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A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF THE UNDERSTANDING OF GOD IN J.S. MBITI'S THEOLOGY

ABSTRACT

This article investigates how Mbiti articulates the theological reflections on the understanding of God from an African perspective. Mbiti systematises data of the African concepts of God in a set of Western Christian doctrinal systems. He presupposes a continuity between the Christian and the African concepts of God, and overemphasises the similarities. Mbiti regards African Traditional Religion(s) (ATR(s)) as monotheism and as a praeparatio evangelica, and maintains that the Christian God is the same as the God worshipped in ATR(s). In Mbiti's theology, negative attributes of the African God, which are irreconcilable with the God of the Bible, are not critically evaluated, and the concept of the Trinity is not articulated. In this article, the notions of African monotheism and of ATR(s) as a praeparatio evangelica are criticised. This article claims that what African theology needs is to clarify the Christian concept of God, and to articulate the understanding of God within a Trinitarian context.

1. INTRODUCTION

Globalisation can create the illusion of homogeneity. When all are connected, all seem to be similar. This, however, can create illusions. Religion is intrinsically connected to culture and needs to be viewed as such (Adogame 2016:5).

African theologians primarily intended to formulate "a theology cooked in an African pot" (Ukpong 1984:19), so that theology becomes

intelligible to African Christians and helps them "feel at home" in their new faith (Sawyerr 1987:26).

African theology[1] can broadly be distinguished between a "theology of inculturation" and a "theology of liberation" (Martey 1993:69; Nyamiti 2001:3). Martey classifies the two major theological directions into four theological trends based on four different points of departure, namely African inculturation theology; African liberation theology; Black theology in South Africa, and African women's theology.

This article will be limited to African inculturation theology that endeavours to bring the African culture and traditional religiosity to bear on African theology (Parratt 1987:147-149; Bediako 2000:6). This theology attempts to make Christian faith be rethought, reformulated and re-expressed from within an African religio-cultural form that is familiar to people's thought patterns and way of life.

Specifically, this article is intended as an investigation of how John Mbiti has shown a continuing interest in relating the gospel to the African cultural context, and reflects theologically on the understanding of God within a Christian theological framework, aiming to achieve a dialogue and integration between the Christian faith and the traditional African religiosity.

2.   FORMATION OF AFRICAN THEOLOGY

The articulation and formation of modern African theology emerged in the 1950s and gained momentum in the 1960s (Mbiti 1998:146). African theology, however, did not emerge in a historical or social vacuum. Various factors prepared and accelerated the emergence of modern African theology prior to the 1950s.

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1   Mbiti (1978:72) defines African theology as "theological reflection and expression by African Christians". For Sawyerr (1987:26), African theology is an attempt to "interpret Christ to the African in such a way that he feels at home in his faith". Ukpong (1984:30) states that African theology is "Christian faith attaining African cultural expressions". Some theologians maintain that there should be "African theologies", more precisely, "African Christian theologies", in the plural form (Fashole-Luke 1975a:403; Tienou 1984:20). Other scholars (Parratt 1995:18) insist that there is broad commonness among African theologians, and this "basic unity" permits the use of the expression "African theology" in the singular, but with the recognition of "several divergent trends". In this article, "African theologies", in the plural form, can be used to distinguish between different trends of African theology, and "African theology", in the singular form, can be used as an umbrella term that encompasses a diversity of theological trends in Africa.

According to Mudimbe (1997:159-161), since the 1940s and 1950s, a new intellectual climate has emerged in African studies: African social and religio-cultural phenomena began to be understood from their own structural organisation as presented by their own norms, internal rules, and within the logic of their own systems.

During the period of agitation for independence, early African intellectuals[2] and nationalists recognised that there would not be genuine political liberation without cultural liberation (Bujo 1992:51). Therefore, the cultural self-affirmation by revitalising the African cultural-religious heritage became a "matter of priority" to regain political self-determination in Africa (Van der Merwe 1989:256). African culture and religious symbols were a means to awaken the African people's spirit of struggle towards political liberation (Munga 1998:41).

In the new intellectual and political climate, early African theologians ventured on a new theological course deviating from the prevailing Western image of Africa. They questioned the place and role of African traditional religions (ATR(s)) in Christianity, and began to prepare an epistemological-theological break with Western traditions or discontinuity with the traditional European method of approach to theology, because, for African theologians, it did not comply with the African needs and mentality.

In scrutinising the question as to how the Christian gospel could be proclaimed authentically and effectively to the African people in a way that is meaningful and relevant to them, African theologians attempted to produce a theology that "incarnates the gospel message in the African cultures on the theological level" (Nyamiti 2001:3). Therefore, they started a dialogue between African culture and the Christian gospel, and attempted to integrate indigenous values into the church and theology (Bosch 1991:451; Mudimbe 1997:93).

Bediako (1989:59; 1992:xvii) states that a key for "understanding the concerns of Christian theology in modern Africa [is] the question of identity" (Bediako 1992:1), and that modern African theology emerged as a theology of African Christian identity.

