Presentation paper on Christology

A. JESUS AS ANCESTOR

My presentation will embrace the African Traditional Religion commonly known as ATR. As Christianity is widely perceived through the lens of the Western world, the West being the vehicle for Christian missionary work and the authority for Christological understanding and interpretation, Africa has become a very fascinating region due to its growing Christian populations. The African Traditional Religion is now seen as a possible model for interpreting some of the very difficult issues in Christology. ATR generally embraces a three-tiered religious system which can well be presented by a pyramidal figure of powers.

a. The ancestor Pyramidal Formula

1. The Supreme Being.

At the very top of the pyramid is the Supreme Being. To some Africans The Supreme Being is not clearly defined. He is so far removed from them that they are unable to have a precise understanding of his involvement in their immediate and personal lives. To this group. The Supreme Being is a distant, vague, deus otiosus. Other Africans, however, know exactly, at the level of their culture, who that Supreme being is, and how to relate to him.

2. Pantheon of Various divinities.

At the center of the Pyramid, the second tier of power, is the structure of the African religious life. This is the domain of multiple divinities, human, nonhuman, and ancestors elevated to the rank of divinity. Some of theses divinities, particularly the ancestral ones, still have earthly family members as descendants. This representative second tier of power serves and links God and humanity as it seeks to mediate between the Supreme Being and mankind. Being so, African Traditional Religion seeks to distant itself from any fundamental contradiction by conjointly adopting both the Supreme Being and the Pantheon of divinities simultaneously. Deity and divinity are distinct in African religion. Bolaji Idowu speaks of the pantheon of various divinities and the Supreme Being as an expression of “diffused monotheism”. African Traditional Religion can also be viewed as polydivinistic. Some see no contradiction.


This third level is known as the earthly level where all kinds of rituals and mystic powers are expressed and engaged. The objective is to maintain harmony, balance and power. Traditional healers, herbalists chiefs and priests are engaged to maintain cosmic and mystic harmony.
A good definition of “Ancestors” is outlined in the book “Theology in the context of World Christianity” by Timothy C. Tennent. The African system of ancestry and mediation tends is aimed to showing that a person should never approach God directly. This can be done via the ancestors, serving as supernatural mediators, liturgical companions, guardians of a particular clans. Charles Nyamiti, a Tanzanian scholar defines an ancestor as “a relative of a person with with whom he has a common parent, and of whom he is mediator to God, archetype of behavior, and with whom, thanks to his supernatural status acquired through death, he is entitled to have regular sacred communion”. The following requirements have to be met in order to be regarded as “ancestor”. First, they must have lived a virtuous life that satisfied the moral fabric of the clan. Second, they should have left descendants who remember them. Third they should have “died well (i.e., they lived to an old age and did not die an unnatural or untimely death). As such, ancestors are venerated only by the particular families who are their descendants. Other ancestors become “glorified” and are venerated by different clans who have no blood relation or ancestral connection with that ancestor referred to as the “living-dead” who are in constant relations with the “living-living”.

b. The ancestor Ascending Christology

In ascending Christology, Jesus as a man is the starting point and his wonders and works show then that he is the very Son of God. The African model suggests some similarities with the method found in the gospel where the disciples meet Jesus first as a man, then as the Messiah. Traditional Religion theology sees Christ as a bridge rather than a barrier to the expansion of the gospel in their continent. This is referred to as “Ascending Christology”. To many African theologians, the ancestors system help explain in a unified non contradictory way Christ’s humanity and deity, Christ being the ultimate final mediator between God and humanity. Although ATR Christology does not use Christ as the starting point, the person of Christ, however, is incorporated in their Christology. Everything starts from below to arrive at an understanding the person of Christ through the lens of his work. This is called “Ascending Christology”, the exact opposite of “descending Christology” as in the case of traditional ecumenical formulations.

In the modeled after the ascending Christology Jesus, for the African, becomes the “proto”-Ancestor, the head of the whole family of humanity. He is the archetype that fulfills and transcends the traditional role of the ancestor. He assumes, through his life and his teaching, our humanity as the second Adam by his virtuous life. As such he serves in a mediating role between God and humanity. The agony of the cross appears tragic but his resurrection shows He is the Living-One, victorious over death. This proves his supernatural power required to be an ancestor in the ATR and compared to biblical accounts of Col. 2:15, 1:15, Luke 20:38.

c. The ancestor model summary
The model presented has clearly made a case for an ascending Christology after the pattern of ATR, which starts with Christ’s humanity and culminates in his resurrection and exaltation. Writing on the humanity of Jesus, John Pobee links Christ to Adam, thus making him a member of our race. As such he transcends all, regardless of family, clan, tribe or race. Jesus’ resurrection symbolizes his role as the elder brother of the living-living, but first born of the living-dead. He represents the Head of a new community which he continues to guide in his role of the Glorified Ancestor.

B. EVALUATION OF CHRIST AS ANCESTOR.

A fourfold criteria will be used to evaluate the Ancestor Christology model of the ATR.

1. Biblical criteria evaluation.

The term ancestor applied to Christ is not explicitly found as such in biblical writing as in the case of Healer and Life-Giver. Many theologians reject this notion in light of that, and do not see the notion ancestor as an appropriate Christological image. But for African and other cultures with a strong emphasis on ancestors this may serve as a bridge to biblical knowledge and comprehension, though this may not be a universal model the whole global church would embrace. Africans prove their acceptance of the Ancestor model by presenting the following three points:

a. John’s use of Logos.

The Logos, a non biblical word, was used in John’s Gospel account to refer to Jesus Christ. The term Logos was a bridge of connection. The Logos, a philosophical term referring to a rational capacity, or “generative principle” that is present in all of nature. John chose the term Logos as his starting point but connects it with divine. The Hindu world could connect better with the use of Logos, a nonbiblical term, a precedent, because it referred to an impersonal, all-prevailing force. This helps connect with John 1:14, “the Logos became flesh and dwelt among us”.

b. The Mediator role.

