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THE AFRICAN EXPERIENCE OF JESUS

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The article explores the African experience of Jesus in an objective and subjective sense. Under the rubrics of missionary, biblical, and independent experience, how Africans have experienced Jesus centers on the question whether and how Jesus can be said to have moved from being a stranger or guest to being kin and finally host. How Jesus has experienced Africa is a matter of the "paschal imagination" perceived as the re-creation and transformation of human life, the esthetic celebration of life, and the need for a socially responsible church.

"CHRIST HAS BEEN PRESENTED as the answer to the question a white man would ask, the solution to the needs the Western man would feel, the Saviour of the world of the European world-view, the object of the adoration and prayer of historic Christendom. But if Christ were to appear as the answer to the questions that Africans are asking, what would he look like?"[1] This oft-cited observation by John Taylor reflects the view that Africa suffers from a kind of "faith schizophrenia," not in the conception of God, but in the interpretation and understanding of Jesus Christ. "The problem of faith in Africa is fundamentally Christological," remarks Enyi Ben Udoh.[2] He speaks for many when he writes: "Christ entered the

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[1] John V. Taylor, *Christian Presence amid African Religion*, intro. J. N. K. Mugambi, postscript Taylor (Nairobi: Acton, 2001) 7; reprint of *The Primal Vision: Christian Presence amid African Religion* (London: SCM, 1963) 24. This is a remarkably insightful, sensitive, and perennially relevant book by one who spent many years as a missionary in Zambia and Uganda.

[2] Enyi Ben Udoh, *Guest Christology: An Interpretative View of the Christological Problem in Africa*, Studies in the Intercultural History of Christianity 59 (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1988) 263. Chapter 2, "The Christological Problem," reviews some theologians and novelists who affirm that traditional African religions and practices remain alive and well within Christian commitments. Udoh cites Desmond Tutu, who observes that "the African Christian has suffered from a form of religious schizophrenia" (19), that is, he or she pays lip service to the white Christ

African scene as a forceful, impatient and unfriendly tyrant. He was presented as invalidating the history and institutions of a people in order to impose his rule upon them."[3] Many have experienced Jesus as an alien, a stranger who comes from elsewhere or, at best, a "guest" but one who has "no home" in Africa. Udoh thinks that Jesus can eventually find a home within the specifically African experience of family but only after "a responsible review of the foundation of African faith in Christ."[4]

Only Africans can respond adequately to this challenge. My purpose in this article is not to write a Christology for Africa but, as an outside observer, to propose a possible framework for consideration of the issues.[5] The article relies on a wide variety of African theologians across the Continent yet affirms a particular perspective or point of view, namely, the repristination of the experience of Jesus that relies on his historical particularity. This experience of Jesus is offered as a possible way for Africans to view christological development as well as an invitation to all theologians to consider the African experience in the light of their own concrete situations in Latin America, Asia, Europe, or elsewhere. The amount of literature on

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while deeply sensing that their Africanness has been violated. See Desmond Tutu, "Whither African Theology?" in *Christianity in Independent Africa*, ed. E. Fasholé-Luke et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1978) 366. Udoh is from Nigeria.

[3] Udoh, *Guest Christology* 64. Further, "It is as though Africans are saying: God we know; ancestors we acknowledge; but who are you for us, Jesus Christ?" (92). This is the viewpoint of many but not all Africans. Some might consider the idea of "faith schizophrenia" to be misdirected or even insulting. An alternative view that seeks a balance is offered in the works of Lamin Sanneh (originally from Gambia) who focuses on translation of the Scriptures as the medium whereby Africans as receivers of the Christian message have preserved the message within the genius of African languages and cultures. Sanneh's view entails, however, a real change from the more Eurocentric view of many missionaries. I will treat the question of translation under the "biblical experience." Sanneh's alternative view still affirms my basic thrust toward a repristination of the originating experience of Jesus. See Lamin Sanneh, *Disciples of All Nations: Pillars of World Christianity* (New York: Oxford University, 2008).

[4] Udoh, *Guest Christology* 16.

[5] The same issue of the outside observer comes up in my extensive experience with Hispanic/Latino people, which I address in my *Christology as Narrative Quest* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 1997); see esp. 177 where I cite T. Richard Snyder, *Divided We Fall: Moving from Suspicion to Solidarity* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992) 20: "It has been stated accurately that the leadership of the liberation struggle must come from the oppressed, from those held silent and invisible by their bonds. Only those who know the tragedy of being oppressed can be trusted to lead us into a transformed world. While this is absolutely essential, the question remains whether the rest of us who would participate in liberation must watch on the sidelines or whether we have something crucial to contribute." That contribution, Snyder notes, will take place primarily by raising awareness within our own Euro-American communities.

African theology and, especially since the mid-1980s, on Christology is immense, and I do not propose to review what others have done more adequately.[6] My purpose is to imagine the African experience of Jesus in two ways: first, to reimagine the faith of Africa and, second, to explore how faith imagines the world of Africa.[7] To this end I take a clue from Romans 3:22, "the faith *of* Jesus Christ," which is usually interpreted in the objective sense of faith *in* Jesus Christ but can also be interpreted in the subjective sense of Jesus' own faith (or fidelity). Following this clue, I propose two avenues of approach: first, how Africans have experienced Jesus in an objective sense; second, how Jesus has experienced Africa in a subjective sense. This latter is a matter of the "paschal imagination."[8]

HOW AFRICANS HAVE EXPERIENCED JESUS

The continent of Africa is huge and the diversity of histories and experiences are wide-ranging, so it is difficult to speak of "the African experience." Moreover, it is important to emphasize that Africa had a complex history and culture long before either the Europeans or the Arabs arrived. The prejudice that Europeans brought "civilization" to uncivilized "primitives" who had no history, no culture, and no religion should be dispelled.[9] The complexities of Africa are compounded by the fact that there is an ancient and distinctive history of Christianity in Ethiopia (Acts 8:26–39), Egypt (e.g., Origen, Athanasius, Antony, et al., along with the later Coptic tradition), and northern Africa (e.g., Tertullian, Cyprian, Augustine), and that South Africa has a distinctive history of its own.[10] Moreover, the contemporary scene is complicated by "a triple heritage" represented religiously by African traditional religions, Islam, and Christianity.[11] Yet, with all this rich diversity, it is still useful to speak of Africa and "the African experience," however much what is said must be qualified and applied to different concrete situations. Most of the authors cited have come from sub-Saharan equatorial Africa, East and West, and they communicate their experiences to each other. That is, there is a community of discourse that reflects a shared sense of Africanness.

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[6] See Canadian theologian Diane B. Stinton, *Jesus of Africa: Voices of Contemporary African Christology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2004). A professor at Daystar University in Nairobi, she has extensive experience in Africa. Her book discusses various "models" of Christologies in Africa—Jesus as "Life-giver," "Mediator," "Loved One," and "Leader"—but she also gives ample space to the voices of African lay men and women. For an insightful review article with abundant references see Donald J. Goergen, O.P., "The Quest for the Christ of Africa," *African Christian Studies* 17 (March 2001) 5–51 and the bibliography in the September 2001 issue. The article includes students' reflections from Goergen's 1998 course on Christology at Tangaza College, Nairobi. John Parratt, *Reinventing Christianity: African Theology Today* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1995) is another good review. Among the many collections of articles, see especially: Kofi Appiah-Kubi and Sergio Torres, eds., *African Theology en Route: Papers from the Pan African Conference of Third World Theologians, December 17–23, 1977, Accra, Ghana*, ed. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1979); Robert J. Schreiter, ed., *Faces of Jesus in Africa* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1991); and Rosino Gibellini, ed., *Paths of African Theology* (London: SCM, 1994). For a biographical and theological review of a number of African theologians, see Bénézet Bujo and Juvenal Ilunga Muya, eds., *African Theology: The Contribution of the Pioneers*, 2 vols., trans. Silvano Borruso (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2003, 2006).

