previous events, but also to connect these events to the present and future. It sought to analyse past events about how the Christian faith moved in turns into other cultures—from Jewish to Africa—as well as how the Christian faith was handed down in each culture.

THE CHRISTIAN FAITH EXPLAINED

The word “Christian” is generally used when referring to followers of Jesus Christ (*cf* Acts 11:26). They are individuals who have placed their faith and confidence in Jesus Christ, including His death on the cross as atonement for sins and His third-day resurrection (*cf* Jn 1:12). These individuals form the greatest practised religion adherents in the world. This is corroborated by Pew Research Centre (PRC), which states that the Christian population as of 2010 stood at 2.18 billion.⁶ They have increased for the past twelve years to 2.38 billion.⁷ They profess a particular faith known as the “Christian faith” which centres on beliefs regarding the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ who is believed to be the saviour of the world. The Christian faith is that Christ died for our sins, rose again, and we can be reconciled to the Father by confessing and believing in Him. Because the atonement of Jesus Christ is the foundation of this doctrine, the Christian faith is sometimes referred to as the gospel of Jesus Christ. In accordance with this plan, our God, the Father, sent His Son, Jesus Christ, into the world to give us eternal life.

The Christian faith or gospel is to be shared to all manner of persons. However, there is no better way to communicate the Christian faith apart from using human thought patterns and languages. It must always be expressed within human cultural forms. It is for this reason that God chose to use humans as the primary means of making Himself known to other humans. God became man and lived among other humans, making the Christian faith and Christianity

⁶ Pew Research Centre, *Global Christianity – A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World’s Christian Population* (2011), accessed online on October 25, 2022, from <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2011/12/19/global-christianity-exec/>

⁷ World Population Review, *Most Christian Countries 2022*, Accessed online on October 25, 2022, from <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/most-christian-countries>



in general to take on the culture of the Jews.⁸ Thus, Christianity, the Christian faith or gospel of Jesus Christ was influenced by the historical contexts in which it developed.

HISTORICAL ANTECEDENTS OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH IN SOME CULTURES: FROM JERUSALEM TO EUROPE

The Christian Faith in Jewish Culture

As said earlier, Christianity had its early beginnings in Palestine, in the traditions of Judaism in the First Century AD, spread through the Roman Empire, and eventually became its official religion.⁹ According to Ofori, the early Christians were Jewish, and Jerusalem became the epicentre of all Christian activity. Before 70 AD, Jewish Christianity was the main and representative type of Christianity.¹⁰ They clothed the Christian faith with their traditions and culture in order to give the gospel a home. Ofori outlines the following as the characteristics of the Christian faith in the Jewish culture: They expressed the Christian faith in the religious rites and customs of the Jews, including attending to temple meetings, offering of animal sacrifices, strict observance of the Sabbath, circumcision of their male children, etc.; presented the Christian faith in the Jewish terms as was done by Peter and John in Acts 3:12-26; and re-interpreted Jewish traditions in the light of the Christian faith by presenting Jesus as a priest in the order of Melchizedek in the book of Hebrews.¹¹ In as much as the Christian faith took upon itself the traditions and culture of the Jews to be expressible in human language, it redefined those that were not in tandem to the Christian faith. For example, the Sabbath was redefined (Matt 12:1-8).

The Christian Faith in Greco-Roman Culture

The Christian faith crossed the frontiers of the Jewish into a new environment due to persecution (Acts 8). By the Second Century AD, the Gentile-Mediterranean regions of Greco-Roman (Hellenistic) civilization had been caught up with the move; the centre of the world's Christianity found its root in Greco-Roman culture. Christianity had to eventually settle among those whom the Jews referred to as the "uncircumcised" in order for the Greco-Roman culture to have a deep influence on it.¹² Believers shared the Christian faith to people outside the Jewish culture. According to Ofori, the gospel of Jesus was re-interpreted within the settings of the new environment to make the message meaningful. They presented Jesus as *kyrios*, meaning "Lord", for there were many "gods" and many "lords". This gave the Gentile Christians the opportunity to take all references to Jesus and the Deity's attributes. They also adopted the intellectual and philosophical culture of the Greek and presented Christ as "Logos".¹³

⁸ Samuel Ofori, *Christianity and the Asante Chieftaincy Institution: A gospel and culture engagement*, (Accra, GH: Pentecost Press Ltd, 2022), 32.

⁹ Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of the expansion of Christianity* (Vol. 1): The First Five Centuries (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1938), 46.