The negation of African culture meant to deprive African people of their identity. The revitalisation of African culture meant to recover African identity (Munga 1998:41). Therefore, with regard to the quest for identity,

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2   According to Kesteloot (1972:25), Black intellectuals recognised their respon-
     sibility in three complementary aspects: educating Black people, being the
     spokesmen for Black people, and endeavouring to help set their people free
     from colonialism.

African theologians maintain that "conversion to Christianity must be coupled with cultural continuity" (Fashole-Luke 1975b:87).

In this sense, modern African theology emerged as a response to missionaries' derogatory attitude towards the African cultural-religious traditions and the imposition of Western ecclesial-cultural values on the church in Africa.

The emergence of African theology shows African theologians' theological reaction to the prevailing and dominant Western interpretation of the Christian gospel in Africa, keeping pace with political-cultural ideological critics of the nationalist movements, on the one hand, and a process of the quest for Christian identity with a self-awareness of being simultaneously genuinely African and authentically Christian, on the other.

3.   MBITI'S METHODOLOGY

3.1   Mbiti's theological concerns

According to Mbiti (1970b:430), "Christianity has Christianized Africa, but Africa has not yet Africanized Christianity". He diagnoses the African Church as "a Church without a theology, without theologians, and without theological concern" (Mbiti 1972:51).

In order to remedy symptoms, the gospel and Christianity have to be deeply rooted within "the point of African religiosity" (Mbiti 1970b:430), and the African should be free to express the Christian gospel, which remains basically universal and the same for all times, within the African language and cultural context that is the "medium of receiving, diffusing, tuning in and relaying the gospel" (Mbiti 1977:27).

Therefore, the search for ways and means of communicating the gospel to Africans and an encounter and living dialogue between the gospel and African traditional concepts have been placed at the forefront of his theological task (Mbiti 1971:2; Bediako 1989:59).

3.2   Mbiti's methodology

The principal concern of African theology is clearly to communicate the gospel to the African people in "a manner suitable to African conditions and background" (Mbiti 1972:53).

In order to produce an authentic theology that is meaningful to the African context, Mbiti (1971:189-190; 1972:51) suggests the following sources of African theology: the Bible; the theology of the older churches and the

major traditions of Christendom; ATR(s), African philosophy and African religious heritage, as well as the living experience of the church in Africa. Mbiti (1972:51) designates them as "the four pillars on which theological systems of the church in Africa could be erected". Mbiti (1979:68) mentions two additional sources: African culture and African history.

3.2.1 Anthropological analysis

The basic premise of Mbiti's methodology is that traditional Africa and the early Israelites had a great deal in common. Based on parallels, which resulted from the comparative study between the biblical record and African religiosity, Mbiti ([1969] 1975:xiii, 5) wants to find a fundamental ground on which the gospel can be understood in Africa.

Mbiti begins his study on the concept of God not from the God who has revealed himself in the Bible, but from anthropological, phenomenological-comparative research on what the African peoples say about God. First, the concepts of God were collected from various African ethnic groups, and then lined up in comparison to the concept of God as viewed in the Bible.[3]

3.2.2 Theological interpretation

The beliefs and practices of ATR(s) were not formulated into a "systematic set of dogmas" (Mbiti [1969] 1975:3). However, Mbiti, who is a theologically trained scholar, approaches and constructs ATR(s) in a doctrinal system that is markedly theocentric.

Although Mbiti ([1969] 1975:5) mentions that he uses a descriptive and phenomenological method to study ATR(s), his method of approaching ATR(s) and his way of listing the contents of his books show that he has his own theological presuppositions about ATR(s).

Mbiti's theological tendency in his interpretation of ATR(s) is best expressed by his acknowledgement that he uses "the academic and technical language of theology to address the African situation" (quoted by Nieder-Heitmann 1981:71). He employs Christian theological categories

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3   In his approach to ATR(s), Mbiti ([1969] 1975:14) has treated religion as "an ontological phenomenon", and attempted to understand the concepts of God in Africa within African ontology that can be divided into five categories: God as the ultimate explanation of the genesis and sustenance of both man and all things; the Spirits being made up of superhuman beings and the spirits of men who died a long time ago; man including human beings who are alive and those about to be born; the animals and plants, or the remainder of biological life, as well as phenomena and objects without biological life (Mbiti [1969] 1975:15-16).

such as revelation, sin, monotheism, salvation, and eschatology as the framework to describe ATR(s).

Through his anthropological study of ATR(s), Mbiti discovered similarities between the African concept of God and the Christian concept of God. Consequently, he translated the result of his anthropological studies on ATR(s) into Christian theological terms; he gives a theological response to his anthropological analysis and interprets the anthropological data of ATR(s) theologically.