[7] William F. Lynch, S.J., *Images of Faith: An Exploration of the Ironic Imagination* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame, 1973), divides his book into two parts. The first attempts to "reimagine faith"; the second explores how "faith imagines the world." I employ his insights in *Christology as Narrative Quest* 8–11 to discuss faith as a life of the imagination. The main point is that the "ironic imagination" opens us to infinite possibility as mediated through the concrete particularity of one man's history, Jesus of Nazareth, who shared to the full our human life and died as a rejected prophet.

[8] See Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991) 127, where she affirms that the NT text is a product of the paschal imagination.

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[9] A readable account with many illustrations that makes this point well is Basil Davidson's *African Kingdoms* (New York: Time-Life, 1966). For a trenchant critique of those who ignore or deny the African origins of civilization, see Cheikh Anta Diop, *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality*, ed. and trans. Mercer Cook, from original French works of 1955 and 1967 (Chicago: Lawrence Hill, 1974): "According to the unanimous testimony of the Ancients, first the Ethiopians [Sudan/Nubia] and then the Egyptians created and raised to an extraordinary stage of development all the elements of civilization, while other peoples, especially the Eurasians, were still deep in barbarism" (230). Diop does not seek to exalt one race over another but to write the history of humanity that gives due recognition to the evolution of the black world. Diop is from Senegal.

[10] See John Baur, *2000 Years of Christianity in Africa: An African Church History*, 2nd rev. ed. (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1998); and Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa: From Antiquity to the Present* (Lawrenceville, N.J.: Africa World, 1995).

[11] For an emphasis on the political and economic effects of these religions, see Ali A. Mazrui, *The Africans: A Triple Heritage* (London: BBC Publications, 1986). He says that, while precolonial Africa was "a miracle of diversity" ranging from pastoralists (e.g., the Maasai in Kenya) to cultivators (e.g., the Kikuyu in Kenya) and from empires (centralized authority and cohesion by use of force) to stateless societies (decentralized authority and cohesion by custom and consensus), the "modern African state is a child of three forces in world history: Semitic absolutism [monotheism], European organization [technology] and African land-reverence" (261). Mazrui is from Kenya. With regard to the mystique of land-reverence versus territorial possessiveness: "Pre-colonial statehood had a mystical deference to land, an obsession with the aesthetics and religiosity of the soil" (273). This is crucial to understanding the root cause of much of the turmoil in Africa, especially of the recent tragic events in Kenya.

The framework I propose is parallel to an earlier article I wrote on Christology in Latin America, but with distinct differences.[12] After considering the methodological claims of Gustavo Gutiérrez, Hugo Assmann, and Juan Luis Segundo and the principal Christologies produced at that time by Leonardo Boff and Jon Sobrino, I pursued the question, What are the conditions for the possibility of a Christology truly indigenous to Latin America?

> Such a possibility revolves around two inseparable factors: indigenization and conscientization. By indigenization, I mean simply a particular people getting in touch with their own uniquely proper roots ("radicalization" in the best sense of the word) through a profound *recognition* (memory) *of themselves* in their history, their culture, their spirituality, and their communal (ecclesial?) experience. By conscientization I mean that such a recognition, in order not to be romanticized or idealized, must be *critically appropriated* through a specific politico-communal commitment. This is an experience that remains rooted in memory but moves beyond it to imagination, i.e., to the concretely imaginative creation of a new humanity.[13]

The two realities that make an indigenous Christology possible in Latin America are popular religiosity and popular (grassroots) Christian communities. Both realities are present in Africa but differently. The most striking difference is that, whereas popular religiosity in Latin America uses the ironic imagination to subvert the images and symbols of the Spanish conquerors by reconstituting them as expressions of their own religious and cultural identity,[14] the African experience of Christian symbols has often been one of opposition and alienation. That is, Africans have either accepted wholesale the European-based Christian traditions and so have been alienated from their own religious traditions, or they have rejected as a foreign and alien imposition the Christianity brought by the missionaries which corresponds to their own experience of rejection based on the prejudices of the colonizers. The question, then, is whether the African experience of Jesus can find an alternative way by valuing what is deepest and best in the African heritage and bringing that to expression in new and creative ways in the contemporary world. If so, then African Christianity should not be considered a displacement from center to periphery but a new center of Christian universality.[15]

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[12] Michael L. Cook, S.J., "Jesus from the Other Side of History: Christology in Latin America," *Theological Studies* 44 (1983) 258–87. This article was the fruit of a sabbatical in Bolivia and Peru in 1980–1981. The current article reflects a sabbatical at Hekima College in Nairobi, Kenya, in 2007–2008.

[13] Ibid. 277 (emphasis original).

[14] Ibid. 278, citing the description of José Míguez Bonino, "La piedad popular en América latina," *Concilium* 96 (1974) 440–47, at 442. The ensuing discussion in my article "Jesus from the Other Side" (278–85) develops the complexities and ambiguities of popular religiosity.

To explore how Africans have experienced Jesus I will consider three modes of experience that have occurred in a more or less sequential and progressive manner: the missionary experience, the biblical experience, and the independent experience.

The Missionary Experience

Missionaries from foreign lands came, along with the colonial powers of Europe, with the sincere but culturally misguided attempt to save primitive, idolatrous natives from their ignorance of true religion and from their lack of civilization. Of course, for many missionaries, Christianity was inconceivable apart from European culture and history. Therefore, saving the native people meant removing them from the nefarious influences of their own cultural and religious practices that were deeply embedded in their sense of ancestral continuity and influence. One of the most poignant expressions of this experience is the novel by Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, in which the hero, Okonkwo, cannot finally cope with the new impositions of colonial rule—the center of his world cannot hold. Barbara Kingsolver's novel *The Poisonwood Bible* makes this point from the perspective of the ignorance and fanaticism of a missionary.[16]

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[15] Kwame Bediako, *Jesus in Africa: The Christian Gospel in African History and Experience* (Ghana: Regnum Africa, 2000) 115–18. "The plurality of centres of Christianity's universality does not provide a linear unidirectional pattern of Christian history, but a pattern of overlapping circles of Christian life in context, with no absolute centres or peripheries. Every centre is a potential periphery and vice versa" (118). Bediako (from Ghana) is one of the most insightful of contemporary African theologians. It is time, as he infers, for Africa to evangelize the West, especially in the continuing effect of Africa's "primal world-view" (58–60). For Bediako here, "primal" is not the same as "primitive" in the sense of an "uncivilized" people who have had no history, culture, or true religion. In this sense, he is close to Sanneh's focus on the receivers of the Christian message who have preserved it within the indigenous experience.

[16] Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1958). Achebe is from Nigeria. The book has been hailed as one of the best novels to come out of Africa and its author as one of the originators of the African novel. The title is from W. B. Yeats's poem "The Second Coming": "Things fall apart/the centre cannot hold/Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world." For a recent use of Achebe's novel as a framework to discuss theological themes, see A. E. Orobator, *Theology Brewed in an African Pot* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2008). Orobator is also from Nigeria. Barbara Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998). A stunning poem from the perspective of the Acoli people of Uganda that laments the abandonment of ancestral traditions for Western religions and technology is Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino: An African Lament* (Cleveland: World-Meridian, 1969): "Listen Ocol, my old friend/The ways of your

Unbeknown to themselves, the early missionaries represented a lost opportunity to listen to the voices of the people of Africa, to "pass over" into the history and culture and the wisdom of centuries of experience so as to return to their own religious convictions with an enriched understanding.[17] Whose voice is being heard, as Gustavo Gutiérrez insistently asks, and whose voice should be heard for an adequate understanding of the gospel today? According to Taylor (and many others), the missionaries brought a "classroom religion": "In many tribes the word used to signify Christian worship means simply 'to read', and believers are the same as literates. The Gospel has been presented by instruction but there has been little appeal to sympathy and imagination."[18] The missionaries brought a European style of education, medicine, and technology that was greatly valued for practical purposes—mainly to be successful in the emerging new world order—but their lack of empathy and imagination frequently deadened the African soul.