¹⁰ Ofori, *Christianity and the Asante Chieftaincy Institution: A gospel and culture engagement*, 34.

¹¹ Ofori, *Christianity and the Asante Chieftaincy Institution: A gospel and culture engagement*, 34-36.

¹² Ofori, *Christianity and the Asante Chieftaincy Institution: A gospel and culture engagement* 37.

¹³ Ofori, *Christianity and the Asante Chieftaincy Institution: A gospel and culture engagement*, 38-40.



The Christian Faith in European Culture

As the Greco-Roman civilization fell, the church's missionary efforts grew, and the Christian faith was widely embraced by the Germanic, Slavic, Celtic, Viking, Finn, and Hungarian peoples. This is corroborated by Fletcher who orates that the Christian faith spread among the outsiders whom the Romans referred to as barbarians.¹⁴ This happened between the Fourth and Fourteenth Centuries AD, and it was to save Christianity from extinction.¹⁵ The engagement of the Christian faith led to the development of Christendom in Europe; conversion was a matter of the whole community, and their response to the gospel of Jesus Christ was in terms of traditional expectations and goals.¹⁶ They also adapted their traditional customs in Christian worship.¹⁷ In addition to that, they "...purified their traditional institutions such as temples from the worship of demons and dedicated themselves to the service of the true God."¹⁸ In order to thank God, the Giver of all things for the abundance they enjoy, they stopped offering animals as sacrifices to the Devil.¹⁹

HISTORY OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH IN AFRICA

The Christian faith was introduced in Africa before colonialism around the period 33-65 AD, that is, before Mark [the earliest Gospel] was written.²⁰ But as it were, Christianity was re-introduced on a larger scale by the European missionaries in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Before this was the emergence of the Portuguese missionary expeditions which happened between the Fifteenth and Eighteenth Centuries.²¹ The missionaries came to Africa for a variety of reasons, including humanitarian, social, and economic ones. The principal role of the explorers and traders was to serve as chaplains to the local traders, but efforts to evangelise the indigenous people generated just a few converts to Christianity. These converted "Christians" continued to consult their pagan priests, making them nominal Christians. According to Bediako, this was due to "inadequate theological premises" which preceded the missionaries' presentation of the Christian faith; there was no engagement between the Christian faith and African culture.²²

By 1742, the Portuguese had been forced out of the Gold Coast trade market by the Dutch and, subsequently, the British. The French, Danes, and Swedes were among the other European nations competing. By the end of the Eighteenth Century, little progress had been made in missionary evangelization of West Africa. However, the early Nineteenth Century witnessed a different narrative. After the slave trade was abolished, real missionary evangelistic efforts

¹⁴ Richard Fletcher, *The Conversion of Europe: From Paganism to Christianity 371-1386 AD* (London: Fontana Press, 1997), 1.

¹⁵ Ofori, *Christianity and the Asante Chieftaincy Institution: A gospel and culture engagement*, 40-41.

¹⁶ Andrew F. Walls, *The cross-cultural process in Christian History: Studies in the transmission and appropriation of faith* (New York: Orbis Books, 2002), 35.

¹⁷ They replaced their pagan customs with Christian ones, all towards celebrating Jesus Christ. For example, the festival of *Sol Invictus* (the unconquered Sun) was transformed into Christmas and *Ostara* was converted to Easter. See; Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Translated by Leo Shirley-Price (London: Penguin Books, 1955), 92.

¹⁸ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Translated by Leo Shirley-Price (London: Penguin Books, 1955), 92.

¹⁹ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 92.

²⁰ Emmanuel Foster Asamoah, "Towards solving the Synoptic Problem," *Journal of Arts and Humanities* 11(5), (2022): 41-50.

²¹ Vincent Anane Denteh, *Revitalising Mission and Missiology: The way forward in the Twenty-first Century* (Revised and Enlarged Edition), (Accra, GH: Pentecost Press Ltd., 2021), 202.

