

**Contextualizing the Christ-Event: A Christological  
Study of the Interpretations and Appropriations of  
Jesus Christ in Nigerian Christianity**

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## **Declaration**

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been presented to any other academic institution other than the University of Edinburgh to which it is submitted for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. I also declare that the entire thesis is the result of my own research.

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## Abstract

In Nigerian Christianity, many theologians and Christians who do not have any formal theological training perceive Jesus Christ primarily as a solution to the problems that confront humanity. As a solution, they expect Jesus Christ to inspire some theological discourses that will deconstruct and overthrow Western theological hegemony, to rekindle the quest to preserve some indigenous traditions, to liberate the oppressed, poor and powerless, to expose the oppressors and all evildoers, to liberate and protect people from the attacks of the malevolent spirits, and to save people from being eternally separated from God. But what these solution-oriented Christologies have overlooked is that the Christ-Event is a paradox for it creates simultaneously a problem and a solution for the Christian community which confesses that God has revealed God's self in this event. The contextual Christology that I develop in this study probes the theological, christological and anthropological consequences of this claim for interpreting and appropriating Jesus Christ in the Nigerian contexts. To achieve this task, I will converse with and critique some selected 'constructive Christologies' of some key theologians and some 'grassroots Christologies' that have been informed by social conditions, indigenous worldview, encounter with some versions of Christianity propagated by the West, and some existential issues that confront many Christians.

However we choose to interpret and appropriate Jesus the Christ in our contexts, he remains simultaneously a question and an answer to the theological, cultural, religious, anthropological, political and socio-economic issues that challenge us. Viewed from this perspective, I will argue that the Christ-Event upsets, unsettles, critiques, and reshapes the solution-oriented Christologies of Nigerian Christianity. I will explore this claim within the circumference of the overarching thesis of this study; namely, as both a question and an answer, Jesus Christ confronts us as a 'revealer' of divinity and humanity. Thus, he mediates and interprets divinity and humanity for the purpose of enacting and sustaining a relationship between God and human beings.

## Dedication

*To five people who are dear to my heart...*

Adamma Rita Ezigbo, my wife

Rev. Alfred (ISLO) and Mrs. Love Ezigbo, my parents

John Semke and Debbie Cornett, my great friends

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## Abbreviations

AACC	All African Conference of Churches
AICs	African Indigenous (or Independent) Churches
<i>AFER</i>	African Ecclesiastical Review
CPM	Christian Pentecostal Mission
EAEP	East African Educational Publishers
ECWA	Evangelical Church of West Africa
EATWOT	Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians
<i>IJST</i>	International Journal of Systematic Theology
<i>NASR</i>	Nigerian Association for the Study of Religions

## INTRODUCTION

### A. Historical Contexts of Christological Discourse in Nigeria and Sub-Saharan Africa

The early ecumenical councils of the classical Christian church through painful processes – controversies, fierce debates, physical abuse, and voting – created what can be referred to as a ‘standard resilient circumference’ within which many Christian theologians have explored the meaning and significance of Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup> Since the Chalcedonian Council, many theologians have wrestled rigorously with the issue of how to hold in tension the claim that Jesus Christ is both divine and human and how to explain this highly troubling christological assertion and confession.<sup>2</sup> The interpretations, reactions, and appropriations of this christological claim have varied depending on the contexts of different Christian communities. For too long, however, many North American and European theologians have hijacked christological discourses and have (consciously or unconsciously) constituted a Western ‘christological hegemony’.<sup>3</sup> But with the influence of postmodernity infiltrating almost unrestrained into theological and christological discourses, forcing many theologians to be more suspicious of metanarratives, many non-Western theologians now seek for ways to dismantle what seems to be the ‘imperialist’ empire of Western Christologies. In what follows, I will explore how some Nigerian and other African theologians have reacted against Western Christologies and how they have proceeded to explain the Christ-Event to benefit their local contexts.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1958); Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). For a study on the Christologies of the early Christian councils by a Nigerian theologian, see Uchenna A. Ezech, *Jesus Christ the Ancestor: An African Contextual Christology in the Light of the Major Dogmatic Christological Definitions of the Church from the Council of Nicea (325) to Chalcedon (451)* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> In this study, the expressions and names ‘Jesus the Christ’, ‘Jesus Christ’, ‘Christ’, ‘Jesus’ are used interchangeably with no theological distinction intended.

<sup>3</sup> The word ‘Western’ in this study refers to North America and Europe.

<sup>4</sup> The expression ‘Christ-Event’ is used in this study to refer to the birth, life, ministry, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ.

## 1. Discovering the ‘Missing Gene’: Awareness of the Import of African Pre-Christian Worldviews and African Identity for Contextual Christology

Nigerian contextual Christologies are weaved together into a complex political, cultural, economic and religious web. A helpful way to unpack this complexity is to locate it within the broader historical context of the emergence of what has been described (for lack of a better expression) as ‘African theology’.<sup>5</sup> Since the focus of this study is a systematic/contextual examination of some Nigerian Christians’ (both theologians and non-theologians) interpretations of the Christ-Event, and not an historical examination, I will not discuss extensively the history of Nigerian and African Christologies. But it is important to note that some African theologians began to wake up from their theological slumber in the 1950s to raise some questions that concerned their dual identities: they wrestled with the issue of the *African and Christian* heritages. And since the 1950s, many African theologians have continued to seek to discover some novel and relevant ways to express the Christ-Event in their contexts.<sup>6</sup> Boosted by the rise of *pan-Africanism* and nationalism, the complex ideologies promoted by Nnamdi Azikiwe (Nigerian), Kwame Nkrumah (Ghanaian) and others, which aimed to promote the oneness of African peoples, to empower them to fight against Western imperialism and domination, and to encourage them to promote their cultural heritage,<sup>7</sup> some

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<sup>5</sup> Some contemporary African theologians have argued that the existing theological discussions in Africa cannot be described in the singular due to the variety of issues that inform the discussions. Thus, they speak of ‘African theologies’ and not ‘African theology’. The same principle is also applied to christological discourses in Africa. See Charles Nyamiti, “Contemporary African Christologies: Assessment and Practical Suggestions,” in *Paths of African Theology*, ed. Rosino Gibellini (London: SCM Press, 1994), 62-77.

<sup>6</sup> Scholars of Christianity in Africa disagree on who pioneered African theology, and what the expression ‘African theology’ means. Whilst John Parratt is willing to associate ‘African theology’ with Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther and Holy Johnson, Bénézet Bujo sees Placide Tempels as the father of African theology. Bujo also sees Mulago’s 1955 dissertation titled “Life Unity Among the Bashi, Banyarwanda and Barundi” as a template of an ‘African Theology’. See Bujo, *African Theology in Its Social Context*, translated by John O’Donohue (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992), 58; John Parratt, *Reinventing Christianity: African Theology Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 5, 10. John Mbiti sees Harry Sawyerr as the first African theologian “to publish a substantial study in the area of indigenous theology”. John S. Mbiti, *New Testament Eschatology in African Background: A Study of the Encounter between New Testament Theology and African Traditional Concepts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 187.