There has been a long-standing discussion among African theologians as to whether priority should be given to inculturation or to liberation,[19] but

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ancestors/Are good/ . . . /Because their roots reach deep into the soil" (29)—Lawino is lamenting her husband Ocol's fascination with the progress of technological change that is transforming the traditional customs. See the analysis by G. A. Heron, *The Poetry of Okot p'Bitek* (London: Heinemann, 1976). Okot p'Bitek, *African Religions in Western Scholarship* (Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 1970) eschews the myths of outside foreign influence, both of Christianity and of Marxism, and calls for an understanding of the religious beliefs and practices of Africans as Africans understand them.

[17] "The holy man of our time, it seems, is not a figure like Gotama or Jesus or Mohammed, a man who could found a world religion, but a figure like Gandhi, a man who passes over by sympathetic understanding from his own religion to other religions and comes back again with new insight to his own. Passing over and coming back, it seems, is the spiritual adventure of our time" (John S. Dunne, *The Way of All the Earth* [New York: Macmillan, 1972] ix). Of course it is anachronistic to apply this idea to the early missionaries in Africa, but had they operated with such an orientation, the subsequent history of a colonized Africa would have been quite different.

[18] Taylor, *Christian Presence* 4–5. Many authors do not think "tribe" accurately describes the African situation and prefer "clan," "family," or "nation." Many others, however, continue to refer to tribes. It appears here as used in the sources.

[19] See Emmanuel Martey, *African Theology: Inculturation and Liberation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993). Martey, a theologian from Ghana, offers a good review of sub-Saharan "African" theology as "inculturation theology" and of South African "black" theology as "liberation theology." The book is a revised dissertation under the direction of James H. Cone and so includes some consideration of the influence of black American theology. Martey maintains that all theology must be liberative, and so the opposition between inculturation and liberation is a false dilemma. "Rather, Africa's problem 'is in *the battle for the liberation to which a new culture is called to give birth in dominated societies*'" (130, emphasis original, citing Jean Marc Éla, *African Cry*, trans. Robert R. Barr [Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1986]). Éla is from Cameroon.

the crucial issue underlying both is the overwhelming and massive experience of suffering that pervades the Continent. John Waliggo writes: "After careful reflection, what I propose as the single root cause of Africa's suffering is *rejection*, both by powerful outsiders and powerful insiders."[20] What I observed in Latin America is similar to what I observed in Africa: the experience of the people "has too often been one in which their history has been suppressed, their culture despised, their spirituality alienated, and their communal values of solidarity and co-operation devalued."[21] The symbolic center of suffering and oppression is a poor woman of color, who suffers the threefold oppression of class, gender, and race. However, in an African context, it should be noted that "color" makes sense only in the context of white domination. Until she is free, no one of us is free, because we are all implicated in her oppression. Such oppression is particularly evident in Africa because it is the women who have enabled the people to survive in the midst of so much suffering. As Mercy Amba Oduyoye claims: "It is now openly acknowledged that two-thirds of the work necessary for human survival is done by women and in Africa that percentage could be higher."[22] Women who share in solidarity the experience of giving life and sustaining and protecting life and who are empowered by their own networks built on traditional culture but at the same time self-defining—women who create a new myth of interconnectedness—are Oduyoye's "dream" and indeed the hope of an Africa free from the internalized oppression of colonialism.

The Biblical Experience

"Nowhere else today is the world of the Bible as real or as alive as it is in Africa,"[23] asserts John Mbiti. This assertion may well be true today, but it was not always so. Kwesi Dickson, in enumerating factors that alienated missionary preaching from the African reality, includes the fact that the translation and availability of the Hebrew Scriptures (OT) were delayed because of their affinity with Africa.[24] A number of authors stress affinities such as: most African languages are close to biblical Hebrew; the importance of oral traditions within clan or tribal affiliations; the exodus experience as including (1) liberation from slavery and oppression, (2) covenanting with God in the form of rituals and taboos, and (3) the promise of land as God's land and so belonging to all the people; a strong sense of blood and marital kinship; the practice of polygamy; and the importance of spirits as the mediation of God's presence and power combined with a strong sense of ancestral influence. One could go on, but the important issue is that such affinities must be treated dialectically with what Dickson calls an "interpretive realism" that engages contemporary issues.[25]

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[20] John M. Waliggo, "African Christology in a Situation of Suffering," in *Faces of Jesus* 164–80, at 171 (emphasis original). Waliggo is from Uganda. In the same volume, Cécé Kolié (from Guinea) in his article "Jesus as Healer?" (128–50, at 149) concludes that "the face of Christ in Africa today is more that of the ill than of a healer." Both authors appeal to the death and resurrection of Jesus, which I consider in the second part of this article. Waliggo concludes: "The rejected Jesus of Nazareth being raised from the dead as the victorious Christ, to the great shame and dismay of his rejectors, is the Christ that is relevant to Africa" (179).

[21] Cook, "Christology in Latin America" 277.

[22] Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1995) 210. The book, focusing on the Akan people of Ghana, is a call to free the imagination for alternatives that are not culture-bound. "For me, African myths are ideological constructions of a by-gone age that are used to validate and reinforce societal relations. For this reason, each time I hear 'in our culture' or 'the elders say' I cannot help asking, for whose benefit?" (35).

[23] John Mbiti, "The Bible in African Culture," in *Paths of African Theology* 27–39, at 38. Mbiti is from Kenya.

It is imperative to reread Scripture from an African perspective and so to rethink theology. Such rereading includes, from a Christian viewpoint, the whole of Scripture, both Hebrew and Christian Testaments, so as to see their inseparable connection. An important text, often cited by African theologians, is the Letter to the Hebrews because it combines a strong affirmation of the human and historical Jesus, especially in his suffering (4:14–5:10), and the mediation of one "who has passed through the heavens" (4:14) and so combines the visible and the invisible worlds, both by his eternal sacrifice (8:1–10:39) and by his affirmation of the ancestors in faith who were valid witnesses in their own time (11:1–40). What Hebrews affirms, that Jesus has passed through all the stages of human life in order to enter into his glory (2:5–18; 12:2, "the pioneer and perfecter of our faith"), is a central thesis of contemporary African Christology. Today, the first step in a biblical rereading must be to retrieve the human historical prophet from Nazareth. As Udoh says: "A realistic African Christology . . . must seek to reinstate the human face of Jesus Christ."[26]

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[24] Kwesi A. Dickson, *Theology in Africa* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1984) chap. 4, "Theological Unreality in the Church in Africa" 89–107. Dickson is from Ghana. In terms of indigenization, he calls for neither adaptation nor translation but for a "rethinking" from within African experience: "African Christian theology is meant to involve a sustained articulation of faith which would bear the marks of an original African experience" (120); "a distinctive meditation upon faith in Christ that does justice to the life-circumstances of the African" (122).

[25] Ibid. 182. Dickson enumerates such affinities in his chap. 6, "Cultural Continuity with the Bible" 141–84. See also Kwesi A. Dickson, "Continuity and Discontinuity between the Old Testament and African Life and Thought," in *African Theology en Route* 95–108. Mbiti does something similar in the article cited in n. 23 above. Taylor, in his postscript to *Christian Presence* writes that, when Africans read the OT, they exclaim: "This is *our* story" (148, emphasis original).

[26] Udoh, *Guest Christology* 74.