²² Bediako, "Biblical Christologies in the Context of African Traditional Religions," 88.



were launched in West Africa. The Church Missionary Society (CMS) dispatched two missionaries to Sierra Leone in 1804. These missionaries first focused on freed slaves who arrived in Sierra Leone on British naval ships. The CMS had organised a local Anglican Church by 1816, which celebrated its Golden Jubilee in 1866. They adopted Sierra Leone as a foundation for West African evangelization, which included Nigeria, Liberia, and the Gambia. The CMS did not restrict themselves to spreading the Christian faith; they also performed other practical chores like construction of settlements for emancipated slaves and schools such as Foura Bay College in 1827, and provided school masters. In addition to that was the teaching of works of handicrafts. The CMS engaged in these practical chores with the only Western education and culture method known to them.²³ According to Omoyajowa, this is why the African nowadays uses English (or French) more than their mother tongue; chooses a foreign or biblical name at baptism; and feels more at home in foreign clothes than in their native clothes.²⁴

The Wesleyan Methodists followed the CMS in Sierra Leone when they sent their missionaries there in 1811 AD. By 1866 AD, it had developed a thriving church, but not without obstacles. The earliest challenges they encountered were deaths from malaria and other ailments, as well as hostility from illicit slave traders—both European dealers and the West African chiefs who supplied them. However, this did not stop the missionaries who were burnt for answering the Master's charge to "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations" (Matt. 28:19, NKJV). The American Methodist Episcopal Church (AMEC) dispatched missionaries to Liberia in 1829. This happened after the first liberated Americans landed in Liberia around 1820 AD. The AMEC arrived in 1833 AD to build a post—United Methodist Church of Liberia (UMCL)—for liberated slaves and gained adherents from the early missionaries' evangelistic operations. Separate churches were eventually built for black settlers of Liberia and African converts since the freed slaves were not permitting the black individuals to attend church with them. By 1835 AD, more than fifteen missionaries had arrived but most perished from malaria and yellow fever.

Christianity arrived in Nigeria in 1843, thanks to a Yoruba freed slave named Samuel Ajayi Crowther. Samuel was one of the slaves released by British naval ships off the coast of West Africa. He was schooled by the CMS and eventually became a teacher-catechist, translating the Bible into Yoruba. Crowther was contracted to help the Niger Expedition, which did not succeed since the majority of the explorers perished. He was afterwards transferred to England for theological training by the CMS. In 1843 AD, he was ordained as an Anglican minister in the United Kingdom and went to Sierra Leone. He was sent back to his native Yorubaland to resume his ministerial responsibilities. As a pastor, Crowther preached extensively the Christian faith both on the seaside and interior. In 1864 AD, he was ordained a bishop of the Anglican Church and given leadership of the "Niger Mission." Despite persecution and martyrdom, his ministry gained many believers to Christ, including African Kings. He collaborated with the CMS to open Nigeria to the Christian faith which extended to some parts of the coastal belt, in-land up to Abeokuta area and some fifteen miles distance from the River Niger.

²³ Joseph Akin Omoyajowo, *Gospel and Culture from the Perspective of African Churches*, accessed online on October 25, 2022, from <http://www.pctii.org/wcc/akin96.html>.

²⁴ Omoyajowo, *Gospel and Culture from the Perspective of African Churches*, from <http://www.pctii.org/wcc/akin96.html>.



The Wesleyan Methodist Church (WMC) deployed missionaries, Thomas Freeman and William de Graft, a Ghanaian, to the Badagry region, which boosted the evangelical campaign. In 1848 AD, the WMC also established a mission station in Abeokuta. In addition, missionaries from the Southern Baptist Church of the United States arrived in 1849 AD to operate in Nigeria and Liberia. In Nigeria, mission work encountered several challenges. One of such happened in 1867 AD when the Egba chiefs ejected all missionaries, including Anglican, Wesleyan, and Baptist. The Scottish Presbyterian Mission also encountered very strong hostility from witch doctors and slave dealing chiefs. Though slave trade had been abolished, the chiefs used them for the burial to accompany the dead chiefs to be their servants in the next world. However, this did not deter the missionaries from pursuing the Great Commission.

By 1878 AD, the Christian Church in Nigeria had been formed with African pastors. By the 1890s, Mary M. Slessor, a Scottish United Presbyterian Mission missionary, had considerably aided in the evangelization of the Igbo of Eastern Nigeria. The Presby Mission had gained 10,792 disciples in Igboland by the time she died in 1915 AD. It was, however, difficult to evangelize in the Muslim-heavy interior of West Africa, which included Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali. When missionaries asked to open mission stations, Muslim rulers and kings refused to grant their requests. Along the upper Niger River, there were just a few scattered Roman Catholic Mission outposts.

In Ivory Coast, no mission station was opened by 1878 until 1895 AD when the Roman Catholic Missionaries first arrived. Evangelistic activities also increased in 1913 AD, when a Grebo man coupled as a prophet-evangelist found his route in Ivory Coast to preach. Prophet Harris made thousands of converts in the Ivory Coast.