4.   MBITI'S UNDERSTANDING OF GOD

The question as to how Africans understand God has had a long history of interpretation. Two main traditional perspectives are evident: the traditional colonial view as represented by the likes of Edward Tylor (1871 [2010]) who would state that Africans believe in many gods and are, in fact, animists. According to Tylor, Africans believe that all things, even inanimate objects, have souls. This makes the understanding of God by ATR(s) different from the understanding of God by Christians. A second traditional perspective is that of a group of African scholars such as Edward Blyden, John Mbiti and Bolaji Idowu who hold that the God worshipped in Africa is the same God worshipped by Christians in other parts of the world. This implies that Africans knew the God of Christianity long before missionaries introduced God to Africa.

African theologians maintain that God is to be articulated in keeping with the Africans' mentality and needs, with special reference to their tradition, culture, religion, history and current life experience (Motlhabi 1994:123). Motlhabi (1994:123) mentions that the God articulated in African theology must be an African God who is incarnated in each distinct context of the African continent.

In Mbiti's view, Christians who convert from ATR(s) cannot understand the Christian teaching about God without the help of their traditional knowledge of God, because "religion permeates all departments of life" (Mbiti [1969] 1975:1).

Through his comparative study of ATR(s) and Christianity, Mbiti (1980:817) finds that "great commonality" between the two revolves around the concepts about God. To Mbiti, the African concept of God, which is conceived of as a kernel of ATR(s), seems to be a point of continuity or a link that connects the traditional African religious heritage and Christianity effectively.

The following questions need to be considered: How could Mbiti perform a theological interpretation of an anthropological study of the concepts of God in Africa? What are Mbiti's theological presuppositions or underlying considerations that lead him to adopt his methodology?

4.1   Mbiti's theological presuppositions

4.1.1 ATR(s) as monotheism

Mbiti ([1969] 1975:36; 2009:147) is convinced that ATR(s) are monotheistic. As a Christian African theologian, he begins his study of God in Africa within the theological frame of Christian monotheism. Then he moves from Christian monotheism to African monotheism, and arrives at the assertion that ATR(s) are monotheistic. Mbiti (1970a:xiii) maintains that "there is but One Supreme God", and African people believe the one and same God in Africa as a whole. By confirming the theological premise of ATR(s) as monotheism, he is able to use a theological basis in order to interpret the various African concepts of God, and to maintain that the African peoples' beliefs about God have a common basic structure that makes comparison meaningful (Nieder-Heitmann 1981:72). Consequently, Mbiti's (1975) theological presupposition of ATR(s) as monotheism enables him to speak of a single, comprehensive ATR.[4]

4.1.2 ATR(s) as *praeparatio evangelica*

Mbiti (1970b:432) mentions that the way in which African people, who experience their life through their religiosity, recognise and accept Christianity is inevitably influenced by their traditional religiosity. ATR(s) are, to a large extent, compatible with Christianity, especially a great deal of religious and cultural elements in the Old Testament (Mbiti 1970b:436). The content and concepts of indigenous words that describe God have elements that match or are not contradictory to the Biblical account about God.

African religiosity has provided the religious "groundwork", "vocabulary", "insights", "aspirations and direction [for] the gospel to find a hearing and an acceptance among African peoples" (Mbiti 1979:68).

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4   Mbiti ([1969] 1975:1) originally spoke of ATRs in the plural, because there are approximately one thousand peoples and each has its own religious system. Later on, he speaks of ATR in the singular (Mbiti 1975). However, he does not discuss or give the rationale for this shift to the singular form. If it is not due to generalisation, then his theological premise of monotheism is responsible for this (Nieder-Heitmann 1981:76).

According to Mbiti (1986:203), ATR(s) have equipped people to listen to the gospel, to discover meaningful passages in the Bible, and to avoid unhealthy religious conflict. He emphasises that African traditional religiosity can become an enrichment for the Christian presence in Africa (Mbiti 1970b:437) and a crucial stepping stone towards the Ultimate Light (Mbiti [1969] 1975:32).

Mbiti (1980:817; 2009:146) states that African people had the concepts and belief in God and had various ways of worshipping in their religious life long before foreign Christian or Muslim missionaries and travellers arrived in Africa. Therefore, missionaries did not bring God to the African continent. God brought them to Africa. The God African people have known and worshipped is the God who revealed himself in the Bible and whom Christians have worshipped. What the missionaries proclaimed was the name of Jesus Christ (Mbiti 1979:68; 1980:818).

Mbiti (1970b:432) maintains that ATR(s) "should be regarded as a preparation for the Christian gospel. Christianity does not destroy ATR(s)". "Christianity rather comes to say YES to ATR(s), and to enrich, to fulfil and to crown ATR(s)" (Mbiti 1970b:436).

As an African who searches the African cultural identity in the wave of African nationalism, Mbiti prepares a room for pre-Christian African religious heritage within Christian theology with the intention not to sacrifice the African cultural identity.