Justin Ukpong, after reviewing and rejecting current approaches to inculturation, advocates a biblical approach (in contrast to a Western focus on systematic/doctrinal Christology) that embraces the whole ministry of Jesus: "Using elements of Jewish culture, he sought to instill into the Law and the Jewish religion a new vision based on the Good News that he preached. . . . Jesus issued this challenge from within the culture itself and not from outside it. This is the inculturation approach to evangelization."[27] In my view, Jesus in his historical mission was a prophet sent to his own people to renew and revitalize the covenant relationship given to Moses and the people on Sinai. As a prophet, he sought to create a new vision of the future by calling his contemporaries to a deeper appropriation and validation of what is true and lasting in their heritage, bringing it into the present in creative and imaginative ways and so opening the possibility of a true future as God's own, the reign of God.[28] Thus, there is an inseparable connection between the experience of the people of Israel and Jesus' own experience. Similarly, John Pobee argues, there should be an inseparable connection between the experience of the people of Africa and Jesus' relationship to that experience.[29] The appeal is often made to what Ukpong calls functional analogies, i.e., to titles applied to Christ based on authentic African experience, but in Christian hands this appeal usually results in an argument from the lesser to the greater. That is, as Éfoe Julien Pénoukou argues, a basic anthropological datum such as "life – death – life" as a fulfillment of "being – there – with" (Emmanuel) can be subsumed into Christ who confirms and matures its originality. "To speak of the capacity of an anthropological datum to receive a Christian mystery in no way implies that such a datum is itself adequate to create this mystery, or to render it comprehensible. It only means that this mystery does not contradict, still less annihilate, the structure or content of the anthropological datum, and can be appropriated as a locus of encounter with and conversion of the human being."[30] Jesus will be called "Master of Initiation," "Chief," "Ancestor and Elder Brother," or "Healer" not because theologians declare him to be such but because the people will have experienced him as such in the process of liberation.[31]

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[27] Justin S. Ukpong, "Christology and Inculturation: A New Testament Perspective," in *Paths of African Theology* 40–61, at 58. The approaches he rejects include: (1) incarnational; (2) *logos spermatikos* (Christ pervades all cultures from the beginning); (3) functional analogy (titles applied to Christ from the African experience, e.g., ancestor and king); (4) paschal mystery (as a basis for inculturation); and (5) a biblical approach based on the Gospel of John. See also Ukpong's review of African theologies as they were emerging in the mid-1980s: "The Emergence of African Theologies," *Theological Studies* 45 (1984) 501–36. Ukpong is from Nigeria.

[28] Michael L. Cook, S.J., *Justice, Jesus, and the Jews* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 2003) 73–113.

[29] "Just as biblical christology is not possible without Jewish anthropology, so too African christology is impossible without African anthropology" (John S. Pobee, "In Search of Christology in Africa: Some Considerations for Today," in *Exploring Afro-Christology*, ed. John S. Pobee [Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1992] 9–20, at 15). Pobee is from Ghana.

The Independent Experience

Liberation means independence from oppressive and alienating voices. It means a return to and repristination of the originating experiences of Africa not as a mere romantic retrieval of the past but as powerful symbolic experiences to evoke a usable past, one that is creative of the future. Mere adaptation or translation still bears the marks of dependency. The human face of Jesus must be an African face, one that bears the marks of original African experience and, indeed—given the whole of African history—the marks of the crucified African Christ (see Gal 6:17). In telling her own story, Africa unveils to the world her own proper face of Christ, one that comes from deep within her own experience and especially from within what Engelbert Mveng has called "anthropological poverty."[32] That is, she must affirm her own dignity and integrity as a human person, as Jesus was fully human. She must affirm with the Apostle Paul: "By the grace of God I am what I am and his grace toward me was not in vain" (1 Cor 15:10). Africa's history, her cultures, and her religious traditions have intrinsic value. The first step is to value them for themselves; the second is to envision how they do or do not relate to Africans' experience of Jesus.

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[30] Efoé Julien Pénoukou, "Christology in the Village," in *Faces of Jesus* 24–51, at 42. Pénoukou is from Benin. It is clearly legitimate to employ images of Jesus that correspond to African experiences culturally and linguistically, but the images must be rooted in the historical reality of Jesus so that he is not made to be something he was not. A good image, for example, would be Jesus as sage or teacher of wisdom. For an attempt to do this from an Asian perspective, see Michael Amaladoss, *The Asian Jesus* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2006). Rooted firmly in the tradition about Jesus, Amaladoss is not seeking to make comparisons but to understand Jesus "through symbols to which Asians are accustomed in their own cultural and religious traditions" (3). Thus, Jesus can be considered an "avatar" (a common symbol) but not Krishna. Just as Krishna is considered an avatar ("a divine manifestation") of Vishnu, so Jesus can be considered a different and distinct avatar. That is, avatar as applied to Jesus acquires a specific meaning in the light of Jesus' own life. "Indians looking at Jesus will spontaneously consider him an avatar. It is an Indian religio-cultural entry point to explore our experience of Jesus as a human-divine person." (106)

[31] Cécé Kolié, in his conclusion to "Jesus as Healer?" (in *Faces of Jesus* 128–50, at 148), affirms that the people will give Jesus such titles only because they will have actually experienced him as one who cures and liberates; that is, their reading of Jesus and view of him is eminently practical. The titles mentioned are all treated in *Faces of Jesus* as well as in Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*. Illustrative of the problematic character of these titles is the book by Ukachukwu Chris Manus, *Christ, The African King: New Testament Christology* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1993). Manus offers an interesting review of kingship in precolonial Africa, but the book finally demonstrates that Jesus' kingship presents a critique and an alternative to African kings. Manus is from Nigeria.

[32] Engelbert Mveng, "Impoverishment and Liberation: A Theological Approach," in *Paths of African Theology* 154–65. Mveng (d. 1995) was from Cameroon.

Bénézet Bujo declares that "there is no African tribe which does not revere its ancestors."[33] Of all the functional analogies, the role of ancestors is the most significant; it can serve as a test case for the validity of such a functional approach. John Pobee poses the question, "Why should an Akan [a tribe in Ghana] relate to Jesus of Nazareth, who does not belong to his clan, family, tribe, and nation?"[34] Indeed, ancestors are deeply embedded in the history and experience of a particular clan as founders and progenitors. An ancestor is one who has lived among his or her people, has experienced all the "progressive dynamics proper to initiation,"[35] has lived a good and edifying life and, above all, has been the source of life to others by physical generation. Finally, an ancestor is one who has died a good and noble death and is considered after death to be among "the living dead" as Mbiti calls them. As close to God, ancestors hold the first place as the mediators of life between the invisible world of spirits and the visible world of humans. They are exemplars, "founders of our societies and reconcilers of human beings,"[36] who guarantee the continuing flow of life among the dead, the living, and those yet to be born. Ancestors are reborn in future generations. They depend on the living to be "fed" through rituals of remembrance, but the decisive key for the living is the availability of assistance from the invisible world, especially in matters of subsistence and survival—for example, the very practical concern with having enough land to provide sufficient food.[37]

Ancestors, in a word, have a very practical and specific function. Ancestors, along with traditional healers and tribal chiefs, should be affirmed and respected for what they are, including positive values and negative limitations. In Africa, as in other cultures, the ancestors should be allowed to be just that, ancestors. Jesus, as a first-century Palestinian Jew, had his own natural ancestors. If he is to be "adopted" by Africans, as Bediako proposes, then that assumes his universality as risen Lord and Savior. Bujo's model of "Proto-Ancestor" (Jesus Christ as "the ultimate embodiment of all the virtues of the ancestors, the realization of the salvation for which they yearned") works only when he admits, as he does, that "only the African who has been converted and has faith will see in the Crucified Jesus the Proto-Ancestor with whom he or she can identify."[38]

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[33] Bénézet Bujo, *African Theology in Its Social Context*, trans. John O'Donohue (Nairobi: St. Paul, 1992) 120. Bujo is from the Democratic Republic of Congo.

[34] John S. Pobee, *Toward an African Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979) 81. Raymond Moloney, S.J., "African Christology," *Theological Studies* 48 (1987) 505–15, at 511, considers Bujo's notion of "Proto-Ancestor" the most promising among the Christologies of inculturation at that time.

[35] Anselme T. Sanon, "Jesus, Master of Initiation," in *Faces of Jesus* 85–102, at 93. He relies on the Letter to the Hebrews in this connection. Jesus cannot be a "master of initiation" unless he himself has gone through the initiatory experiences from birth to death. Sanon is from Burkina Faso.