In Togo, the work was started by the North German (Bremen) Mission in the 1850s. By 1914 AD, they had achieved significant advancements, thanks to their collaboration with the Basel Mission (inter-denominational). From 1890, the Roman Catholic Church began to operate in Togo. They spent a lot of money quickly constructing churches and schools. This helped them convert more people. The Roman Catholic Church had 19,740 converts, 198 schools, 47 priests on work, 15 Lay Brothers, and 30 Sisters by the year 1914 AD. In addition to the Roman Catholic Church in Togo was the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society which arrived in Dahomey by 1914 AD.

In Gold Coast, the Anglican Church through Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG) had sent Thomas Thompson to Cape Coast in 1751. Thompson, in turn, returned in 1754 with Philip Quaque for training and ordination as an Anglican Minister after enduring considerable suffering. After returning to the Gold Coast in 1766, Philip Quaque passed away in 1816 without having the desired impact there. Thompson's capacity to change things was constrained since he preferred to convert Africans to Christianity than to assist them in becoming Christians. Many Africans struggled to reconcile their beliefs with those of European slave traders when he and other preachers insisted that all Europeans were Christians. The SPG, introduced by the Anglican Church in the middle of the Eighteenth Century, was followed by the BMS. Although the Basel Mission started operations in 1829 AD, by the end of 1832 AD, she had lost all of her original missionaries. In the 1840s, the Wesleyan Methodist Church entered a few Gold Coast settlements and made little progress. They faced a lot of opposition, but they were nevertheless able to set up their headquarters in Christiansborg with the Basel Mission.



Among their evangelistic initiatives were the establishment of Mission Schools and a Bible School for the training of catechists. Furthermore, the missionaries decided that it would be ideal to translate the Bible into Twi by the end of 1868 AD, with the premise that God understands and speaks every language. This idea was also upheld by the Basel Committee who “insisted that, at all costs, the African was to hear the Gospel, read the Bible, and worship and be taught in his own tongue.”²⁵ Despite their good intentions of translating the Bible into the African languages, there existed some translation challenges in the course of work, making it difficult for Africans to do accurate exegesis with their mother tongue Bibles.

HOW THE CHRISTIAN FAITH WAS HANDED DOWN TO AFRICANS BY MISSIONARIES

No one can downplay the immense contributions of the missionaries in the spread of the Christian faith in Africa, for they worked tirelessly to enable the gospel to reach us at the peril of their lives. The tropical environment and health hazards were the biggest challenge to the early European Christian missionaries. Many missionaries perished as a result of the weather and tropical diseases like malaria and yellow fever as well as opposition from illegal slave traders—all towards helping the Africans to receive the Christian faith. These problems they encountered made missionary work extremely tough.

Despite all these efforts, the Christian missionaries disregarded African cultures and traditions which they perceived to be demonic or devilish, superstitious and foolish. Pejorative terms such as “animism,” “primitive,” “tribal,” “paganism,” “heathenism,” “idolatry,” and “fetishism,” were used by the missionaries in reference to African traditional religions.²⁶ In addition, “native” was used for anything indigenous; “dialects” for African languages, and “paganism” or “superstition” for the people’s religion. This afforded them the chance to paint the picture of Africa as a dark continent, not respecting the peoples’ way of life, their religion or culture. The speeches of a Capuchin missionary to the Congo reveal the missionaries’ disdain for African culture.

“On my way, I found a number of idols which I threw into the fire. The owner of these idols....seemed very annoyed. To calm him down by humiliating him, I let him know that if he persisted in anger, I should see that he himself is burnt with his idols.”²⁷

From the quotation, the foreign missionaries’ missionary effort was marked by this destructive mindset. They arrived unintentionally but naturally as carriers of both the Christian message and westernisation because they were too easily persuaded of the vast superiority of the European West. Africans who declared themselves Christians did so in a phoney and deceitful manner. This made them to be “nothing” as they were cut off from their community.²⁸ Christianity among Africans became Christianity in Africa rather than African Christianity because the Christian faith failed to interact with African life and lore. This is buttressed by Atiemo who maintains that Africans have been estranged from their historic religious ideals,

²⁵ A. A. Boahen, *Mfantsipim and the Making of Ghana: A Century Hist., 1876-1976* (Accra: Sankofa Edu. Pub., 1996), 144.

²⁶ Bolaji E. Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (New York: Orbis Books, 1973), 109-143.