Relying on his belief in an African monotheism, Mbiti (1970b:436) declares that the pre-Christian African religious heritage is a *praeparatio evangelica* for the biblical revelation. Consequently, ATR(s) are placed on an equal footing with the Old Testament as preparation for the coming of Christ.

Mbiti relates African religio-cultural heritage as *praeparatio evangelica* to the biblical revelation in the hope of creating not only an African Christian theology, but also an African Christian identity. According to Bediako (1993:372), Mbiti's assertion of "the African pre-Christian heritage" as *praeparatio evangelica* is "the most enduring paradigm" in his writings.

4.2   Mbiti's understanding of God

4.2.1 One God

African scholars such as Danquah and Idowu asserted, respectively, that the Akan knew only one God (Danquah 1944) and that the Yoruba religion was originally a primitive monotheism (Idowu 1962; 1973). Mbiti ([1969] 1975:36) agrees: "Every African people recognize(s) God as One."

Mbiti's *Concepts of God in Africa* (1970a) has its roots in Danquah's *The Akan doctrine of God* (1944). Danquah was the first African to expound the African concept of God, in order to make it understandable and comprehensible to the Western people and to make it compatible with Western philosophical systems (Ray 1972:85). Danquah wished to uphold the conviction that the Akan religion had known only one God, objecting against the European tendency that reduced African religions to mere polytheism and dismissed the African Supreme Being as "remote" and "abstract" (Ray 1972:85).

Mbiti (1970a:xiii) asserts that African concepts of God are the result of an "independent reflection" upon the Supreme God. Mbiti ([1969] 1975:29) investigates the traditional African concepts of God and knowledge of God contained in "proverbs, short statements, songs, prayers, names, myths, stories, and religious ceremonies".

Mbiti ([1969] 1975:29) collected over two thousand primary and attributive names of God, and concluded that all African peoples and languages have a notion of the One Supreme Being.

In many African languages, the name of God or the word for God is used in the singular form (Mbiti 2004:222). Mbiti (2004:228; 2009:147) argues that this phenomenon demonstrates that the ATR is "a deeply monotheistic religion". However, grammatical coincidence should not be confused with worshipping the same God.

4.2.2 The same God

Mbiti (1988-1989:60) questions whether God, who is the Father of the Lord and saviour Jesus Christ, of the Bible is the same God acknowledged by ATR(s), and answers positively.

On the basis of African monotheism and of objecting to the traditional distinction between general and special revelation, Mbiti (1970b:435-436) presumes that ATR(s) are, to a large extent, compatible with Christianity and that many parallel elements of these religions can merge into each other without conflict. From his assertion of the sameness of the subject of revelation, Mbiti moves to the sameness of the content of revelation concerning the knowledge and nature of God. The traditional Africans and the early Israelites cherished the same concepts of God, and used the same metaphor to describe the divine.

Boaheng (2012:8) confirms this position by stating that, in Africa, "the knowledge of God is innate and intuitive". The existence of God is held to be obvious in Africa. Boaheng (2012:8) concludes that no human being can lack the concept of God; therefore, "all have the idea of God".

Mbiti (2004:228) maintains that

> African religion is monotheistic and revolves around the concept of
> God, whom the people feel and believe they have known since time
> immemorial. This is the same God described in the Bible.

God who revealed the substance concerning Himself "among the Jewish
people" must have revealed the same substance among "African peoples"
in different forms such as oral tradition, rituals, and symbols (Mbiti
1980:818), because the subject of revelation who revealed Himself in Israel/
the Bible is the very same subject of revelation who is revealed in Africa.

On the basis of the same subject of revelation revealed in Israel and
Africa, Mbiti (1988-1989:67) attempts to integrate the history of the African
religious tradition into the Biblical salvation history. In other words, Mbiti's
assumption that all revelation, whether general or special, is the same
amalgamates all history with salvation history, making both indistinct
(Eitel 1988:329). Mbiti combines the African religious history with the
Christian theological category of salvation history (Bediako 1993:388).

God was and is already known by African peoples as *Mungu*, *Mulungu*,
Katonda, *Ngai*. African people know God according to their languages. They
are names of one and the same God, the creator of the world, the Father
of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is essentially the same (Mbiti 1980:818).
Contrary to Mbiti's position, a tempered theory is to be witnessed among
some African theologians. Ekeke and Ekeopara (2010:209) explain the
African view of the one god by subscribing to a revelation theory. The
Great Being in Africa reveals Himself in many different ways. This theory
has the appearance of monotheism; in fact, it borders on polytheism or
even henotheism. Unlike Mbiti, Ekeke and Ekeopara acknowledge the
diverse forms of interpretation and representation that God takes on in
African contexts. Based on this theory, it must be questioned whether the
same God is present in both Christianity and ATR(s).

His studies of the concepts of God in Africa enable Mbiti (1980:818;
2009:151; 1979:68) to articulate that the God described in the Bible is none
other than the God who is already known in the framework of ATR(s).