<sup>7</sup> Kwame Nkrumah, *Africa Must Unite* (London: Heinemann, 1963); Nkrumah, *Neo-colonialism: The Last State of Imperialism* (London: Nelson, 1965); Nnamdi Azikiwe, “The Future of Pan-Africanism,” in *Ideologies of Liberation in Black Africa, 1856-1970: Documents on Modern African Political Thought from the Colonial Times to the Present*, ed. J. Ayo Langley (London:

theologians began to construct contextual theologies that promoted and defended the dignity of Africans in “a world that denigrated black humanity”.<sup>8</sup> The 1955 conference organized by the Christian Council of Gold Coast (in Accra, Ghana), which was titled ‘Christianity and African Culture’, provided a platform for some Anglophone African theologians such as C. Baëta to present arguments for the co-existence of African indigenous religions and Christianity.<sup>9</sup> A year later, in 1956, some Francophone theologians including Vincent Mulago and Engelbert Mveng began to launch some attacks against the Europeanization of African Christianity.<sup>10</sup> Thus, from the 1960s through the mid 1970s there were steady streams of theological articles, treatises and books written by African theologians to defend the possibility of engaging in a Christian theological discourse from an African vantage point. Most of these theologians were also very critical of the relevance of Western-shaped theologies and Christologies for Africa.<sup>11</sup>

The Nigerian theologian, Bolaji Idowu, in 1969 summarized what can be considered the underlying task of African theology.

We seek, in effect, to discover in what way the Christian faith could best be presented, interpreted, and inculcated in Africa so that Africans will hear God in Jesus Christ addressing Himself immediately to them in their own native situation and particular circumstances.<sup>12</sup>

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Collings, 1979, 302-327; Adrian Hastings, *A Historical of African Christianity 1950-1975* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 14-16.

<sup>8</sup> Emmanuel Martey, *African Theology: Inculturation and Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993), 7.

<sup>9</sup> See C. G. Baëta, ed. *Christianity and African Culture* (Accra: 1955). In 1958, a similar conference took place in Ibadan, Nigeria. According to Uchenna Ezech, the conference led to the formation and inauguration of All Africa Council of Churches (AACC) in Kampala in 1963. Ezech, *Jesus Christ the Ancestor*, 104-107.

<sup>10</sup> John Baur, *2000 Years of Christianity in Africa: An African History 62-1992* (Nairobi: Paulines, 1994), 291.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> E. Bolaji Idowu, “Introduction,” in *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs*, ed. Kwesi. A. Dickson and Paul Ellingworth (London: Lutterworth Press, 1969), 16. Concerned with the plurality and differences of the cultures of Africa, Aylward Shorter argues that an “African Christian Theology... will correspond to a culturally fragmented Africa, albeit with many chains of possible comparison and actual, historical interaction”. Aylward Shorter, *African Christian Theology – Adaptation or Incarnation?* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1977), 27.

Idowu's summation is, of course, broad for it does not specify exactly what he means by "African situation and particular circumstances". But at the time he was writing, some theologians were well aware of the particular situations and circumstances to which he was referring: the dehumanized, disgraced, oppressed, and colonized conditions of African peoples which were the consequences of their contact with Western slave traders, colonialists and missionaries. Almost a decade later after Idowu's summation, some African theologians who convened in Ghana signed a christological communiqué on the task of African theology. The communiqué's description of the task of theology in some ways corresponds with Idowu's understanding of the task of theology.

African theology must reject ...the prefabricated ideas of North Atlantic theology by defining itself according to the struggles of the people in their resistance against the structures of domination. Our task as theologians is to create a theology that arises from and is accountable to African people.<sup>13</sup>

Kwame Bediako, one of the leading Ghanaian theologians, has in most of his writings explored the fragmented identity of African peoples after they encountered the West.<sup>14</sup> He accuses many Western slave traders, colonizers and missionaries for collaborating to promote the "general European *Afrikaanschauung*" – the Western estimation of Africans as "savage, ignorant and superstitious".<sup>15</sup> For Bediako and many other theologians who were dissatisfied with some Westerners' derogatory estimation of the cultures, traditions, and personality of Africans, the primary task of an African theologian is to deconstruct Western colonialists' and missionaries' perceptions of Africans with the intent to rediscover (and rescue) the identity and heritage of Africa.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> "Final Communiqué," in *African Theology en route: Papers from the Pan-African Conference of Third World Theologians, December 17-23, 1977*, Accra, Ghana, ed. Kofi Appiah-Kubi and Sergio Torres (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979), 193.

<sup>14</sup> Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and in Modern Africa* (Oxford: Regnum, 1992).

<sup>15</sup> Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), 6.

<sup>16</sup> It is important to note that the attitudes the Western missionaries in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries exhibited toward African peoples were ambivalent. Some of the missionaries, perhaps due to their theological anthropology, viewed and treated the people of Africa in a more respected manner than some of their Western colleagues who primarily construed and treated them as sub-humans. I am indebted to T. Jack Thompson for discovering this ambivalence in some Western missionaries' estimations of African peoples. It is equally important to note that some

Within the Christian theological circle, the quest to criticize the presence of Westerners in Africa (both in the political and ecclesial arenas) inspired some theologians to interpret and appropriate God and Jesus Christ intelligibly, culturally, and contemporarily to confront the dehumanized and oppressive conditions of many African peoples. Some of the theologians started to interpret and explain Jesus Christ as the one who identified with the oppressive conditions under which most African peoples lived. The corollary of these theological explorations is the development of numerous christological and theological typologies. But it was not until the 1970s that constructive christological discourse began to find its way in the theological works of African theologians.<sup>17</sup> By the early 1990s, christological discourse flourished so much that Charles Nyamiti, a Tanzanian theologian, in 1994 wrote: “Christology is undoubtedly the most advanced subject in African theology today”.<sup>18</sup> Rightly so, Christology has since the 1990s become the most developed topic in sub-Saharan Africa.

Interestingly, the emergence of constructive African contextual Christology or Christologies is indebted to the writings of some Western missionaries, particularly the British missionary John V. Taylor. In the early 1950s, some Western historians of religions and anthropologists began to be highly suspicious of the negative attitude of some Western missionaries towards the indigenous religions of Africa. The writings of Edwin Smith and Geoffrey Parrinder became very popular among some African theologians who considered the indigenous religions to be compatible with Christianity. Parrinder, like Smith, argued that Christianity functions as a sort of ‘fulfillment’ to the religious aspirations of the indigenous religions.<sup>19</sup>

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African theologians have viewed Western missionaries differently. Whilst some are highly critical of the missionaries and have promoted anti-missionary literature, others have continued to see the Western missionary presence in Africa from an ambivalent perspective. See Parratt, *Reinventing Christianity*, 7-13.