[36] François Kabasélé, "Christ as Ancestor and Elder Brother," in ibid. 116–27, at 125. Kabasélé is from the Democratic Republic of Congo.

[37] "African religion is essentially a way of living in the visible sphere in relation with the invisible world." Patrick A. Kalilombe, "Spirituality in the African Perspective," in *Paths of African Theology* 115–35, at 115. Kalilombe is from Malawi.

On the other hand, is there another approach to Christology in Africa, another way of thinking about how Africans experience Jesus? As in Latin America, the initiative must come from the "base," the grassroots communities that orally and spontaneously give rise to a new expression of the faith. Bediako strongly asserts that academics and other professionals can aid this process but cannot replace it: "We ought to speak positively of oral, spontaneous, implicit or grassroots theology, as theology which comes from where the faith lives, in the life-situation of the community of faith. Accordingly, this 'grassroots' theology is an abiding element of all theology, and therefore one that it is essential for academic theology to be in touch with, to listen to, to share in, and to learn from, but never to replace."[39] Bediako appeals to the collection of prayers and praises, *Jesus of the Deep Forest*, by Afua Kuma of Ghana, an illiterate Christian woman, to illustrate "the true basis of African theology" as found in a widespread and living community of faith that is Christian and truly African. The Christology of these texts, however, is, as Bediako says, "very elevated" and raises the question: how can and do Africans arrive at this fuller acceptance of the Jesus experience?

In contrast to the missionary experience that often imposed alienating images of Jesus and in correspondence to the independent experience that affirms the truth and goodness of the African heritage—based especially on an imaginative rereading of the Bible interfaced with the "primal imagination" as distinctively religious[40]—one approach would be that suggested by Enyi Ben Udoh, namely, the gradual acceptance of Jesus into the African experience of family life. From a critical biblical perspective, the first and most fundamental experience is that of Jesus as fully and freely human. Yet, he comes from another culture and so is experienced initially as a stranger, a guest to whom Africans must first extend hospitality.[41] As such, he must first be perceived from within his own culture to manifest concerns corresponding to the ancestral heritage of Africa. These concerns include in his own personal life and growth initiation rites such as circumcision at his birth, baptism at the start of his mission, and burial at his death. Thus, Jesus is seen as one who grew in wisdom and in years and in favor with God and his fellow clan members (Lk 2:52). Moreover, he must be seen to show a special concern for and to participate in the customs and practices of the people such as marriage rites (Jn 2:1–10), funeral rites (Mk 5:35–43; Lk 7:11–15; Jn 11:33–44), sacred meals (Mk 14:12–25 par), and rites against evil spirits and for healing (passim). In all this, Jesus affirms *in principle* the cult of the ancestors. According to Bujo: "It is important to observe what was laid down by the ancestors. In repeating the words and deeds of the ancestors, however, people are shaping a new tradition, transcending and completing the old by uncovering its previously unsuspected depths."[42] If Jesus is perceived in this way, affirming the traditions but renewing them and moving them in new directions, then he will be perceived to have moved beyond guest to kin. This can happen only if the grassroots communities acknowledge that Jesus affirms and revitalizes the intense aspirations in Africa for kinship, life, land, and hospitality, as he did for his own people.[43]

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[38] Bujo, *African Theology* 81, 91. Bediako sees the power and existence of ancestral functions to depend upon the myth-making capacity of the community that produces them as a "projection" of social values and spiritual expectations into a transcendent realm. Jesus, on the other hand, is in another realm altogether: "His incarnation implies that he has achieved a far more profound identification with us in our humanity than the mere ethnic solidarity of lineage ancestors can ever do." Ancestors are merely humans who "have not demonstrated any power over death, the final enemy, [and] cannot be presumed to act in the way tradition ascribes to them." Hence, Jesus fulfills what ancestors cannot. Bediako, *Jesus in Africa* 30–31.

[39] Bediako, *Jesus in Africa* 17. See ibid. 8–15 for citations from and analysis of Afua Kuma's "spontaneous adoration."

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[40] Ibid. 85–96. Chapter 7, "The Primal Imagination and the Opportunity for a New Theological Idiom," is abridged from Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1995) 91–108. Bediako's thesis is that the "primal world-view," understood in the positive sense of what is deepest and best in the African heritage, offers another mode of articulating the Christian message somewhat parallel to Justin Martyr's use of the Greek Logos, because biblical words and concepts are no less indigenous. "Is 'Nana Yesu' less biblical because 'Nana' translates 'Ancestor' in English? Is not the question, rather, whether the experience of the reality and actuality of Jesus as intended in Christian affirmation, can inhabit the world of 'Nana' in the same way that it could inhabit the Greek world of 'Logos'?" (ibid. 78–79). See Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and in Modern Africa* (Oxford: Regnum, 1992, 1999).

[41] In Mark 6:8–11 Jesus gives three instructions to his disciples as he sends them out: travel light (no excess baggage, weapons, and so forth), accept the hospitality of the place where they arrive, and, if not accepted, move along peacefully with a sign of nonviolent protest. If the missionizing colonizers the world over had followed these simple instructions, the world would be a far different place.

[42] Bujo, *African Theology* 130. For a treatment of "the liberating dimension in traditional African society," see 17–73. The various rites done in union with the ancestors manifest the dominant preoccupation: "salvation from all that diminishes life" (27).

Israel considered herself to be God's own family, God's kin. Jesus affirmed this, but he called Israel to renew and revitalize that vision by including the excluded, the poor and marginalized, the tax-collectors and prostitutes, those who were labeled "sinners" and so excluded from the covenant table. If he sits at table within the family of Africa, he can do so only if the family is willing to overcome inordinate ethnic and tribal loyalties that are exclusive and create tension and strife. Such kinship is an ongoing process, as Udoh says, of relationality and participation, a gradual process of mutual knowledge: "Jesus' initiation puts him on equal footing with us, not only as completely human but also as one with whom we share a common history and destiny."[44]

Finally, for Jesus to emerge as leader (or Lord), he must have the people's mandate based on a long experience of kinship. Only then can Jesus become the host at the royal banquet of the reign of God who has transformed the people into guests, invited now to be envoys and interpreters of a new family (Mk 3:35). Udoh summarizes: "A guest Christology is, using the extended family dynamic, an organic and dialectical work. The one who comes to us as a guest in search of a home amongst us, gradually comes to be kin and, in the case of Christ, our Lord."[45] The place where this transformation primarily takes place is at festive meals. Jesus now extends the African virtue of hospitality to all Africans as "host" and so becomes truly African.[46] Whether this will take place depends on a long process of maturation at the grassroots, as Gutiérrez says of Latin America, so that Jesus is perceived to be "at home" in the African context as one who affirms and celebrates what is deepest and best in the African heritage, as he did in his mission to historic Israel, so that the people may experience true freedom.

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[43] Jesus' concern for justice in Israel had to take the shape of specific structural or institutional forms or it would have been ineffective. In my *Justice, Jesus, and the Jews* 84–95, I propose the renewal of structures centered around Torah, Land, and Kinship as inherently necessary to Jesus' proclamation of God's reign. This corresponds well to the African concern for specific and practical outcomes in their faith experience.

[44] Udoh, *Guest Christology* 243; see also 209–58 where he explores the "Christological import" of Jesus as *our* Guest, *our* Kin, and *our* Lord on 209–258. Earlier, Udoh proposed the "Kolanut Rite" of Nigeria as a way of celebrating Jesus' initiation (194–209). I am employing Udoh's basic schema but with my own take on its significance.

[45] Ibid. 256. Udoh also argues throughout his book that claims to Jesus' divinity are antithetical to African religious beliefs and cause "faith schizophrenia." In his concluding remarks, he cites a popular saying: "*God no bi mann and mann no bi god* is true and theologically sound" (266).

[46] Goergen, "Quest for the Christ of Africa," focuses on "host" as a compelling image that corresponds to the African ethos, especially of hospitality.