4.3   Evaluation of Mbiti's understanding of God

Unlike Western scholars who regard the Africans as a religious
"*tabula rasa*", Mbiti pays attention to Africa's rich cultural heritage and
religious consciousness, and attempts to build a close connection between
the past religious beliefs and practices and the Christian gospel, in order

for African Christians to have the "true character of African Christian Identity" (Bediako 1989:59).

The question has been asked as to whether Mbiti's analysis and interpretation of ATR(s) and his theological articulation of the understanding of God are based on methodologically sound principles or not.

4.3.1 The tendency to generalise

According to anthropologists, Mbiti's materials are inevitably "superficial catalogues of examples" (Ray 1972:83; Shaw 1990:185), "Frazerian fashion" (Ray 1972:83), and resemble "Victorian comparativism at its worst" (Ray 1972:86). Mbiti makes "an almost totally uncritical use of secondary sources without any attempt to assess their reliability" (Welbourn 1971-1972:227). Beidelman (1976:413) criticises Mbiti's *African religions and philosophy* ([1969] 1975) as "a scissors-and-paste list of snippets from many different societies jumbled together out of full social context". Mbiti's *Introduction to African traditional religion* (1975) is criticised as being "full of errors" (Beidelman 1992:670).

The first area of disagreement is Mbiti's hypothesis of unity. Mbiti ([1969] 1975:30) asserts that

> there are sufficient elements of belief which makes it possible for us to discuss African concepts of God as a unity and on a continental scale.

However, the validity of his hypothesis of unity or a common basic structure of ATR(s), which treats all tribal religions in Africa somewhat homogeneously, has been seriously questioned.

Anthropologists are reluctant to discuss "African religion" or "African cosmology" or "African monotheism", since each cultural unit would have to be articulated in, and of itself (Burleson 1986:97). Mbiti himself occasionally notes that Africa holds many ethnic groups and languages and hence different systems of ideas and practices. He admits that there are "great distances separating the peoples of one region from those of another" (Mbiti [1969] 1975:30).

Mbiti characterises "African religion" as a generalised system. He frequently overgeneralises various African beliefs into a single unified system. A fine example of overgeneralisation is Mbiti's assertion that all African peoples attribute creation to God. Although God is widely conceived of as the Creator of all things in Africa, many exceptional cases demonstrate that some African people do not recognise God as Creator

of the universe and humankind (Schebesta 1936:168-170; Smith 1950:7; Setiloane 1976:81; p'Bitek 1971:45, 50).

The Igbo God, *Chineke* (Idowu 1969:27; Uchendu 1963:95), *Ngewo*, God of the Mende (Sawyerr 1970:66-67), and the Ambo God, *Kalunga* (Dymond 1950:140) are conceived of as the Creator. However, *Ruwa*, the Chagga God, is not the Creator of the universe and humankind (Dundas [1924] 1968:107). The Sotho-Tswana have no creation story (Setiloane 1976:81). In the Central Luo, there are no words for "creation" and "to create" (p'Bitek 1971:45), and they do not have the notion of a God who is the Creator (p'Bitek 1971:50). In Mbiti's expression that *all* African peoples attribute creation to God, the word *all* is incorrect.

It should not be ignored that, when God is spoken of as Creator in ATR(s), the meaning of the word "creation" differs between the various African peoples, and differs from the Biblical witness about creation.

According to Gyekye, Mbiti's accounts are both false, because it is not the case that Akans lacked the concept of future time, and fallacious, because Mbiti makes hasty generalisations from what he observed of a very small part of Africa, and applies it to the whole of Africa (quoted by Òkè 2005:28).

In his study of the African concepts of God, Mbiti tries to address nearly every aspect of African Supreme Beings. Because of his desire to deal with every feature of religious phenomena, Mbiti gathers "bits and pieces" from different societies (Ray 1972:86), and categorises them into a set of "doctrines", which are analogous in structure to Western faith, without recognising the sociocultural and ritual fabric within which they are imbedded.

Mbiti presents the information about the attributes of God in general, and does not examine a particular people's relationship to God in depth. Mbiti interprets various attributes of the African God in a Christian systematic theological scheme and hastily classifies African religious thoughts and symbols according to the table of contents of a Christian systematic theology (Ray 1972:86; Horton 1984:396; Kato [1975] 1987:71; Westerlund 1985:17). As a result of his interpretation and classification of ATR(s) in Christian theological terms, Mbiti presents one of the most evident examples of systematical-theological structuring of ATR(s) (Kato [1975] 1987:69), and creates a kind of Pan-African Christian theology[5]

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5   Müller (2005:112) states that the term "Pan-Africanism" is a general term for various African movements that have their common goal as the unity of Africans and the elimination of colonialism and White supremacy from the continent. For

(Ray 1972:86). This attempt, however, results in the subordination of African religious ideas to Christian theological concepts (Shaw 1990:185). Mbiti seriously distorts the actual African religious situation.