<sup>17</sup> In 1972, the Kenyan theologian, John Mbiti, observed: “African concepts of Christology do not exist”. What Mbiti seems to be saying is that at the time African theologians have not started to engage critically with the Christ-Event from the perspective of the indigenous worldviews of Africa. See John S. Mbiti, “Some African Concepts of Christology,” in *Christ and the Younger Churches: Theological Contributions from Asia, Africa and Latin America*, ed. Georg F. Vicedom (London: SPCK, 1972), 51.

<sup>18</sup> Nyamiti, “Contemporary African Christologies,” 70.

<sup>19</sup> See chapter one for an examination of the ‘fulfillment presupposition’.

The old attitude of missionaries was usually destructive; the indigenous religion was not studied, it was not thought to have any divine revelation or inspiration, and little effort was made to use any part of it as a basis for fuller teaching. But it is not necessary to deny that the old religion both taught some truths and produced some spiritual values and living. There was some general revelation of the God who has never left Himself without witness, even if it is now superseded by the full and unique revelation of Jesus Christ.<sup>20</sup>

But it is John Taylor's writing that has stimulated some contextual christological discussions among many African theologians since the mid twentieth century.<sup>21</sup> In 1963, Taylor posed a series of questions that summarized provokingly the christological condition (created by most Western Christian missionaries) within which African Christians experienced and expressed the Christ-Event.<sup>22</sup> In *The Primal Vision: Christian Presence amid African Religion*, Taylor asked the following questions that triggered off a *paradigm shift* in Jesus-talk among African theologians.

Christ has been presented as the answer to the questions a white man would ask, the solution to the needs that Western man would feel, the Saviour of the world of the European world-view, the object of 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? If he came into the world of African cosmology to redeem Man as Africans understand him, would he be recognizable to the rest of the Church Universal?<sup>23</sup>

These questions have continued to inspire many Nigerian and other African theologians to undertake constructive Christologies from a contextual spectrum. I will refer to these questions in this study as the *Taylorian christological*

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<sup>20</sup> G. Parrinder, "Theistic Beliefs of the Yoruba and the Ewe Peoples of West Africa," in *African Ideas of God: A Symposium*, ed. Edwin W. Smith (London: Edinburgh House Press, 1950), 239.

<sup>21</sup> See Kwame Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa: History and Experience* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2004); Deji Ayegboyin, "Li Oruko Jesu: Aladura Grass-root Christology," *Journal of African Christian Thought* 8, no. 1 (June 2005): 11-21; Judith M. Bahemuka, "The Hidden Christ in African Traditional Religion," in *Jesus in African Christianity: Experimentation and Diversity in African Christology*, ed. J. N. K. Mugambi and Laurenti Magesa (Nairobi: African Initiatives, 1989), 1-15; Diane B. Stinton, *Jesus of Africa: Voices of Contemporary African Christology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2004); Mbiti, *New Testament Eschatology in African Background*, 1.

<sup>22</sup> In the same year, John Mbiti completed his doctoral dissertation at the University of Cambridge. Unsurprisingly, he referenced Taylor's writing. The dissertation has been published by the Oxford University Press as the *New Testament Eschatology in African Background: A Study of the Encounter between New Testament Theology and African Traditional Concepts*.

<sup>23</sup> John V. Taylor, *The Primal Vision: Christian Presence amid African Religion* (London: SCM Press, 1963), 16.

*presupposition*. Reacting to the *Taylorian christological presupposition*, particularly, Taylor's claim that many Western missionaries presented Jesus Christ as the answer to the questions the Western peoples were asking, Ukachukwu Chris Manus, a Nigerian theologian, contends: "For over a century of missionary work and intensive evangelization, this image of Christ had been planted in Africa".<sup>24</sup> Manus goes on to argue that many Western missionaries failed to present Jesus Christ in the ways that were recognizable to many African peoples.<sup>25</sup>

The theologians who adopt the *Taylorian christological presupposition* seek, among many other things, to construct the Christologies that are designed to undo Western theological hegemony and imperialism, and to rediscover the import of the indigenous worldviews for doing contextual theologies and Christologies. The Tanzanian theologian, Andrea Ng'Weshemi, observes:

African theology comes out of a search for freedom from the domination and imperialism of western theology, which not only has been dumb on the African experiential reality, but also has perpetuated the disorientation and oppression of African people, and the expansionist agenda and attitude of the West.<sup>26</sup>

The Kenyan theologian, J. N. K. Mugambi, in *From Liberation to Reconstruction* essentially says the same thing. He notes that liberation has been the dominant theme in African Christian theology, and that the primary issue has been how

African Christians can be liberated from domination by the missionary legacy on which they have been nurtured, to enable them participate as full members of the international community.<sup>27</sup>

Like the majority of African theologians, Mugambi is highly suspicious of the ways some Western missionaries in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries presented the gospel message in Africa. I will now turn to examine how the majority of African contextual theologians have understood and presented the Missionary Christology.

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<sup>24</sup> See Ukachukwu Chris Manus, *Christ the African King: New Testament Christology* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1993), 119.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>26</sup> Andrea M. Ng'Weshemi, *Rediscovering the Human: The Quest for a Christo-Theological Anthropology in Africa* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2002), 82.

<sup>27</sup> J. N. K. Mugambi, *From Liberation to Reconstruction: African Christian Theology After the Cold War* (Nairobi: EAEP, 1995), 23.

## 2. Beyond Western Christology: African Theologians' Articulation and Estimation of 'Missionary Christology'

The locution 'Missionary Christology', as used in this study, refers to what the majority of African theologians believe to be the predominant understandings and portrayals of Jesus Christ by most Western missionaries who worked in Africa in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Many of these theologians have construed the Missionary Christology as suppressive and oppressive. Douglas Waruta is a representative of the theologians who are seeking to demonstrate to their Western peers and African peoples that such theologians have the 'right' to construct the Christologies that can fit more properly into their contexts. He writes,

I contend that Africans have every right to formulate their own Christology, their own response to who Jesus is to them. Such response should reflect their consciousness as to who the Messiah really is.<sup>28</sup>

It is important to keep in mind that the activities of the Western missionaries and their estimations of African peoples are ambivalent, as I have already argued. Therefore, it is misleading to speak of the Missionary Christology as a congruent unit. We must recognize that the missionaries did not write books on Christology for their converts. Therefore, the theologian who undertakes the task of articulating the structure and content of the Missionary Christology will encounter the following difficulties. First, since the missionaries did not write a constructive Christology, it is extremely difficult to know if the theologians who charge them with the crimes of 'non-contextualization' and insensitivity to the indigenous cultures and religions have correctly judged them. Even when we depend on the reports, sermons and journals of the missionaries, it is vital to note that the problem with depending on such material is that they were never intended to be theological writings or treatises and as such cannot represent a systematic view of the missionaries on the person and work of Jesus Christ.<sup>29</sup> Second, the theologian would need to depend on the 'christological stories' of some Christian converts who lived under the tutelage of the missionaries. The danger is that some of the stories seem to have been preserved in

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<sup>28</sup> Douglas W. Waruta, "Who is Jesus Christ for African Today? Prophet, Priest and Potentate," in *Faces of Jesus in Africa*, ed., Robert J. Schreiter (London: SCM Press, 1992), 53.