If this proposal is a valid way of reimagining the faith of Africa freed from colonial impositions, then such an approach should affect and indeed transform how faith imagines the world of Africa. I now proceed to the second, or subjective, sense proposed at the outset.

HOW JESUS HAS EXPERIENCED AFRICA

How faith imagines the world of Africa, especially prior to and independent of colonial and Arabic influence, is possible to ascertain only as an exercise of the "paschal imagination," that is, of how Jesus as risen transforms the whole of creation from beginning to end and so affirms and embraces all places, all times, and all peoples. At root, what the risen Jesus embodies is the fullness of human life and, as such, inseparable from the vision of God—as Irenaeus put it: "Gloria enim Dei homo vivens; vita autem hominis visio Dei" (For the glory of God is a living human being, but the life of a human being consists in beholding God [*Adversus haereses* 4.20.7]). The question of whether Africa is deeply religious or profoundly humanistic is a false dichotomy. But, as many authors note, her religiosity is anthropocentric. While God is transcendent and normally acts through intermediaries, God is at the same time immanent, that is, "a real and living force, close to the people."[47] The same God invoked by the ancestors is the God of the people of Israel and so of Jesus as well. As Bujo says: "It is not a question of replacing the God of the Africans but rather of enthroning the God of Jesus Christ, not as the rival of the God of the ancestors, but as identical with him."[48] Thus, Africans reject the notion of an evolutionary understanding of God from "primitive" to "fully known." The creative power of God has always been known and revealed in the African traditions as well as in Islam and Christianity. Dialogue among the three religious traditions, a necessity in Africa, could well revolve around the Word of God (Gen 1:3; Isa 55:10–11; Heb 4:12) as creative and revelatory, living and active, the presence and power of the one God in the particular experiences of each.

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[47] Samuel G. Kibicho, "The Continuity of the African Conception of God into and through Christianity: a Kikuyu Case-Study," in *Christianity in Independent Africa* 370–88, at 382. The main point is that the Kikuyu, whether Christian or not, continued to worship the *one God* (*Ngai*) who is the same God worshipped from ancient times. Kibicho is from Kenya. For a good description of the mores of the Kikuyu, see Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya: The Tribal Life of the Gikuyu*, ed. Josiah Mwangi Kariuki (1938; Nairobi: Heinemann, 1971). "The Gikuyu believe in one God, Ngai, the creator and giver of all things" (127). Ngai is addressed as "Mwene-Nyaga" (possessor of brightness) and lives in the sky but rests on "Kere-Nyaga" (mountain of brightness) now known as Mt. Kenya. On the African "primal world-view" as anthropocentric, that is this-worldly, as a matter of divine destiny that embraces the purpose and goal of the universe in a unified and interrelated cosmic system, see Bediako, *Jesus in Africa* 90–96, where he comments on the views of Alexis Kagame of Rwanda and Vincent Mulago of Congo. See also the work of John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969).

[48] Bujo, *African Theology* 16.

But if the creative power of God is already active, what does the risen Jesus bring into African life? I will consider this question under three rubrics: the recreation and transformation of human life; the celebration of life in the power of the Spirit; the community of life in a socially responsible Church.

The Recreation and Transformation of Human Life

John Taylor sets the scene: "The African myth does not tell of men driven from Paradise, but of God disappearing from the world."[49] Africans have traditionally recognized a transcendent God but normally have had no need of such a God in daily life, because the essentially this-worldly "closed circle" of being, that is, the self-sufficiency of the clan and its ancestors assures an afterlife. But Christ has broken into this closed circle. "He that should come, the Emmanuel of Africa's long dream, is, I believe, this God who has been eternally committed to, and involved in, the closed circle, even to the limit of self-extinction. . . . His is the lost Presence that the primal faith of man has always sensed."[50] The risen Christ comes to Africa as a personal presence (Emmanuel), not as one who imposes himself from outside but as one who takes up into himself what is deepest and truest in all human experience and transforms that into the fullness of human life as the second Adam, the new human being.[51]

The good news of Jesus carries two "surprises" for the African worldview, as Taylor says. The first is "the recognition that the solidarity of human life is related directly to God," who is no longer distant but intimately involved. The second is "the discovery of Adam" as the common ancestor of all of humankind who creates a human solidarity that transcends tribal and kinship ties. Taylor affirms that "the heart of the Gospel for Africa" is Christ as the Second Adam. "Here is the universal irony of

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[49] Taylor, *Christian Presence* 52.

[50] Ibid. 58–59.

[51] "God's grace introduces something new and distinct in the human condition, puts everything on a new basis, but only insofar as it includes and preserves and brings to fuller realization all that is truly constitutive of human nature, which in turn has 'sublated' the physical, chemical, botanical, and zoological dynamics of cosmic nature" (Cook, *Christology as Narrative Quest* 16; see also chapter 5 [188–94] on the Mexican-American experience, where I show that Our Lady of Guadalupe similarly takes up into herself and transforms the symbolic world of the Nahuatl-speaking people).

Man's situation, that what seems to be a search for God is in fact a flight. Everyman is in Adam, and Adam is hiding from God. And so the All-Present himself passed into the closed circle of the human family."[52] Jesus freely and completely identified himself with our human condition in all its stages and so, from within our human experience, called for a radical change of heart and mind, not to a different world but in Africa to the specific context and reality of family, clan, tribe, and larger community.

Taylor invokes the image of the "tender bridge" from Leopold Senghor of Senegal that joins death and life. Between the living who are happy to be alive and the dead who are powerful but fear to be forgotten is the deeply felt desire to preserve the human family on both sides. The early missionaries missed a golden opportunity when they failed to proclaim the good news that Christ has conquered the powers of evil and darkness (Eph 6:10–20), including potentially harmful ancestors, and that Christ has redeemed all the dead, including the ancestors, by entering into their realm and bringing them to newness of life (1 Pt 3:18–20; Rom 10:7; Eph 4:8–10). Thus the risen Christ embraces the legitimate concerns about human ancestors but also brings something new into the relationship with them. "The resurrection of Jesus Christ offers two immense innovations to African thought—the idea that there is *life* for the dead as well as power; and the idea that their present state is not the end of the story."[53] What Jesus said in reference to the God of Moses' ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who are his own ancestors, is true of all ancestors. "He is not God of the dead but of the living" (Mk 12:27; cp. Rom 14:9). Thus, the ancestors not only have power in the lives of the living but are living themselves, and their present state (*sasa*) does not simply recede into the past (*zamani*) but opens into a new and exciting future in which all can share. The risen Jesus affirms all that is true, authentic, and life-giving in the African experience. He has come for one purpose only, that "they [the Africans] may have life, and have it abundantly" (Jn 10:10).

The Celebration of Life in the Power of the Spirit

'Zulu Sofola invokes the African soul: "Christ must have an African soul, a soul that understands the realities of the African cosmos, before he can respond to our lyrics, dances, and customs."[54] That Jesus understands and affirms the African cosmos is a point I argued in the preceding section. If he has now found a "home" in Africa, then his presence should be celebrated in an African way, according to African tradition and custom. Kofi Appiah-Kubi underscores the appeal of the so-called "independent" or "indigenous" churches. "These are churches founded by Africans for Africans in our special African situations."[55] While these churches have ambiguities of their own and create problems for the older institutional churches, the reasons why the African-instituted churches are attractive cannot be ignored.[56] The first and most important reason is that they express their biblical and liturgical experiences in their own mother tongues.[57] Second, these relatively smaller communities respond to practical and concrete needs, such as healing, divining, prophesying, and visioning, that correspond to a "spiritual hunger" rather than to political, economic, or racial factors.[58] The gifts of the Holy Spirit are emphasized and expressed in the primary African modes of oral and visual communication, such as proverbs, myths, stories, songs, drums, dancing, clapping, painting, sculpture, and theater. Finally, these communities embody a closer interconnectedness on a scale small enough to evoke the traditional experiences of family, clan, and tribe. There is a sense of belonging in a church of "our own." Thus, questions of biblical interpretation, liturgical celebration, catechetical instruction, proclamations of God's word, and so on, must be engaged in an open and dialogical way that embraces the genius of the African soul and respects the diversity and uniqueness of religious experience. In another context, that of "multiple religious belonging," Peter Phan makes an important distinction: "Because of irreducible differences among religions, the goal of such dialogue is neither syncretism nor synthesis but rather symbiosis."[59]

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[52] Taylor, *Christian Presence* 82–83.