4.3.2 African monotheism

Mbiti (1970a:xiii) asserts that Africans clearly know the One Supreme God who is known in various forms to all men, and that ATR(s) are essentially monotheistic. This needs serious critical reflection. Boaheng (2012:6) acknowledges that ATR(s) believe in God and in the existence of lesser deities. This would constitute a polytheistic religious structure (Sarpong 2009). Although both Boaheng and Sarpong defend the monotheistic nature of ATR(s), such a position seems untenable. Even Mbiti's position needs to be critically assessed.

Mbiti and some African scholars emphasise a single African belief system of God across the entire African continent. Mbiti focuses on the concepts of God as essentially independent elements, and thus describes the attributes of God out of context and mixes them without considering their structural relationships within the different historical, cultural, sociological, and cosmological systems (Ray 1972:87).

Some scholars (Horton 1984:402; p'Bitek 1970:47) argue that the term "African monotheism" is not always appropriate. African monotheism is, in fact, unrealistic, because each ethnic group conceptualises its own particular concept of God, due to a particular historical, religio-cultural context in which the religious elements have developed. The differences among the various African peoples' concepts of God should not be neglected, but rather be sustained.

The views of Sarpong and Boaheng on the assumed polytheistic nature of ATR(s) is argued as follows. In an African understanding, the polytheistic situation presupposes a pantheon of gods comprising of many deities, but none is considered greater than the other (Boaheng 2012:6). According to Boaheng, polytheism would only be possible where many gods of equal importance in a pantheon are struggling for supremacy. The Supreme Being in Africa does, however, not form part of the pantheon; therefore, ATR(s) does not constitute polytheism (Boaheng 2012:6). Neither would an accusation of henotheism be applicable to ATR(s). According to Boaheng (2012:6), henotheism would refer to a situation where many gods are worshipped, while one deity is held to be superior. ATR(s) worships only

that reason, they should have one system of belief. When the term applies to Christian theology, Pan-African Christian theology refers to a theology that shares its goal with Pan-Africanism, theologically and ideologically.

one Supreme Being and does not consider other deities worthy of worship. Should other lesser gods be present in Africa, they are viewed as dependent of, and inferior to the Supreme Being and emanations of the Supreme Being who is worshipped "through" the lesser beings (Boaheng 2012:6). This is an attempt to maintain the monotheistic characteristic of ATR(s).

p'Bitek (1970:47) argues that Mbiti has intended to show not only that "African peoples are not religiously illiterate", but also that the African deities are "but local names of one God, who is omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, transcendent and eternal". According to p'Bitek (1970; 1971), his own southern Acholi believe in many *jogi*, but not in one *jok*.

Surely, the nationalist inspiration and/or the urgent political desire has encouraged the belief in one God that functions as a common and decisive factor to unify culturally bound tribes into the unity of a "nation" and of "Africa" as a whole.

But a systematic description of a homogeneous or one unified concept of God in all African peoples across the continent is not possible. Each ethnic group conceptualises its own particular concept of God. Therefore, to maintain one God who is commonly considered as identical in all parts of Africa is to impose a non-existent or unrealistic concept of God on each African ethnic group.

An identical concept of God in Africa must then be a mosaic work. What Mbiti provides is a giant (though incomplete) mosaic of isolated attributes of God that goes far beyond the scope of any actual God (Ray 1972:87). African monotheism as a theological presupposition should be abandoned.

On the basis of his assumption of African monotheism, Mbiti (1970a:xiii-xiv) asserts that the God of ATR(s) and Christianity appears not only to be the same, but is also, in fact, the same God worshipped in both religions. The whole issue of the Trinity as present in Christianity poses another problem to Mbiti's theory. Boaheng (2012:7) solves this dilemma by indicating that the lesser gods within ATR(s) should be viewed similar to the relationship between God the Father, Jesus the Son and the Holy Spirit. As Christians would not claim to worship three gods but a triune God, so ATR(s) is aware of the unity among divine elements in a polytheistic religious environment. The lesser deities become intermediaries, such as Jesus, between God and human beings (Boaheng 2012:7).

This is, however, a feeble attempt to justify the existence of multiple deities. Within the perichoresis of the Christian Trinity, one God with one substance cannot be viewed similar to the existence of a multitude

of lesser gods in relation to one Supreme Being, as if all shared in the same substance. Lesser gods being dependent on the Supreme Being, as Boaheng (2012:6) claims, does not imply a unity in substance, but merely a functionality and not an ontological unity.

To some extent, there are similarities and decisive differences between some aspects of the African concepts of God and of the Christian concept of God.

Both cases – Mbiti's African monotheism and his attempt to identify the Christian God with the African God – are rushing into "the twin dangers of 'reading-in' what is not in fact there and of 'reading-out' what is not in fact indigenous" (Smith 1950:3).