<sup>29</sup> We should also keep in mind that the missionaries came from different missionary agencies which were connected with some church denominations that had different theological and christological views.

distorted forms in the traditions of the mission churches.<sup>30</sup> Thus, the theologian will face the ‘obstacle of misrepresentation’. This is because it is possible that some Christian converts unintentionally misinterpreted the Christology of the missionaries due to language problems,<sup>31</sup> or intentionally did so with the intent to castigate the missionaries whom they already saw as posing serious threats to their indigenous traditions and customs.<sup>32</sup> In light of these difficulties, it is important for the theologian that wants to reconstruct the Missionary Christology to examine the following questions: What kind of images of Jesus did the missionaries preach and embody? And what are the ideologies and contexts that shaped them? In what follows I will explore the images of Jesus Christ that existed in the Missionary Christology.

#### **a. The ‘Enlightened Jesus’: Missionary Christology and the Intellectual Worldview of the Missionaries**

The Nigerian theologian and ethicist, Yusufu Turaki, once wrote that a “mixture of Western Christian worldview was what [the missionaries] transmitted to Africa”.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, Ogbu Kalu, a prominent Nigerian church historian, has argued that the “conflict with African cultures occurred precisely because missionaries came with a different worldview”.<sup>34</sup> But what is it that constitutes the worldviews of the missionaries? It must include socio-political, historical, theological, doctrinal, and

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<sup>30</sup> Mission Churches are the churches some Western missionaries established.

<sup>31</sup> Language barrier could be a major reason. Africans who learned under the missionaries undoubtedly had difficulty understanding their language. The missionaries too would have experienced a great difficulty in understanding the languages of Africans. However, the translation of the Bible into some African vernaculars, initiated by some missionaries, gave African converts the opportunity to hear the message of Jesus in their own languages. See Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002), 105-125, 157-164.

<sup>32</sup> An excellent book that describes the disintegration of the cultures and traditions of the Nigerian people when they encountered the missionaries is Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (London: Heinemann, 1958).

<sup>33</sup> Yusufu Turaki, *The Unique Christ for Salvation: The Challenge of the Non-Christian Religions and Cultures* (Nairobi: International Bible Society of Africa, 2001), 86.

<sup>34</sup> Ogbu U. Kalu, “Church Presence in Africa: A Historical Analysis of the Evangelization Process,” in *African Theology en route: Papers from the Pan-African Conference of Third World Theologians, December 17-23, 1977*, Accra, Ghana, ed. Kofi Appiah-Kubi and Sergio Torres (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979), 19.

philosophical factors. Kalu provides a helpful summary of what many African scholars refer to as the ‘Western worldview’ of the missionaries. He writes,

Reasons for the nineteenth-century revival of the missionary enterprise include scientific discoveries, voyages of exploration, new and aggressive mercantilist economic theories, scientific theories of racism, and competition for plantation of colonies, as well as humanitarianism, anti-slavery movements, resettlement of liberated slaves, and the desire to convert souls allegedly headed for perdition.<sup>35</sup>

My concern here is the intellectual ideology of the missionaries, a factor many Nigerian theologians have ignored. The intellectual ideology of the missionaries in some ways functioned as a hub around which most of the other factors revolved.

Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* has described the intellectual mindset that undergirded scholarship in the eighteenth century Europe and North America. Central to this intellectual mindset is

the belief that mankind formed a marvellous, almost symphonic whole whose progress and formations...could be studied exclusively as a concerted and secular historical experience, not as an exemplification of the divine.<sup>36</sup>

This mindset is principally what underscores the project of the Enlightenment that began with the works of individuals such as Francis Bacon (1561-1626), and René Descartes (1596-1650).<sup>37</sup> For many advocates of the Enlightenment, the West has for too long lived under the shackles and shadows of religious beliefs or, as Alvin Plantinga puts it, under “the religious and intellectual ferment generated (in part) by the Reformation....”<sup>38</sup> But a new era is en route, contended the proponents of the Enlightenment. They compelled some Westerners to seek for an alternative hermeneutic to understand the world.<sup>39</sup> Thus, the stage was set for the pursuit of a scientific way ‘to know’ and ‘to explain’ the universe from the perspective of the

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>36</sup> Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993), 50.

<sup>37</sup> Colin Gunton, *Enlightenment and Alienation: An Essay Towards a Trinitarian Theology* (Basingstoke: Marshall Morgan & Scott, 1985), 3.

<sup>38</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 71.

<sup>39</sup> Immanuel Kant defined the Enlightenment as the era of human beings’ “emergence from self-incurred immaturity”. And by ‘immaturity’ Kant meant “the inability to use one’s understanding without the guidance of another”. Thus, he construed the motto of the Enlightenment as “*Sapere aude!* Have courage to use your own understanding!” See Kant, “An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?” in *Kant’s Philosophical Writings*, ed., Hans Reiss, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 54.

‘individual self’.<sup>40</sup> With the breakthroughs in both science and in philosophy, the *Age of Reason* was inaugurated in the West. To use the words of Colin Greene, “science replaced religion as the final arbiter of truth” and became the most acceptable way of understanding the world and manipulating it for human purposes.<sup>41</sup> And consequently, “omnicompetent human reason”<sup>42</sup> became the universal test of all knowledge.<sup>43</sup>

The causes of the Enlightenment, its relations to modernity, and its influence on Christianity are complex. An exhaustive examination of these phenomena is beyond the scope of this study. However, it suffices to note, as Alister McGrath has done, that the “interplay between the ‘Enlightenment’ and ‘modernity’ is notoriously complex”,<sup>44</sup> a phenomenon that has resulted in the misrepresentation of the uniqueness and similarity of modernism and the Enlightenment. The claim that modernism is “a cultural movement” and that the Enlightenment is the “ideational or intellectual core”<sup>45</sup> of modernism remains open to criticism. But many scholars seem to accept that the Enlightenment derived impetus from a modernistic worldview – a cultural mood that emerged from the will “to achieve autonomous self-definition” and “to achieve emancipation from any form of intellectual or social bondage”.<sup>46</sup>

The extent to which the Enlightenment has shaped ‘Western Christianity’ is ambivalent.<sup>47</sup> But some Western theologians have continued to claim that the

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<sup>40</sup> Gunton, *Enlightenment and Alienation*, 71.

<sup>41</sup> Colin Grene, *Christology in Cultural Perspective: Marking Out the Horizons* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 75.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>43</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 25.

<sup>44</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *A Passion for Truth: The Intellectual Coherence of Evangelicalism* (Leicester: Apollo, 1996), 165.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>47</sup> The expressions ‘Western Christianity’, ‘African Christianity’, and ‘Nigerian Christianity’ are used in this study with caution. This is because there are different versions of Christian expressions within each of these contexts.