[53] Ibid. 112 (emphasis original).

[54] 'Zulu Sofola, "The Theater in the Search for African Authenticity," in *African Theology en Route* 126–36, at 136. Sofola is from Nigeria.

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[55] Kofi Appiah-Kubi, "Indigenous African Christian Churches: Signs of Authenticity," in ibid. 117–25, at 117. Appiah-Kubi is from Ghana. Other more contemporary terms for these churches are African "instituted" or "initiated" churches.

[56] For the complexities and ambiguities, see Harold W. Turner, "Patterns of Ministry and Structure within Independent Churches," in *Christianity in Independent Africa* 44–59. For a church that rejects African traditional religions yet incorporates "many features from the indigenous forms of worship," see Akin Omoyajowo, "The Aladura Churches in Nigeria since Independence," in ibid. 96–110. For a church that "draws heavily on traditional Akan religion and culture" (in Ghana) and yet considers itself to be "a divinely-established institution" in continuity with ancient Israel as a new dispensation, see Kofi A. Opoku, "Changes within Christianity: the case of the Musama Disco Christo Church," in ibid. 111–21.

[57] Sanneh contrasts the resistance to translation of the Qur'an in Islam with the use of the vernacular in Christianity, each of which has its own strengths. He proposes that the translation of the Christian Scriptures into the vernacular from the earliest missionary contacts acted as a catalyst for the later emergence and development of independent, biblically rooted, African Christian experience. See Lamin Sanneh, "Translatability in Islam and in Christianity in Africa: A Thematic Approach," in *Religion in Africa: Experience and Expression*, ed. Thomas D. Blakely, Walter E. A. van Beek, and Dennis L. Thomson (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1994) 22–45. For a fuller treatment, see Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, 2nd ed., rev. and exp. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2008).

[58] See Appiah-Kubi, "Indigenous African Christian Churches" 117–25. See also Zablon Nthamburi and Douglas Waruta, "Biblical Hermeneutics in African Instituted Churches" 40–57; and Nahashon Ndungu, "The Bible in an African Independent Church" 58–67, referring to the Akurinu Independent Church of the Gikuyu in Kenya—both essays in *The Bible in African Christianity: Essays in Biblical Theology*, ed. Hannah W. Kinoti and John M. Waliggo (Nairobi: Acton, 1997). For reference to more than one million African proverbs and other oral literature, see Joseph Healey, M.M., and Donald Sybertz, M.M., *Towards an African Narrative Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1996), whose purpose is to offer a basis for "a life-centered and experience-based catechesis" (15–16).

Underlying all this is the conviction that to be African today is to be "black." As the "black consciousness" movement from South Africa has it, this is not a matter of skin color but of an attitude of mind (conscientization) and a way of life. Celebrating blackness or "negritude," deeply rooted in the soil (memory) and growing to full flower (imagination),[60] is the way to liberation. Before considering the implications of black consciousness for social responsibility, however, it is important first to dwell on the esthetic experience of blackness, the sheer joy of celebrating with bodily movement, in the inimitable style of Africans, the cosmic unity of the invisible (spirit) and the visible (body). We humans have been created to contemplate the glory and beauty of God's creation. We do it in different ways according to our cultural heritage. The genius of African culture is that it makes no separation between the visible and the invisible. This esthetic experience connects readily with Roberto Goizueta's analysis of praxis in a Hispanic/Latino context. Goizueta interprets Aristotle's notion of praxis as "communal, aesthetic performance,"[61] that is, praxis is a matter of doing something for its own sake, because it is inherently valuable, rather than making something for an extrinsic purpose, which is poiesis. The fundamental form of praxis is the celebration of life itself which is "inherently communal." The sense of community as family is "the highest form of beauty." These reflections on Hispanic/Latino culture have profound resonance with the African experience. To celebrate the fullness of life as a communal relationship—"I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am"[62]—is truly African. In this sense, the risen Jesus is himself black as the revelation of God's glory and beauty in all of creation. To paraphrase the Song of Solomon 1:5: "I am black *and* beautiful." If the Christian churches in Africa, whatever the denominational affiliation, cannot embrace the esthetic experience of blackness as the experience of the risen Jesus, then they have nothing to say to the African soul.

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[59] Phan develops the statement further: "Syncretism and synthesis violate the unique identity of each religion. . . . By contrast, symbiosis is a movement in which members of different religious traditions live and work together in basic human communities (not just base Christian communities), especially in favor of and with the poor; in the process all are taught by the 'other' more about what is unique and significant in their own faith" (Peter C. Phan, *Being Religious Interreligiously: Asian Perspectives on Interfaith Dialogue* [Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2004] 76). He refers to the work of Aloysius Pieris, *Fire and Water: Basic Issues in Asian Buddhism and Christianity* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1996) 154–61. This perspective is applicable to the varieties of religious experience in Africa (especially to Christian dialogue with Islam) as well as to the established Christian churches (Anglicanism, Roman Catholicism, etc.) and the African-instituted or -initiated churches. Syncretism in the sense of people drawing upon and expressing themselves from within local experiences of language and culture is inevitable, but not in the sense of submerging and changing fundamental or core religious convictions, otherwise the possibility of true dialogue would be replaced by attempts at conversion.

[60] The imagery comes from Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino* (cited in n. 16 above); a poem *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* by Aimé Cesaire from Martinique, celebrating "my negritude" that "plunges into the red flesh of the earth" (cited in Mazrui, *The Africans* 73); and a novel by the Kenyan author Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Petals of Blood* (London: Heinemann, 1977), who sees hope for Africa in the continuing (since independence) struggle of the masses in both the rural areas and among the urban workers who make "full flowers" grow with "petals of blood" (294).

The Community of Life in a Socially Responsible Church

In contemporary African theology, I find that, while there is great interest in Christology (although no single work treats it as completely as Jon Sobrino's works), there is far greater concern for engaging ecclesiology in the sense of a practical and effective embodiment of the risen Jesus in today's world. Jesus' experience of Africa is not only mediated through the Spirit-inspired experiences of the people but precisely through the communities that profess to be his followers. Eboussi Boulaga maintains that "Jesus Christ is not come to abolish myth but to fulfill it."[63] In effect, the only Jesus we know is the one who is risen into the community and so is a "living model" of what the churches should be today. "Jesus bears a gift to the humanity of the future: his tradition, transmuted in and by his person. What Jesus did for his tradition, each of the rest of us must do, from wherever we are, for our own tradition."[64] Boulaga affirms the two factors I am treating, namely, the esthetic experience of imaginative participation in story and song on the popular level and "a Christian existence that will do justice to the demands of an ethic of responsibility in history."[65]

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[61] Roberto S. Goizueta, "Rediscovering Praxis: The Significance of U.S. Hispanic Experience for Theological Method," in *We Are a People! Initiatives in Hispanic American Theology*, ed. Roberto S. Goizueta (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 51–77, at 57, 67, as employed in Cook, *Christology as Narrative Quest* 181–82.

[62] Mbiti, *African Religions* 108–9.

[63] F. Eboussi Boulaga, *Christianity without Fetishes: An African Critique and Recapture of Christianity,* trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1984) 130. Boulaga is from Cameroon.

[64] Ibid. 160.