4.3.3 ATR(s) as *praeparatio evangelica*

Mbiti ([1969] 1975:277) is convinced that the traditional religious beliefs and practices serve a positive function to Christianity, and that ATR(s) can and have to be considered a *praeparatio evangelica*. Africans are undeniably very religious. However, it is questionable whether their religiosity is a *praeparatio evangelica*.

The concept of *praeparatio evangelica* is mainly linked to the thoughts of Clement of Alexandria who conceived it: like the Old Testament prophets prepared Jews for the gospel, Socrates and Plato prepared the Greeks for it (Ferdinando 2007:131). Likewise, Mbiti perceives that ATR(s) prepared Africans for the coming of Christ. In this sense, ATR(s) take over the role of the Old Testament, and "traditional religions, Islam and the other religious systems" are considered the God-given "preparatory" and "essential ground" for seeking "the Ultimate" (Mbiti [1969] 1975:277).

In a sense, according to Kraemer, Christ can be called

> the fulfillment of some deep and persistent longings and appre-
> hensions that everywhere in history manifest themselves; yet
> this cannot be the perfecting of what has gone before (quoted by
> Goheen 2000:358).

Certain good and positive elements of ATR(s) and other religious systems can be regarded as *praeparatio evangelica.* It cannot be denied that beliefs of other religions are consistent with the Christian faith.

However, in those cases, the elements do not function to reveal the will of God or guarantee that people of other religions will accept the gospel. Rather, they provide a contact point or a meeting place for communicating the gospel. A religion that confronts people with the "issues of ultimate

concern" or "the fundamental questions" can help produce a milieu in which the gospel can be positively comprehended. It might be a response to the general revelation of God. However, this is far from saying that the religion has prepared its believers to accept the gospel or that it has salvific power (Ferdinando 2007:132).

The notion of *praeparatio evangelica* raises several issues. First, ATR(s) as *praeparatio evangelica* is presumably based on the assumption that ATR(s) had a "positive" tradition in which Christ was somehow at work. ATR(s), like other religions, have a number of positive and negative elements (Ferdinando 2007:126).

When African theologians regard ATR(s) as *praeparatio evangelica*, it seems that they identify some of these positive elements of ATR(s), while the negative elements such as superstition, this worldliness, and anthropocentrism in ATR(s) are not identified and even remain unevaluated (Nyamiti 1977:9-12).

Secondly, *praeparatio evangelica* is based on the continuity between Christianity and ATR(s) that is attributed to the monotheistic notion of God. According to Mbiti, the majority of African people believe in the existence of one God as creator. However, how do the attributes of *Olódùmarè* or of the Supreme Being of the 300 ethnic groups surveyed in Mbiti's research actually correspond to those of the Christian God? If some descriptions of the concept of God are contradictory among the different ethnic groups, which concept of God among them is the most trustworthy?

Bosch (1991:485) states that "religions are worlds in themselves, with their own axes and structures". The elements of different religions, therefore, cannot be immediately comparable. The fact that African people may have worshipped the same Supreme Being does not mean that the God whom African people have worshipped can be simply identified with the God and Father of Jesus Christ (Ferdinando 2007:127).

Nyamiti and even Mbiti assert that ATR(s) are mainly concerned with human life and welfare in the here and now (Nyamiti 1987:58-66; Mbiti [1969] 1975:5). Man is at the centre of anthropocentric African ontology (Mbiti [1969] 1975:16), and man's acts of worshipping God are pragmatic and utilitarian rather than spiritual (Mbiti [1969] 1975:5, 67-68).

ATR(s) are this-worldly in outlook, and are not longing for spiritual redemption (Mbiti [1969] 1975:5). Obviously, for adding blessings and avoiding death, illness, infertility, drought, accident, and other misfortunes, people keep living together with the ancestors, remembering their names and making the appropriate offerings to them (Nyamiti 1987:60).

After studying his own people, the Jaba, Kato ([1975] 1987:44) maintains that "there is neither redemption nor evidence of direct divine revelation to individuals in Jaba religion". Kato ([1975] 1987:70) does not accept that ATR(s) contain the same conception of God found in the Old Testament and can provide the synthesis element to Christianity. Parratt (1995:198) remarks that "the central aspect of the Christian faith has no real parallels or points of contact in African traditions".

The radical continuity between the gospel and ATR(s) runs the risk of understating the unique and extraordinary nature of the gospel (Ferdinando 2007:134). It seems likely that the concept of *praeparatio evangelica* has been motivated by a "conscious and deliberate apologetic intent" (Ferdinando 2007:128) to view the African traditional religio-cultural heritage as the key element for establishing an African Christian identity.

It is, therefore, evident at this point that the notion of a radical continuity between the African concept of God and the Christian concepts and teachings of God are incompatible.

5.   CONCLUSION

Some religious concepts and notions are common to both Christianity and ATR(s). Through the vehicle of religious commonality in concepts and ideas, the Biblical and Christian concepts and ideas can be conveyed to an African context. Therefore, African theologians study ATR(s) and seek useful means to explain Christian theology, so that the gospel truth becomes relevant to African churches and African contexts. The emergence of Woman Theology in Africa is an attempt in this direction. Although a great deal of research has been done on this,[6] more needs to be done.