Enlightenment ideologies have influenced Western Christianity.<sup>48</sup> For example, McGrath argues that Western Christianity absorbed the Enlightenment's fraudulent theme of 'supremacy of human reason' which reflected on its views of Scripture, spirituality, apologetics and evangelism.<sup>49</sup> Regarding the influence of the Enlightenment on Western Christians' understanding of mission, McGrath writes,

Evangelism, on the basis of an Enlightenment worldview, is about persuading people of the *truth* of the gospel – with that crucial word 'truth' being understood in a strongly rational manner as 'propositional correctness'. Evangelism thus concerns the proclamation of the cognitive truth of the gospel, with a demand for its acceptance.<sup>50</sup>

Although the extent to which Western Christians embraced the Enlightenment ideologies has remained a subject of massive debate, it is important to recognize that the Enlightenment forced many Western Christians to make some 'theological' adjustments in order to become relevant to the 'intellectual culture' that the Enlightenment created. For Ng'Weshemi, this adjustment had a dual effect on the Western missionary expedition to Africa. On the one hand, the missionaries feared that the future of Christianity was under serious threats and therefore wanted "to reach out to unchristian populations, [to] evangelize them" and also "to check the spread of secularism and other consequences of the Enlightenment". On the other hand, the missionaries considered Africans as people who were "living in darkness and backwardness" and as people who were "irrational, ignorant, irreligious, and uncivilized".<sup>51</sup>

Armed with the idea of propositional understanding of the 'truth' of the gospel, the intellectual and scientific methods of knowing, 'dualistic' understanding of the spiritual and physical worlds, 'common sense', and Jesus as the "Teacher of Common Sense",<sup>52</sup> many Western missionaries set off on a missionary journey to the

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<sup>48</sup> See Gunton, *Enlightenment and Alienation*, 112.

<sup>49</sup> McGrath, *A Passion for Truth*, 166-179.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>51</sup> Ng'Weshemi, *Rediscovering the Human*, 40-41.

<sup>52</sup> As Greene argues, "Jesus ceased to be regarded as the Logos incarnate, or the Divine Son of the Father and became instead the great example of moral excellence or the simple teacher of common sense religion". Greene, *Christology in Cultural Perspective*, 75. See Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 182-193.

sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>53</sup> And holding tenaciously unto their intellectual worldview that was deeply shaped by the Enlightenment, some of the missionaries presented to their converts the imagery of an ‘enlightened Jesus’ who denounced most of their indigenous religious customs and traditions. The key issue here is that the missionaries failed to see that the cultures and traditions of the West were not indissolubly united with the gospel message of Christianity. This made them to be highly suspicious of and to discourage the people of Nigeria from creating an ‘African church’. For example, a missionary with the Church Missionary Society (CMS) who worked in Nigeria in the 1920s lamented that the quest for an ‘African Church’

is exercising a most baneful influence... and threatens to sap the very life of the Church in Nigeria. Its low moral standards, and its readiness to baptize every would-be applicant at a shilling a head, are a scandal to the Christian faith.<sup>54</sup>

This is an example of the suspicion and hostility of some Western missionaries toward the desire of some Nigerian Christians to contextualize their faith. When the indigenous religious tenets such as the ancestral cult failed the scientific and intellectual tests of the West, many missionaries dismissed them as mere superstitions, claiming that they were incapable of contributing positively to Christianity’s messages about the Christ-Event.<sup>55</sup> The sole purpose of the ‘enlightened Jesus’ of the Missionary Christology, as some Nigerian theologians see it, is to teach the ‘barbaric’ and ‘unschooled’ people the civilized ways of the West. The influence of the intellectual ideology of the West on the Missionary Christology will become even more evident as I explore some missionaries’ estimation of the identity, cultures, and indigenous religions.

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<sup>53</sup> What many Western missionaries failed to take seriously, to use the words of Veli-Matti Karkkainen, was that “the average African Christian takes the story [about Jesus] at face value. The kind of critical-historical questioning so common in the West is foreign to African Christians. African culture is at home with the stories of unusual events, miracles, visions, prophecies, and healing”. See Karkkainen, *Christology: A Global Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 248.

<sup>54</sup> Quoted in the Annual Report of CMS of Committee in May 3, 1921 in *Proceedings of the Church Missionary Society for African the East, 1920-1* (London: Church Missionary Society, 1921), 5.

<sup>55</sup> Bujo, *African Theology in its Social Context*, 43-49; Fergus King, “Angels and Ancestors: A Basis for Christology,” *Mission Studies* 11, no. 1 (1994): 11-14.

## **b. Jesus the Imperialist: Missionary Christology and the Personality of the People of Nigeria**

Like the colonizers, many missionaries viewed Africans as barbaric people without the knowledge of God, uncivilized, and objects to be conquered. To cite one example, the missions' manifesto of Pringle, a Scottish missionary, in 1820 represented this sort of dehumanizing view of African peoples.

Let us enter upon a new and nobler career of conquest. Let us subdue and salvage Africa by justice, by kindness, by talisman of Christian truth. Let us thus go forth, in the name and under the blessing of God, gradually to extend the moral influence... the territorial boundary also of our colony, until it shall become an empire.<sup>56</sup>

The words of Pringle reveal a predominant Western estimation of the personality of Africans in the nineteenth century, and a cluster of hegemonic prospects that were executed through colonization and 'evangelization'. In V. Y. Mudimbe's assessment, Pringle was a template of many classical Western missionaries, whose objectives were,

coextensive with [their] country's political and cultural perspectives on colonization, as well as the Christian view of mission.<sup>57</sup>

Mudimbe goes on to argue that the majority of the missionaries served with enthusiasm as agents of political empires, representatives of civilization and envoys of God. He concluded that there was "no essential contradiction" in these three functions because they "implied the same purpose: the conversion of African minds and space".<sup>58</sup>

It is important to note that although Pringle's understanding of the evangelization of Africa was popular in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, there were some Western missionaries who believed that Christian evangelization must be distanced from Western political ambition to colonize and rule African peoples. John Robson's address to Hope Waddell as the latter was preparing to leave for Nigeria in

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<sup>56</sup> Quoted in Dorothy Hammond and Atla Jablow, *The Myth of Africa* (New York: The Library of Social Science, 1977), 44.