However one views the actuality of the risen Jesus, his presence is surely mediated through the power of the Spirit in those churches that are socially responsible, but as Martey puts it, "It is only a liberated church that can liberate."[66] Liberation means freedom from all extrinsic influences that dominate and alienate, and freedom for an authentic African relationship with God, ancestors, spirits, fellow humans, those yet to be born, and the whole of creation.[67] Every church that professes to be Christian must be a "listening church" and a socially responsible church. Both involve imaginative participation in an African way of life for all that is based on what is deepest and best in African religion. Elochukwu Uzukwu proposes a "listening church" with "large ears" modeled on the African chief who must take time to listen to all the voices concerned about an issue before he utters the "last word." To engage in this obviously time-consuming conversation is known as "African palaver."[68] Uzukwu elaborates:

> The focus for the emergence of this new kind of living, in my view and in the view of the authoritative teaching of African bishops and the faithful, is the creation of Small Christian Communities. In the SCCs, at the grassroots level where the initiative belongs to the Spirit of Jesus, the prophetic Word is heard, the community is fully challenged, the contextual problems are fully addressed. This miniature church, which is organized according to the listening model of African tradition, realizes that she does not exist for herself but for the Kingdom, for the transformation of the world.[69]

A. E. Orobator employs the model of church as family that emerged from the 1994 African Synod of Bishops (held in Rome). The African family is a "heuristic paradigm" that can offer insights into a renewed vision of church. His basic thesis, given an acute awareness of the social context of Africa, is "the Church-as-family at the service of society embodies a community of solidarity at the service of life."[70] This thesis assumes three essential factors. First, "only a church that remains in constant touch with the *real life situation* of Africans can become the church-as-family at the service of society."[71] Second, "ordinarily, the family creates the place par excellence for attaining, protecting, and propagating the fullness of life."[72] This second thesis is grounded in Laurenti Magesa's analysis of African religion as the moral traditions of abundant life. That is, in the light of African traditions of preserving and promoting life, the vital power of the universe, the church must always be at the service of life. Third, as a community of solidarity the church must promote and embody the interdependence and interconnectedness of the whole of creation with each and every human person. The consequent concern for the common good entails reciprocal rights and obligations.[73]

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[65] Ibid. 217.

[66] Martey, *African Theology* 146. This is a major theme in the writings of Éla.

[67] Laurenti Magesa provides an excellent review of African traditions and practices whose basic intention is "preserving the vital power of the universe" (*African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* [Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1997] 148, and throughout). "The relationships of the vital forces in the universe constitute the complex of African Religion; the 'management' of these forces so that they promote the abundance of human life and not diminish it constitutes the sum of Africa's religious activity" (285–86). He maintains that African Religion (singular) is one of the great world religions and should be in dialogue with other world religions, such as Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and so forth. Hence, in a subsequent volume, *Anatomy of Inculturation: Transforming the Church in Africa* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2004), Magesa attempts "to correlate critically the religiosity original to the African people with the Christian forms of spirituality they have received through the centuries" (3). Magesa is from Tanzania.

[68] Elochukwu E. Uzukwu, *A Listening Church: Autonomy and Communion in African Churches* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1996) 127–28. Uzukwu is from Nigeria.

[69] Ibid. 150.

The risen Jesus experiences Africa in her authentic culture, that web of meanings and values that informs her way of life and comes to expression in her stories, her celebrations of life, and her religious symbols. Cultures are composite with some elements unique and others common across cultures. Every culture can and must learn from other cultures. Cultures can be romanticized as invariably good, holy, and valuable and so can fail to be open to encounter with other cultures. However, acculturation, the meeting of diverse cultures, is unavoidably necessary in our contemporary world of increasing global consciousness and interdependence.[74] An inculturated way of life, then, must bring a sense of freedom in that it enables personal and communal self-transcendence in relation to others and to God. The possibility of such self-transcendence is the risen Jesus' gift to Africa as host at the banquet of God's reign.

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[70] A. E. Orobator, S.J., *The Church as Family: African Ecclesiology in Its Social Context* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2000) 13, 138.

[71] Ibid. 74 (emphasis original). Orobator develops "three case studies" from Nigeria, Kenya, and South Africa (76–106), moving from "social passivism and numbing resignation" (87) in Nigeria to increasing action from Kenya to South Africa.

[72] Ibid. 151.

[73] Charles Villa-Vicencio (from South Africa) develops a theology of reconstruction as both "*contextually responsible*" and "*socially transcendent.*" Hence, he proposes "middle-axioms" that are "an attempt to state what the gospel requires at a given time in a given place, without ignoring its ultimate ethical demands on humankind." He proposes a continuing social renewal that needs concrete proposals in the immediate situation with regard to law-making and human rights, but that is evolving and constantly being reshaped by the eschatological vision of the gospel (*A Theology of Reconstruction: Nation-Building and Human Rights* [New York: Cambridge University, 1992] 281, emphasis original). Orobator employs his insights in his chapter on "practical means," in *The Church as Family* 107–36.

[74] Stephan P. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1992), as employed in Cook, *Christology as Narrative Quest* 14–16. Sanneh uses "inculturation" "only in the limited sense of critical indigenous appropriation as distinct from the unheeding imposition of foreign institutions or ideas" (Sanneh, *Disciples* 290 n. 34).

CONCLUSION

Jean-Marc Éla affirms that "Christianity must try to liberate the gospel from all forms of captivity, including the forces of inertia prevailing in Africa."[75] Such liberation goes back to the originating ground of the good news and to those who heard and received it. Jesus proclaimed good news to the poor and marginalized and indeed it was the "tax-collectors and prostitutes" who were entering the kingdom (Mt 21:31). Paul proclaimed good news to the Gentiles, and indeed it was the "foolish," the "low and despised in the world" who heard "the word of the cross" (1 Cor 1:17–18, 25–29). Do Christians today proclaim good news to a people being crucified, as Éla says of Africa? to African women who are "literally rooted to the soil and so to religion," as Mercy Amba Oduyoye puts it?[76] or to a black humanity over against white domination and oppression, as Simon Maimela describes it?[77]

This article has endeavored to reflect many voices from contemporary African theology. It has tried neither to write a Christology for Africa nor to offer a comprehensive review of current authors. Rather, it has proposed a possible framework for discussion derived from the particular viewpoints of a selection of African authors. It is intended both to encourage dialogue among African theologians themselves about the issues that concern them (as I have perceived these issues in my own reading of the situation) and to invite "outside observers" to engage these same issues both with Africans and among themselves. All theology, if it is valid, is practical; that is, it touches and transforms the lives of people at all levels. Authentic theology emerges from the concrete commitments of many people over long periods of time. It must be grounded in the lived experiences of the people at the grassroots—whose voices must be heard, as Gutiérrez says, but it must also come to expression through the vision and genius of one or more persons who can feel and express the indigenous experience and instinctive pulse of the people. In Africa, as in Latin America, an indigenous Christology entails a long process of maturation at the base, but it also includes the mediating institutions of church and society that seek continuing social renewal of legal systems in order to reflect basic human rights. Both community building and nation building are integral to a theology that liberates.

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[75] Jean-Marc Éla, "Christianity and Liberation in Africa," in *Paths of African Theology* 136–53, at 150.

[76] Mercy Amba Oduyoye, "Feminist Theology in an African Perspective," in ibid. 166–81, at 173.

[77] Simon S. Maimela, "Black Theology of Liberation," in ibid. 182–95, at 182. Maimela is from South Africa.

I do not believe that a Christology that is truly indigenous to either Latin America or Africa (or Asia?) has yet emerged, but it must do so lest Jesus remain forever the stranger who visits from the outside but never lives within the unique and irreplaceable experience of the people. The voice we all must hear—African, Asian, European, Latin American, and Euro-American— if we hear anything at all, is that of a poor woman of color, who celebrates her humanity precisely in her blackness. The "dream" of Mercy Amba Oduyoye is that the women of Africa will create a new myth of interconnectedness and will be the agents of true liberation. These women are the daughters of Anowa, as Oduyoye writes: "It is . . . my hope that this work will bear the nature of a true African child, a daughter of Anowa, the mythical woman, prophet, and priest whose life of daring, suffering, and determination is reflected in the continent of Africa. It is this that leads me to name Anowa Africa's ancestress."[78]

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[78] Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa* 6.