"HOW IS JESUS CHRIST LORD?" — Aspects of an Evangelical Christian Apologetics in the Context of African Religious Pluralism

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Introduction

In many evangelical circles, there seems to be an unquestioned assumption that the only authentically "evangelical" way to affirm Christian convictions is to avoid a serious engagement with alternative viewpoints. One of the most startling comments ever made by the towering African evangelical theological figure, the late Dr. Byang Kato, was his proposal that in evangelical theological education “African Traditional Religions as well as other religions should be studied carefully ... but only secondarily to the inductive study of God's Word" (Kato 1975:183). Yet at the very time that Dr. Kato was making his proposal, it was already becoming evident that no self-respecting theological institution in Africa could avoid the serious academic study of African traditional religions, for they were now “at the very centre of the academic stage” (Hastings 1976:183). It was quite clear that in the African “conditions of a plural society where religion was a massive, unignorable fact of life” (Walls 1980:144), Dr. Kato’s idea would prove unrealistic.

By any reckoning, Dr. Kato’s insistence on the centrality of the Bible for the theological enterprise in Africa must be seen as a most important contribution to African Christian thought in our time. On the other hand, his outright rejection of the understanding of theology itself as a synthesis of “old” and “new” in a quest for a unified framework for dealing with culturally-rooted questions meant that Dr. Kato’s particular perspective could not provide a sufficient foundation for a tradition of creative theological engagement such as the African context seemed to require. Therefore, before long, other evangelicals, without denying their commitment to the centrality of the Bible, were already seeking more positive ways in which the Christian Gospel might encounter African tradition (Tiéno 1982).

The biblical records as the fruit of engagement

It is difficult to conceive of the formation of the biblical records of both Old and New Testaments themselves without theological engagement with the alternative viewpoints present in the contexts in which the biblical witness
was being assembled. To mention merely the prophetic witness in the Old Testament, it is hard to make sense of the intense struggle against Baalism apart for the reality of "other faiths" with which the prophets felt called to do battle. In relation to the New Testament, it seems hard to conceive of the coming into existence of large portions without the deep religious and intellectual engagements between the Gospel proclamation and the various "mystery-religions" and other alternatives, quite apart from Judaism itself, in the Greco-Roman world of the time.

The point, then, is that serious engagement with such alternatives, seems to be inbuilt in the process of giving final shape to the very source-materials for Christian theological reflection.

My route to the problem

As an African evangelical

Christian of the twentieth century, my awareness that a creative African evangelical theological tradition can emerge from a serious engagement with the religious world of African traditional religions, as well as with the spiritual and intellectual problems which they pose, has been nurtured in three ways.

The first has to do with the discoveries that I made in the course of the work that I did for my book, Theology and Identity — The impact of culture upon Christian thought in the second century and modern Africa (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1992). In that book, I sought to bring together two eras and contexts of Christian history — namely the Greco-Roman world of the second century and post-missionary African world in the twentieth century — in an attempt to show the relevance of the insights and achievements of the one context for the other. The point was not that the problems and issues that faced Christian thinkers in the one context could simply be read off from the other. Rather my approach was to select a number of Christian writers from the two eras, and to study their responses to some of the enduring questions in the area of Christ and Culture as far as possible within each writer's own world of thought and concerns. Only after I had studied each writer against the background of the ideas and forces which shaped that writer's Christian and intellectual career did I then proceed to seek analogous correlations between the two contexts.

My selection of ancient writers was Tatian, Tertullian, Justin and Clement of Alexandria; my modern African writers were Bolaji Idowu of Nigeria, John Mbiti of Kenya, Mulago Musharhamina of Zaire and Byang Kato of Nigeria.

As my study progressed, it became increasingly clear to me that the early Christian theology was relevant for the theological enterprise in modern Africa. Not only were there similarities in the context of religious pluralism