<sup>57</sup> V. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 47.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

1845 on a mission trip is a vivid contrast to Pringle's mission theory. In this address, Robson encouraged Waddell with the following inspiring words:

You go to prosecute there [Christianity's] peaceful and bloodless conquest, to subdue hearts to the obedience of the faith, and to bring them to bow in submission to the sceptre of the 'Prince of Peace'.<sup>59</sup>

Although the language of warfare appears in this charge, such as, 'subdue', 'conquest', and 'sceptre', it is clear that Robson locates the victory of evangelism within the context of the "kingdom of God", which in his thinking, "must prevail" but not through a political conquest of a colonial 'kingdom' or rule.<sup>60</sup>

The relationship between the missionaries and colonial masters is complex and an extensive examination of this phenomenon is not the task of this study.<sup>61</sup> However, what is worth noting is that although the missionaries may have criticized and rejected some of the policies of the colonizers, the majority of contemporary Nigerian (and other African) theologians have consistently accused many Western missionaries and Western imperialists of sharing a dehumanizing concept of the identity of Africans. Evidently, Pringle was not the only Westerner who considered Africans to be inferior to Westerners. To cite another figure that was highly influential in the West, Georg Hegel, in *The Philosophy of History*, trivializes the

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<sup>59</sup> John Robson, "Address by Rev. J. Robson, D. D., to the Rev. H. M. Waddell, on the Occasion of his leaving for Africa. Delivered in Wellington Street Church on the evening of Tuesday, the 8<sup>th</sup> of December 1845," in "Missionary Record of the United Secession Church," no II, vol. I, February, 1846, 23-24, in *Missionary Record of the United Presbyterian Church*, vol. I & II (Edinburgh: William Oliphant and Sons, 1847).

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> For scholars like Bolaji Idowu and Bénézet Bujo, the missionaries and the imperialists worked hand-in-hand in disintegrating African cultures, and in siphoning Africa's resources. However, as Ogbu Kalu and T. Jack Thompson have rightly observed, to assume that the missionaries were always in agreement with the colonial masters is reductionistic and amounts to an oversimplification of a complex phenomenon. They argue that some missionaries were sometimes highly critical of some of the policies of the colonizers when the policies conflicted with their evangelistic work and occasionally with the rights of Africans. Bujo, *African Theology in Its Social Context*, 43-49; Bolaji E. Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (London: SCM Press, 1970); Ogbu U. Kalu, "Ethiopianism in African Christianity," in *African Christianity: An African Story*, ed. Ogbu U. Kalu (Pretoria: University of Pretoria, 2005), 260; Ogbu Kalu, "Color and Conversion: The White Missionary Factor in the Christianization of Igboland," *Missiology: An International Review* 18, (1990), 67-74; T. Jack Thompson, *Christianity in Northern Malawi: Donald Fraser's Missionary Methods and Ngoni Culture* (Leiden: Brill, 1995).

ancestral cult of Africa and describes Africans as cannibals and as people with “barbarous sensuality”.<sup>62</sup>

Many African scholars and theologians have remained highly critical of some Westerners’ derogatory estimation of African peoples. According to Chukwudi Njoku, the missionaries

embraced the idea of a ‘civilizing mission’, the idea of being heirs of a culturally superior people going out to share the riches and glories of their culture with people from cultures they generally assumed to be inferior to their own.<sup>63</sup>

Teresia Hinga concurs and argues that the missionaries degraded the cognitive faculties of Africans by presuming that they were *tabula rasa*:

The conquest of Africa implied erasing most of what Africans held dear. The missionaries, in the name of Christ, sought to create a spiritual and cultural *tabula rasa* upon which they could inscribe a new culture, a new spirituality.<sup>64</sup>

‘Jesus the Imperialist’, therefore, arrives in Nigeria with his Western workers with the intent to capture the land, the mind, and the worldview of the local people. For this Jesus, in the thinking of many theologians, the Nigerian people, like all Africans, must drop their unique identity and adopt the theological mindset and religious hermeneutic of the West in order for them to qualify as his true disciples. A serious implication of the imperialist Christology of some missionaries is that many theologians have considered the imperialist Jesus to be an enemy of the traditional society.

In the minds of many theologians, the majority of the Western missionaries construed Africans to be inferior cognitively and spiritually because African cultures and traditions, in the thinking of such missionaries, were inferior. A consequence of this estimation of African cultures and religions is the idea that embracing Jesus

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<sup>62</sup> Georg Wilhem Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, intro. C. J. Friedrich, trans. J. Sibree (New York: Dover, 1956), 218-219.

<sup>63</sup> Chukwudi Njoku, “The Missionary Factor in African Christianity, 1884-1914,” in *African Christianity: An African Story*, ed. Ogbu U. Kalu (Pretoria: University of Pretoria, 2005), 228.

<sup>64</sup> Teresia M. Hinga, “Jesus Christ and the Liberation of Women in Africa,” in *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition and the Culture in Africa*, ed. Mercy A. Oduyoye and Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2001), 187.

Christ entails depriving oneself of the indigenous framework and adopting the Western worldviews.<sup>65</sup> Lamin Sanneh laments this state of affairs:

Notions of Western cultural superiority found a congenial niche in the Christian missionary enterprise where spiritual values were assumed to enshrine concrete Western cultural forms, so that the heathen who took the religious bait would in fact be taking it from the cultural hook.<sup>66</sup>

Among the cultures and religious practices of Nigeria the missionaries condemned were polygamy, the ancestor cult, and some traditional festivals such as the New Yam festival.<sup>67</sup> By failing to engage constructively with the indigenous traditions, most of the missionaries ‘succeeded’ in imposing a strange Jesus on their converts. The derogatory attitudes of many missionaries toward the indigenous cultures and religions suggest strongly that for some of the missionaries Jesus was ‘too Enlightened’ to approve of or associate with the indigenous cultures and religions they labelled ‘uncivilized’. It is noteworthy that the understanding of Christianity as anti African cultures continues to haunt many African churches.<sup>68</sup> One example is the element which many Nigerian churches use when they celebrate the Eucharist. In the Missionary Christology, (Western) wine signified the blood of Jesus. Many missionaries did not encourage the use of the traditional wine, such as palm wine, in the celebration of the Eucharist.<sup>69</sup> Rather, they imposed some Western brands of wine on African Christians.<sup>70</sup> Another effect of some missionaries’ insensitive attitudes toward the indigenous worldview is that it has created a

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<sup>65</sup> Robert J Schreier, “Introduction: Jesus Christ in Africa Today,” in *Faces of Jesus in Africa*, viii.

<sup>66</sup> Lamin Sanneh, *Encountering the West: Christianity and the Global Cultural Process: The African Dimension* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1993), 22.

<sup>67</sup> See J. F. Ade Ajayi, *Christian Missions in Nigeria 1841-1891: The Making of a New Elite* (London: Longmans, Green, 1965), 105-110; H. Onyema Anyanwu, “Why the Igbos Abandoned their Gods,” *African Theological Journal* 14, no. 1 (1985), 91-99.

<sup>68</sup> Therefore, Luke Mbefo’s claim that the impact of Western Christianity on African Christianity “has been broken down with the emergence of non-Western churches” is certainly misleading. See Mbefo, “Theology and African Heritage,” 7.

<sup>69</sup> See Bujo, *African Theology in its Social Context*, 47.