²⁷ Adrian Hasting, *Church and Mission in Modern Africa* (Fordham University Press, 1966), 58.

²⁸ J. V. Taylor, *The Primal Vision: Christian Presence and African Religion* (SCM, 1963), 100.



refusing to become African Christians.²⁹ This is affirmed by Andrew Walls who explains African Christianity as that bounded by the culture and worldview of the African as the Christianity of the Jerusalem Church in the Acts of the Apostles was anchored in the religion of ancient Israel.³⁰ Aside from being cut off from their culture and traditions of becoming Christians, Africans were made to borrow the lifestyle and practices of the missionaries. For example, some were denied singing in their mother tongue, but in Latin and English. This could be due the fact that the missionaries were not conversant with the African languages, hence, their inability to sing in them. So in effect, Africans were converted to become European Christians than African Christians.

This renders the message of the Christian faith theologically inadequate, for it was not clothed by the traditions, practices and culture of the Africans. Unlike the Jewish, Greco-Roman and European cultures where the Christian faith had a home, it was not so in Africa. Makunike explains the need why the Christian faith should have a home in Africa in his comments which was reiterated by Omoyajowo.

In order to redeem mankind, God came among men as man, became human, a man in culture, took a cultural name, spoke a local language, received cultural education, conformed to the cultural mores of his people. He did not become a Roman, an Egyptian, an Asian or an African, but a very identifiable Jew. He became the universal 'Man' but he also became a member of a Jewish home, a part of a small town-community, a Galilean sub-culture and in the eyes of many, especially the Roman official, he was identified with the radical insurrections.³¹

God had the option of not giving Jesus earthly parents like Adam and Eve, but He decided not to. Why? To gain Jesus' acceptance in the neighbourhood where he was born. He did not arrive with a civilization distinct from Jews. God made the proper decision by identifying with the populace's culture. He caused the Word (Jesus) to reside in a Jewish society. But it should be remembered that Jesus did not disregard civilizations that appeared to have been distorted; rather, he rectified them.

Jesus has ties to all civilizations since he is a global figure. In other words, he adapts to or dresses like whatever new culture he encounters. The majority of European missionaries overlooked the need of removing Jesus' European attire and replacing it with his African one. Because this could not be done, Jesus was seen as European; hence his followers in Africa have become European Christians. God did not intend this; He desires that His people worship Him in their own traditions as was done in the Jewish, Greco-Roman and European cultures.

Another challenge that ensued during the handing down of the Christian faith by the missionaries is how Jesus was presented. They presented Jesus as European—as someone born and bred in Europe, and does not know anything about African languages and traditions. As someone who is not interested in the clothes and food of the Africans. This has informed many Africans to have pictures of Jesus as European in their homes; limiting the universality of Jesus as a Man for all cultures including that of Africans. But to the Africans, Jesus Christ is "African Christian proto ancestor"³² or a great ancestor. This was witnessed in Gentile Christianity. Jesus

²⁹ David T. Adamo, "Christianity and the African traditional religion(s): The postcolonial round of engagement," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 32(1) (2011): 1-10.

³⁰ Walls, "African Christianity in the History of Religions," 183-203.

³¹ Omoyajowo, *Gospel and Culture from the Perspective of African Churches*, from <http://www.pctii.org/wcc/akin96.html>.

³² Caleb O. Oladipo, "African Christianity: Its scope in global context," *Review & Expositor*, 113(1), (2016): 85-98.



was presented and accepted by them as Lord and not as Messiah. They could not present Jesus as the Messiah for he would not have appealed to the Hellenistics. According to Ofori, Jesus “had to be presented in terms and categories that would be meaningful and acceptable in the new cultural context.”³³ Since Christianity cannot exist and it has never existed in a vacuum, Jesus was presented as *kyrios* which means Lord. This appealed to the Greco-Roman world which had many ‘gods’ and many ‘lords’. Hence, Jesus becoming the Lord of lords.

