THE QUEST FOR AFRICAN CHRISTIAN WOMEN’S IDENTITY

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INTRODUCTION

Doing theology in Africa has been, for the last generation, predominantly a matter of relating Christian faith and traditional culture. The premise has been that African Christian identity will be secured only when the faith is interpreted in terms of traditional cultural categories.¹ Theologians have tried to show how the message of Jesus Christ has resonance within categories of the traditional African worldview.² African Christians yearn for healing, fullness of life, cultural identity, selfhood, and transformation of broken relationships. The quest is for a theology and an ethic that deal with the realities of the African people. African Christians want to break from the ethics of domination and control that are prevalent within middle-class Christianity, or Afro-European Christianity, and neo-colonial Africa. These theologians contend that an authentic African Christianity and theology must take the human condition seriously, including integrating Christian values with African spirituality and morality.³

African theologies that relate Christian faith to traditional culture have not really impacted the life of African Christian women since they have often ignored and rejected women’s experiences and perspectives on African realities.⁴ The Christian identity constructed by male scholars does not go deep enough to confront and dismantle both Christian and African traditional values, attitudes, beliefs, and structures that

undervalue women. To a large extent, African and liberation theologies have been uncritical of cultural values that propagate sexism in the church and society. It appears as though men have assumed that attacking Western imposed values and structures will be enough to transform African communities.⁵

A second concern of African Christian women in their quest for identity is Christianity’s relationships with other religions. Africa is a place of religious pluralism. There is tension between Christianity and Islam, and Christianity and African traditional religions. Some Africans—both church and non-church members—say, “Africans already have our own religion. It was arrogant for the White man to presume we needed theirs.” The tension between Christianity and African traditional religions is escalating. Christians are exploring how much they can witness to their faith without being imperialistic. They seek to maintain the integrity and validity of their faith while acknowledging the inherent worth of the adherents of other religions. Is it possible for Christianity to stand on common ground with other religions and even to be instructed by them? Can such a vision be translated into social reality in Africa? It is argued here that the quest for African Christian identity should necessarily not be based on wholesome representation of inculturation, albeit that it is also important. Rather, our motivation for the quest of African Christian identity should first be a Christology that recognizes Christ as Lord in the midst of other religions (lords). A recognition that leads to an encounter with Jesus then becomes the basis for the affirming of one’s faith and the critique of other religions/cultures. The liberating message of Jesus Christ also becomes the basis for removing oppressive structures in Christianity and for dehumanizing rituals and taboos in African religio-culture. In this paper it is argued that the search for meaning and identity in culture must be defined to include women’s experiences. This search must inform the ongoing search and quest for an authentic and relevant African Christian woman’s identity if women are going to have life and have it in abundance. African Christian women find their identity in Christ, who they have recognized and experienced as the eternal Word of God, liberator, and the hope of the whole world—African culture inclusive.

In an attempt to make a clear argument, women will be discussed in the context of the African religio-cultural tradition and the church in

⁵ Njoroge, African, 123–124.