<sup>70</sup> This action only helped to perpetuate the idea that ‘white people’ (Westerners) are superior and holier, and ‘black people’ (Africans) are inferior and incapacitated of producing some original and adequate interpretations of the Christ-Event. The majority of the mission-churches in Nigerian today never use palm wine to celebrate the Eucharist or the Holy Communion.

‘religious schizophrenia’ in many Christians.<sup>71</sup> Many of them live with dual religious minds. Osadolor Imasogie expresses this state of affairs when he argues that the

superficiality of the African Christian’s commitment is evidenced by the fact that when he is faced with problems and uncertainties he often reverts to traditional religious practices.<sup>72</sup>

The point that Imasogie makes is that many Christians devote themselves, not only to Jesus Christ, but also to the indigenous religions. When they are inside the church, they sing songs and pray in the ways that expresses their allegiance to Jesus Christ, but when they are outside the church some of them act in the manner that demonstrates their trust and belief in some of the teachings of the indigenous religions.

## **B. Rethinking Nigerian Christologies: Towards a ‘New Context’**

### **1. Aims and Theses of the Research**

In this study, I aim to construct a christological model that engages with and critiques the major christological models some key Nigerian theologians have developed. Also, I will interact with and critique some of the grassroots Christologies that exist in Nigerian Christianity. The three major theses that I explore are: (1) the majority of the constructive and grassroots Christologies that exist in Nigerian Christianity are solution-oriented; (2) an adequate Nigerian contextual Christology will construe Jesus Christ simultaneously as the ‘question’ and ‘solution’ to the needs, aspirations, and problems of Christians; and (3) a contextual Christology that hopes to be relevant to many lay Christians will interact with the grassroots Christologies that are embedded in their testimonies, songs, and prayers.

The majority of Nigerian contextual theologians who construct Christologies have been driven by the quest to interpret and explicate the Christ-Event to befit the history and experience of the people of Nigeria. On the basis of this quest, they have continued to locate their Christologies within the context of the ambivalent interaction between the local people and many Western missionaries who worked

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<sup>71</sup> See E. B. Udoh, “Guest Christology: An Interpretative View of the Christological Problem in Africa,” (Ph. D. Dissertation, Princeton Theological Seminary), 1983.

<sup>72</sup> Osadolor Imasogie, *Guidelines for Christian Theology in Africa* (Achimota: African Christian Press, 1983), 14.

among them in the nineteenth and some part of the twentieth centuries. Like many other African theologians who share a similar quest, these theologians, following the *Taylorian christological presupposition*, have continued to construct the Christologies that seek, on the one hand, to deconstruct the Missionary Christology and, on the other hand, to re-explain the Christ-Event within the indigenous cultural and religious thought. But many of these theologians have failed to examine and engage with the key christological questions that the majority of contemporary lay Christians are asking today. Consequently, there is an unwarranted dichotomy between the contextual Christologies that many theologians are developing and the existing grassroots.

The reactions of some Nigerian and other African theologians to the Missionary Christology, as I have already argued, reflect the impact of the *Taylorian christological presupposition* on the understandings of the nature of contextual Christologies. These theologians aim to discover and articulate what Jesus will look like when they present him as the answer to the questions the Nigerian people are asking, and as the solution to their needs. But an adequate Christology must aim to articulate, explicate, and explore the Christ-Event in an intelligibly relevant way, allowing it to engage with the new questions that arise from the 'new shifts' and 'new historical' conditions in the context-of-life of a given people. Therefore, I argue that although Taylor's provoking questions were appropriate at the time he posed them, they are now somewhat obsolete and can no longer adequately inspire the kind of Christologies that are needed and required in contemporary Nigeria. A new kind of Christology, which arises from a new set of christological questions, is what is needed in Nigerian Christianity. In this study, I will raise one of such new questions and construct a christological model that is informed and shaped by it. The question is: since many Nigerian theologians have expressed Jesus Christ to befit the indigenous worldview and the experience of the Nigerian people and have presented Jesus as an answer to some of the cultural, liberation, and religious questions that some people are asking, if Jesus were also to be presented simultaneously as a question and solution to needs of the people of Nigeria, what would he and Nigerians look like?

It is important to articulate the relationship between the key question that I have asked and Taylor's questions which have informed, imbued, and shaped most of the existing contextual Christologies in Nigeria. The background of the new christological question that I have asked is partly the *Taylorian christological presupposition*. But the key question here is what has changed from the historical context in which Taylor posed his questions when the *Taylorian christological presupposition* is examined in light of the twenty-first century Nigerian context? Although we cannot speak definitively of the 'post-colonial era', the 'post-missionary era', and the 'post-racism era', since some individuals and organized systems may (indirectly) continue to think and act in a way that perpetuates such outdated ideologies, I argue that the majority of the Nigerian people are no longer living in the imperialist and racist eras, which arguably were the eras the Missionary Christology constituted an unchallenged hegemony.<sup>73</sup>

The major problems that confront contemporary Nigerian and many other African Christians are no longer the Western missionaries and colonialists who devalued the dignity of African peoples, demeaned their cultures and traditions, and imposed and enforced some Western ideologies and interpretations of the Christ-Event on the Christian converts. The Ghanaian theologian, Kwame Bediako, captures this state of affairs and consequently predicts a 'new shift' of direction in the African theological discourse.

The era of African theological literature as reaction to Western misrepresentation is past. What lies ahead is a critical theological construction which will relate more fully the widespread African confidence in the Christian Faith to the actual and ongoing Christian responses to the life expression of Africans.<sup>74</sup>

Bediako made this observation as African Christianity and African Christian theologians neared the end of the twentieth century. It must be said that in this twenty-first century, the perennial challenge that faces many African theologians is

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<sup>73</sup> Therefore, Tite Tienou is correct when he contends that "as long as Europe and the West continue to dominate the economy and educational systems of Africa", it remains a legitimate quest by African peoples to seek for "self-hood and identity". Tite Tienou, "Search for the 'African Past': Common Roots of African Theology and Philosophy," in *Issues in African Christian Theology*, ed. Samuel Ngewa, Mark Shaw and Tite Tienou (Nairobi: E. A. E. P., 1998), 48.

<sup>74</sup> Bediako, "Understanding African Theology in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century," in *Issues in African Christian Theology*, 64.

not the Missionary Christology, but rather how to move on to engage the *new contexts* in which African peoples now live. Surprisingly, Bediako who predicted the new shift in christological discourse has continued to write and wrestle with the deep cultural issues that stem from the Western derogatory estimation of the African pre-Christian traditions. Thus, his Christology and theology have largely remained heavily influenced by the *Taylorian christological presupposition*.<sup>75</sup>

Nigerians (and many other African peoples) now live in a ‘new era’: an era in which they enjoy a political independence, an era in which African theologians and African churches are no longer dependent entirely on Western theologies and spirituality, an era in which African theologians have succeeded in rescuing some African indigenous cultures and religions from disappearing from the consciousness of many African peoples, and an era in which some African peoples are now seeking to re-evangelize the Western world. Since every era has its own challenges, this ‘new era’ stimulates new forms of challenges that are different from the challenges of the era of Western imperialism, the missionary cultural and theological hegemony, and apartheid. But what are the challenges that this ‘new era’ poses to Nigerian Christianity and Christologies? For the purpose of this research, I will highlight three major challenges.