Additionally, the missionaries failed to help Africans comprehend the Christian God in terms of their own idioms and cultural issues. This has made African converts to discover that the Christian God is totally discontinuous with their traditional knowledge of God, but of which is not so.³⁴ It must be recalled that the Greco-Roman world used their intellectual and philosophical culture in the presentation of the Christian faith. The Greek Christians asserted as “Christians” all that was admirable or honourable about Greek civilization by using logic and persuasive reasoning.³⁵ Since the Greco-Roman society was dominated by the intellectual and philosophical tradition which concerned itself with the quest for the truth, the Gentile Christians capitalised on this to elucidate the Christian faith to people whose life and thought were shaped by a Greek inheritance that had been built up over centuries. They saw philosophy as given by God as a schoolmaster to bring the Greco-Roman mind to Christ as the law was given to the Hebrews.³⁶ These moral insights, intellectual and religious, were taught by Christian thinkers like Justin, Origen “...to have a home in the Church.”³⁷ This made Gentile Christians to see Greek philosophy as a ground work for the gospel. Hence the usage of the *logos* concept (seminal word) which took shape and became the man Jesus.

The missionaries also did not allow the sacrifices and festivals of the Africans such as *Akwasidae*,³⁸ *Aboakyer*³⁹ and *Homowo*,⁴⁰ be transformed for God as were done in the context of the Europeans where *Sol Invictus* and *Ostara* were changed to Christmas and Easter. They largely ignored everything about African traditions and cultures as having “no preparation for Christianity”⁴¹. Adrian Hastings summarises the activities of the missionaries in this way:

Everything pre-Christian in Africa as either harmful or at best valueless and to consider the African, once converted from paganism, as a sort of tabula rasa on which a wholly new religious psychology has somehow to be imprinted.⁴²

³³ Ofori, *Christianity and the Asante Chieftaincy Institution: A gospel and culture engagement*, 38.

³⁴ Kwesi A. Dickson and Paul Ellingworth, eds. *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1969), 16.

³⁵ Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Crowborough: Highland Books, 1970), 144.

³⁶ Titus Flavius Clemens, “The Stromata, or Miscellanies: Book 1” in Alexander Roberts and James Donalson (eds.), *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the writings of the Fathers down to ADL 325* (Grand Rapids: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 305.

³⁷ Justin Maartyr, “Dialogue with Trypho” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the writings of the Fathers down to ADL 325* (Grand Rapids: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 198.

³⁸ According to Samuel Ofori, *Akwasidae* is an occasion when a finite man goes before an infinite power to seek for help. See; Ofori, *Christianity and the Asante Chieftaincy Institution: A gospel and culture engagement*, 62.

³⁹ The Winneba people in Ghana’s Central Region celebrate the bushbuck hunting event known as *Aboakyer*. The celebration was established to remember Simpafu’s exodus (traditional name given to the people of Winneba).

⁴⁰ In the Ga language, the word *homowo* can be translated as “to hoot (or jeer) at hunger.” Due to a lack of seasonal rainfall in the Greater Accra Region, where the Ga people predominate, there was a period of starvation that eventually turned into famine. The Ga people created the *Homowo* celebration to celebrate when the rains resumed as usual, giving it its name and meaning. It is widely observed in every town in the Ga state, with festivities reaching their peak in Gamashie.

⁴¹ Samuel Ofori, *Christianity & African Culture: The Gospel in Asante Funeral Rites* (Accra, GH: Pentecost Press Ltd., 2014), 1.

⁴² Hastings, *Church and Mission in Modern Africa*, 60.



Another way the missionaries went wrong is how they engaged with Bible translation exercises into some African languages. Caleb Oladipo, an African Christians, asserts that “the Bible is a record of God’s activities and originates not only within the web of human history but also the spiritual world.”⁴³ The missionaries really helped the local indigenes to read in their mother tongue by engaging in Bible translation. However, they employed some concepts that were European cultural practices and worldview making it difficult for some Africans who have not learnt the biblical languages to understand. *talente* as talent (Matt 25:24, 25, 28), *Raka* as Raca (Matt 5:22), *adansefoɔ mununkum* as cloud of witnesses (Heb 12:1), *Alfa ne Omega* as Alpha and Omega (Rev 1:8), etc. are some few examples of these challenges. These translations lack African culture and traditions which does not allow Africans to do a proper biblical exegesis. For Africans to understand God’s word in their language without difficulty, Gerald West opines that the interpretation of Bible into an African language should involve taking into consideration the Christian tradition, African culture and religion, and the contemporary African context(s); “our culture and religion are among the core issues confronting African Christianity”.⁴⁴

TOWARDS DEVELOPING AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY: A PROPOSAL

It is so far known from discussions that the missionaries overturned the culture of the Africans. It looks like they sought to let the Africans become Christians without a holistic conversion. To correct this, it is critical to engage in discourse with Christian faith and traditions of Africa culture. Since all societies contain both good and negative traditions, there is a need for a dialogue between the Christian faith and the traditions. When this is done, Asamoah believes that there will be an increase in awareness of the African culture and make them “more refined” to reflect the Christian faith or gospel, which takes on the culture of any environment it enters. This will allow Africans while maintaining their culture, become African Christians.⁴⁵