There may be similarities between the two religious phenomena. However, the similarity of concepts or ideas of the religious framework does not mean that the two religions have the same theological foundation or the same theological message or meaning (Turaki 1999:148). When their respective contexts are taken into account, the similarities may be found to be very different in content. One needs to differentiate between concept and content. Acknowledging the concept is not the same as having a similar understanding as others who also acknowledge the existence of the concept. To recognise a monotheistic God is only to acknowledge the concept. It does not mean that the concept is filled with similar content. If ATR(s) acknowledge the existence of a monotheistic God, it can hardly

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6   Compare the work by Odoyoye (1995).

imply that their concept exhibits similar characteristics to the Christians' monotheistic concept of God. Talk about God can only imply agreement on the existence of the concept. For Mbiti and others to claim that ATR(s) worship the same God as Christians would be to mix concept and content.

In the process of re-thinking and re-expressing the Christian message in an African cultural context, African theology excessively uses "African concepts and the African ethos as vehicles for the communication of the gospel" (Pobee 1979:39) in order to meet the "needs and mentality of the African peoples" (Nyamiti 1994:63), without considering a "dialogue with the rest of Christendom" (Kurewa 1975:36), so that genuine dialogue and integration of the Christian faith and African cultures have not taken place, and African theology becomes weak in its Christian identity.

In this sense, it appears that Mbiti does not succeed in creating genuine dialogue between the Christian faith and African culture.

5.1   Clarifying the African notion of God

Certain characteristics of the African God are directly contrary to the God of the Bible: A God who has wives, a plurality of gods, and the African identification of God with the elements of nature are not to be paralleled with the Biblical concept of God (Nyamiti 1977:19).

It should be noted that Mbiti does not critically evaluate some negative attributes of the African God that are irreconcilable with the God of the Bible.

The Biblical God is not only the Creator, but also the God of redemption. In his redemptive activity, the Biblical God does not withdraw, but discloses himself and continually seeks the withdrawing people. In the Bible, the redemptive power and authority of God over his entire creation has been mediated through Christ and his redemptive work on the cross (Turaki 1999:28).

For this reason, the understanding of God in Christianity is, in essence, Christocentric: Christ reveals a new relationship between God and man; this aspect is absent in ATR(s) (Nyamiti 1977:7-8).

According to Mbiti (2009:151), the African name of God is the foundation of articulation of the Biblical God within the African context. Mbiti, however, does not mention the other side. When the indigenous word for God is used to designate the Biblical word for God, the existing traditional and indigenous concepts of the word also percolate into the Biblical use of the word; in that case, the indigenous concepts and contents that do not match the Biblical concepts and contents can be attached to the Biblical concepts of God. Consequently, the Biblical concepts of God can be

mixed up with the indigenous concepts of God, and might result in a kind of syncretism.

The understanding of God in African theology should not be a syncretistic amalgamation of ATR(s) and Christianity that is neither African nor Christian. What African Christians need is not the African concept of God, but a clear picture of the Christian view of God.

African theologians' unreasonable attempt to equate the African concept of God with the Biblical concept of God might lead to a wrong interpretation of God and to theological syncretism.

The name and "robe" of *Nkulunkulu* are to remain, but the "content" of *Nkulunkulu* is to become different from the traditional meaning (Ahonen 2003:193). *Nkulunkulu* of Christianity differs from the *Nkulunkulu* of tradition. The form is old, but the old form contains absolutely new content and meaning. The names are the same, but the content is different. Bosch maintains that "the traditional gods must give themselves up. The old God has to die, in order to rise again to a new life" (quoted by Ahonen 2003:200). Christianity has given the old local names that designate God a new Biblical and Christian meaning and content. African theology takes the names for God from the cultural context, and fills them with new Biblical and Christian content.

5.2   Understanding God as Trinity

While African theologians attribute the rapid growth of Christianity in Africa to the African monotheistic concept of God, the concept of the divine Trinity, in which God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit are one, is not clearly articulated. Although African people know the existence of God and have a notion of God as the Supreme Being (Mbiti [1969] 1975:29), the idea of God as a Trinity is an absolutely new concept. Kombo's (2000:223) comment is worth noting:

> Although God is viewed primarily as Creator-Father in the African context, it is important to indicate that the idea of Fatherhood in the context of the Trinity means that God is the Father of the Son and the Spirator of the Holy Spirit, not in the sense in which he is our Father and the Ultimate explanation of the invisible created world.

The only God whom Christians know and confess is the God who exists only as Father, Son, and Spirit. The affirmation of God as the Triune One is the church's response to the revelation of God in history and in the Bible (Vanhoozer 2007:26). Therefore, the Trinitarian understanding of God as a profound confession of the Christian faith should also be articulated in African theology.

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