The biblical role of Jesus Christ as mediator serves as a theological connection between ancestors and Christ. 1 Tim. 2.5 declares that” there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man of Jesus Christ”. The idea behind African ancestors veneration lies in the glorified exalted mediators, the living-dead, between heaven and earth. Thomas Torrance, in “The Mediation of Christ”, sees the ancestor image as the most important Christological image in the New Testament, because only a proper doctrine of Christ as Mediator solves the “Christology from below” versus from the “Christology from above” dilemma. Thomas Torrance says that Christological vulnerabilities occurred with an either-or-approach, ending with no solution to the problem created by their dualistic thinking of Christ.

c. The Life and Death of the Christian Community.
The biblical connection between life and death is very important to consider. We believe in the “communion of the saints”, declares the Apostles’ Creed. Charles Nyamiti argues in favor of a mystical union of both the Head and the members, Christ and his Church, often neglected by Traditional Western Christology. The African model of ancestors connects communities with their ancestral head, giving them a strong sense of continuity beyond earthly life. When Christ enters Africa, Bediako argues, “the ancestors are cut off as a means of blessing and we lay our power-lines differently”. Both the living-living and the living-dead in African Ancestor model are connected in Jesus Christ who is judge of both. As such the relationship between them becomes more evident.

2. Older church criteria evaluation.

Starting “from below”, Ancestor Christology may be less vulnerable to the docetic tendencies more characteristic of the descending Christologies, and thus arrives at the doctrine of Christ as fully God and fully man. Further analysis however shows ascending Christology such as “Ancestor Christ” may lead to arianism, denying the preexistence of Christ on the basis that the ancestors were not eternally preexistent ancestors, but became ancestors through their virtuous life and the dedication of their descendants. This explains the reason why ancestors Christology acceptance even among African Christians themselves range between 44 percent and 63 percent. Kwame Bediako declares that the associations Africans attach the “the English word “Ancestor”are very different from the ones in common language. Many in Akan will pray to “Nana Yesu” (Ancestor Jesus). Whereas in English praying to Ancestor Jesus is not an acceptable form of addressing to Jesus. The word “ancestor”, a generic word, can never serve as an exact equivalent of the Akan word Nana, both a title and a personal name. Similar difficulties were found in describing the unity of the Godhead in three persons, of one substance (homo-ousios), power and eternity; God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. The words person, substance and begotten are all three difficult terms to translate, using their corresponding Greek terms. Pagan Greeks would have had similar problem understanding the term “messiah”. The title “Kyrios” was used instead.

Some African Theologians in favor of Ancestor Christology ask for the use of the term as long some precise explanation is attached to it for comprehension. Some areas needing clarification and explanations would be to show the difference between Jesus and the human ancestors as to creation, sin, death and resurrection.


Raymond Moloney classifies all African Christologies in two general categories: Christologies of liberation and Christologies of inculturation. Many African thinkers see inculturation Christology testify to how the theme is in the traditional African worldview. Several points are important to review: First, Jesus serves as the mediator between God and humankind. Second,
Jesus is the founder and the head of the redeemed community. Third, as the risen Lord, Jesus has an ongoing role to guide and direct the life of the community. Fourth, Jesus gives identity to and transmits life to his community. These factors alone show Christ as fulfilling and completing the key functions ancestors have traditionally occupied in African life. To avoid syncretism, natural “ancestors” must be replaced by new “spiritual ancestors”, which include Abraham, Moses, David, and indeed the entire cloud of witnesses” (Heb 12:1). John Mbiti sees Africa as an open field ready for this contact to be established, from tribal solidarity transition to Christ’s solidarity transposition.


With Christ the “Ancestor model “, where the starting point is “from below”, with an indigenous concept, moving in an ascending fashion ending up with more of a focus on his person. All the problems faced by Africa: malnutrition, AIDS, political instability, discrimination, and so forth, may put into question the idea of Christ as Ancestor. The way to counteract the opposition to seeing Christ as Ancestor is by:

a. Seeing Christ as the new Adam, proto-Ancestor of the human race. At the conclusion of a field research conducted in the early 1990s, among Muslims in Nigeria to determine how ATR influenced the practice of Islam in west Africa, it was discovered that both Muslims and Christians alike were profoundly shaped and influenced by ATR. Therefore to dismiss the “ancestor” image may be lead to dismissing all African cultural elements that also rest on the word. However, this can be done gradually as a “preparation evangelica”.

b. The image of ancestor Christology which transcends the particularities of any tribal identity can help to unify African Christians. Peoples from all tribes and languages can be unified to create a new kind of African solidarity.

Objections to this model are that “ancestors image” is so particularized that it may hamper the church’s ability to bring out the true global universality of Jesus Christ. Second, This image may lead to Arianism, robbing Christ of his full deity and eternal preexistence with the Father. Third, this image will make Christ seem distant from all the struggles of life in Africa because the idea of African ancestor is a remote and distant figure not really engaged. This is contrary to the figure of the passion of Christ on our behalf.

CONCLUSION

Living in a global world, and the majority of Christians not living in the Western world with all its commodities, we need to reevaluate our methodology of missiology and theology. A good way to start is by understanding where each culture stands so we can best present the Gospel at their level and backgrounds without compromising the essence of the message. As
in the case of Africa, it is amazing to see one of the oldest civilizations is posing questions and problems from its own context of faith. Can we learn from Africa? Can this model be used as a universal model for biblical interpretation of Christology? How can we use it in world Evangelism? If not, can it be the ideal model for the African continent only.