In addition, for Africans to engage the Christian faith with their traditions and cultures is to implore Kwame Bediako’s “Scripture as hermeneutic of culture and tradition.”⁴⁶ This will make them become African Christians who can reach God through their own culture or worldview, for there can never be a culturally naked Christianity. Cultures that go against the Christian faith are to be reshaped or discarded to enable the gospel to have a comfortable stay at home. One should not forget that Jesus reshaped the Jews understanding of Sabbath.

Not everything about the African culture and traditions are devilish as was seen by the missionaries, for there are some that portray the existence of God, and His manifold wisdom. There are wise sayings and proverbs in Africa which impart knowledge and moral teachings. As a result, they offer guidance on how to have a productive life as well as moral precepts, which are conveyed through them. African proverbs play a significant role in moral and social education as well as in showing people how to conduct themselves successfully in everyday

⁴³ Oladipo, “African Christianity: Its scope in global context,” 85-98.

⁴⁴ Gerald West, “The Role of the Bible in African Christianity,” *Anthology of African Christianity* edited by Isabel Apawo et. al., (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2016), 76-86.

⁴⁵ Asamoah, “The Bible and Akan Traditional Religious Values: A Search For Dialogue,” 78-86.

⁴⁶ According to him, the positive and negative components of our culture may be revealed through passing culture through the “prism of scripture.” This is not fighting traditions and culture with biblical texts, but rather examining cultures and customs in light of the Bible. See; Kwame Bediako, “Scripture as the hermeneutic of culture and tradition,” *Journal of African Christian Thought*, 4(1), (2001): 2-11.



life. The need to adopt these wise sayings and proverbs in African culture as the Greco-Roman world adopted the intellectual and philosophical culture of the Greek and presented Christ as “Logos” should be given a second look. This is not to wholly conform to all the aspects of the wise sayings and proverbs of the African culture, especially those that are against the Christian faith, but transform them in the light of the gospel through round table engagements with the Christian faith.

The sacrifices and festivals of the Africans such as *Akwasidae*, *Aboakyer* and *Homowo* must be re-interpreted in the light of the Christian faith to help towards developing African Christianity. This is partly pursued by Samuel Ofori who has re-interpreted the *Akwasidae* in the light of the Christian faith to affirm Hans Debrunner’s claim which was made by H. Ph. Junod “Christ was there [in Ghana]...before the arrival of the missionaries. He was there in a boisterous and lively atmosphere...”⁴⁷ To Ofori, the essence of this festival is to invite from their “rest” or “sleep” the spirits of the dead chiefs who are believed to be enshrined in the *nkonwa tuntum* (black stools) and fed with food prepared, and prayers made to them for the benefit and blessing of the community. He explains that this depicts the holiness aspect of the Christian faith for approaching the holy God. He reveals that for a chief to appear before the Transcendent, he puts on the white clothes signifying purity before appearing before the stools. In addition, a clay (*hyire*) solution is marked on his shoulders three times as a mark of purification from all forms of contaminations or dirt that he might not be aware of.

Successful African Christians like royals, chiefs, queens and kings must share their stories to the world on how they have been able to maintain their traditions and culture whilst professing the Christian faith. This can be done through forums organised to bring them together at a common place. The Church of Pentecost has taken initiative in this direction and organises conferences for royals, chiefs, queens and kings in Ghana. They share successes on how they have been able to transform traditional values that were not in tandem with the Christian faith. By so doing, African Christians are correcting what Nyamiti deems “a gross theological error” committed by missionaries for identifying Christianity with European culture and failing to recognize that Christian conversion should not result in the rejection of African culture.⁴⁸

Again, Africans should pursue the studies of Bible translation to help them translate the Bible into their mother tongues. It is an undeniable fact that Bible translation is one of the most challenging academic exercises because it necessitates a detailed examination of the biblical text from the source language into the target language in order for the indigenous people to access the written word of God as it was intended by the author. This is fairly undertaken by an indigene who has studied the biblical languages—Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek—and is accustomed to the religio-cultural contexts and worldview of the African environment, than a person who has learnt the biblical languages and is alien to the African culture. African biblical scholars will be able to re-interpret African traditions in the light of the Christian faith as was done when the Christian faith emerged from the Jewish culture. By so doing, African biblical scholars will initiate a better translation that will meet the worldview and culture of the indigenes, and their counterparts. Mention is made of African biblical scholars like Jean-Claude Loba-Mkole, John Ekem, Jonathan Kuwornu-Adjaottor, Philip Laryea, and others who have helped and are still helping to initiate a more understandable translation of the Bible into

⁴⁷ Hans W. Debrunner, *A History of Christianity in Ghana* (Accra: Waterville Publishing House, 1967), 1.

⁴⁸ Charles Nyamiti, “African Christologies Today,” in J.N.K. Mugambi and L. Magesa (eds.), in *Jesus in African Christianity: Experimentation and Diversity in African Christianity* (Initiatives Publishers, Nairobi, 1989), 29-30.



some African mother tongues. For example Asamoah has initiated *ahyeasee ne ewie no* for “the Alpha and Omega” in place of *Alpha ne Omega no*. This translation fits in the religio-cultural settings of the African (Asante).⁴⁹ It also removes Jesus’ European attire and replaces it with his African one.

CONCLUSION

From the discussions so far, we know that the Christian faith or gospel is to be shared to all manner of persons; God expects every individual to have an encounter with Him. The Christian faith engages with the culture and traditional values of any new environment it enters to develop an indigenous Christianity such as Jewish Christianity, Greco-Roman Christianity, and European Christianity. It does so by re-interpreting and transforming the culture and traditions of the new environment in the light of the Christian faith towards a “home-grown” Christianity.

This seems not to be case when the Christian faith was introduced into Africa by the Western missionaries, for they disregarded African cultures and traditions which they perceived to be demonic or devilish, superstitious and foolish; failed to interact with African life and lore; failed to cloth the Christian faith by the traditions, practices and culture of the Africans; made Jesus to be seen as European rather than an African; did not allow Africans to comprehend the Christian faith in terms of their own idioms and cultural issues; did not allow them to transform their festivals and sacrifices in the light of the Christian faith as was done by the Europeans, and also employed some concepts that were European cultural practices and worldview in Bible translation—making Christianity among Africans become Christianity in Africa than becoming African Christianity. This is because African Christianity is shaped by the parameters of African religion before the coming of Christianity, and produced by the interaction of that tradition with the life, myths, stories, beliefs, culture, etc. of Africa. It is with life and lore of the African planted in the soils of Africa.

For Africans to develop African Christianity like their Jewish, Greco-Roman, and European counterparts, the following must be observed:

1. A critical discourse engagement with Christian faith and traditions of Africa culture. Since all societies contain both good and negative traditions, there is a need for a dialogue between the Christian faith and the traditions.
2. Africans should engage the Christian faith with their traditions and cultures by imploring Kwame Bediako’s “Scripture as hermeneutic of culture and tradition.”⁵⁰
3. Adopt the wise sayings and proverbs in African culture as the Greco-Roman world adopted the intellectual and philosophical culture of the Greek and presented Christ as “Logos”. This is not to wholly conform to all the aspects of the wise sayings and proverbs

⁴⁹ Emmanuel Foster Asamoah, “A Comparative Study of to Alpha Kai to Omega in the Greek New Testament (Revelation 1:8) and Asante-Twi Bible,” *Journal Of Mother-Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics And Theology (MOTBIT)*, 2(1), (2020): 70-77; Emmanuel Foster Asamoah, “Understanding and Interpretation of Revelation 1:8 by some Asante-Twi Speaking Scholars,” *E-Journal of Religious and Theological Studies (ERATS)*, 6(3), (2020): 181-189.

⁵⁰ According to him, the positive and negative components of our culture may be revealed through passing culture through the “prism of scripture.” This is not fighting traditions and culture with biblical texts, but rather examining cultures and customs in light of the Bible. See; Kwame Bediako, “Scripture as the hermeneutic of culture and tradition,” *Journal of African Christian Thought*, 4(1), (2001): 2-11.



of the African culture, but transform them in the light of the gospel through a round table engagement with the Christian faith.

4. Sacrifices and festivals of the Africans such as *Akwasidae*, *Aboakyer* and *Homowo* must be re-interpreted in the light of the Christian faith to help towards developing African Christianity.
5. Successful African Christians like royals, chiefs, queens and kings must share their stories to the world on how they have been able to maintain their traditions and culture whilst professing the Christian faith.
6. Africans should pursue the studies of Bible translation to help in the translation of the Bible into their mother tongues.

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