First, Nigerian Christians need to engage with the challenge posed by the intellectualist and dichotomist tendencies that have compelled many theologians to construct abstract Christologies that fail to interact with the grassroots Christologies. The majority of the Christologies that Nigerian theologians have constructed (as we shall see in chapters two and three) have been written not for the laity, (and most times) not for the theological students in Nigeria, but for the Western academia.<sup>76</sup> Most of these Christologies are peer-driven and escape some key existential christological questions that the majority of lay Christians are asking.

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<sup>75</sup> See Bediako, *Jesus and Gospel in Africa, History and Experience*.

<sup>76</sup> This is a serious theological problem that is widespread in Africa. See Tienou, “The Theological Task of Church in Africa,” in *Issues in African Christian Theology*, 7; John Onaiyekan, “Christological Trends in Contemporary African Theology,” in *Constructive Christian Theology in the Worldwide Church*, edited by William R. Barr (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 366.

Second, Nigerian Christians face the challenge posed by pragmatism. Many theologians and lay Christians tend to explain Jesus Christ only in terms of what he can do for them, such as providing solutions to their cultural, political, social, and religious problems. I will examine some of the grassroots Christologies in chapter three. It will become evident that many Christians primarily see Jesus Christ as a *Solution* to their problem, and interestingly, as a *Solution* which they are to ‘control’. This explains why many of them will seek for a solution to their problems from the indigenous sources (such as native doctors) when Jesus seems not to solve their problems.

Third, the task of constructing the Christologies that are not restricted to the Nigerian context is another challenge that faces a contextual theologian. Any Christology that hopes to be relevant in this twenty-first century will, on the one hand, be relevant to its immediate context and, on the other hand, interact with and contribute to the development of Christology outside of its immediate context. Manus has encouraged Nigerian and other African theologians to undertake christological discussions that are relevant to Africa in isolation “from the prevalence of Western European and North American Christologies....<sup>77</sup> But statements such as this can be misleading and can cause many African theologians not to give sufficient recognition to the positive aspects of the Missionary Christology. Manus’ statement can also cause a Nigerian theologian to ignore the christological conversations that are going on in the West today. A Christology that does not aim to contribute to the development of Christology universally is parochial and can hardly have any impact on the twenty-first century world. If it is true that Africa has contributed immensely to the (demographic) shift of the centre of Christianity’s gravity from the West to the non-Western world, as Andrew Walls, Bediako, Philip Jenkins and others have argued,<sup>78</sup> all Nigerian and African theologians face the challenge, not only of evangelizing the West, but also the task of challenging and contributing to the development of Christologies that are designed for the Western communities.

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<sup>77</sup> Manus, *Christ, the African King*, 10.

<sup>78</sup> See Andrew F. Walls, “Towards Understanding Africa’s Place in Christian History,” in *Religion in a Pluralistic Society*, ed. J. S. Pobee (Leiden: Brill, 1976), 180-189; Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

## **2. Research Scope and Sources**

The nature of this christological study requires both an analysis of the written Christologies and an ethnographic research to gain access to some of the grassroots or oral Christologies. I will undertake a theological analysis of some of the key christological themes, claims, beliefs and ideas that exist in contemporary Nigerian Christianity. I will also interact with some African and non-African theologians for the purpose of substantiating an argument or articulating the relation or non-relation of some of the Christologies that exist in Nigerian Christianity to similar Christologies that exist outside of the Nigerian context.

In chapter one, I explore the major christological presuppositions that inform and shape the interpretations of the Christ-Event in Nigerian Christianity, particularly among theologians. Most of these presuppositions overlap. They illuminate the complexity of the backgrounds of the majority of the Christologies that exist in contemporary Nigeria. As we will see later, the theologians that I examined have drawn insights from most of the presuppositions. Therefore, the theologians cannot be neatly categorized under any single one of the presuppositions. I examine in chapter two the major christological models some key theologians have developed. Although I focused on Nigerian theologians, I also interacted with some other Africans theologians who either share or disagree with the models of neo-missionary Christology, the culture-oriented Christology, and the liberation-oriented Christology. In chapter three, I examine the grassroots Christologies that emerged from the qualitative research I carried out among five churches in Aba, a city in the southeast part of Nigeria, from February to July 2006.<sup>79</sup> I analyzed and interacted critically with the emerging christological issues and themes.

I articulate in chapter four a christological model that I will be referring to in this study as 'Revealer Christology'. I explore also the christological meaning of the word 'revealer' and locate it within the broader context of the theological discussions on revelation. In addition, I examine the contextual and christological grounds on which an adequate Nigerian Christology can be constructed. I also engage with the two major potential christological problems that can obstruct a successful

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<sup>79</sup> See chapter three for discussion on the methodology I used for data collection and analysis.

construction of a Revealer Christology model for the Nigerian context. Chapters five, six and seven contain the main ‘substance’ of this model. In chapter five, I examine some indigenous understandings of the Supreme Being and how this Being correlates to the Christian God. I also explore the ways in which Jesus Christ interprets and mediates God and also provides the context for constructing a contextual Christology for the Nigerian contexts. Building on chapter five, in chapter six, I interact with the understandings of the malevolent spirit beings as construed in Nigerian Christianity and the indigenous religions. This is an area that has been largely neglected by many Nigerian theologians who write Christologies. But any Christology that neglects how Jesus Christ interacts with the malevolent spirits will hardly connect with the existential experience of the majority of Nigerian Christians who have continued to believe that such spirit beings influence their daily affairs. In chapter seven, I investigate and critique some of the major understandings of humanity and the human world in both Nigerian Christianity and the indigenous religions, locating them within a ‘Revealer Christology’ model that I develop in this study. In the conclusion, I articulate the christological and contextual warrants of the Revealer Christology model. Appendix 1 contains the pre-set questions I asked the interviewees and Appendix 2 contains the names of the churches, the interviewees and the date of the interviews.

## CHAPTER ONE

### EXPLORING SOME PRESUPPOSITIONS OF NIGERIAN CHRISTOLOGIES

In the introduction, I argued that the *Taylorian christological presupposition* has provoked serious christological conversations among many Nigerian and other African theologians.<sup>1</sup> A critical examination of these conversations unveils some other complex presuppositions that inform and shape most of the existing christological models in Nigeria and in some other parts of Africa. The following four observations are noteworthy before I explore the presuppositions.

First, the theologians that I will examine here cannot be categorized neatly under any of these presuppositions. This is because they draw insights from all of the presuppositions, albeit in different ways.<sup>2</sup> In addition, although the presuppositions have unique contents and agendas, they overlap. For example, they are informed by contextualization. I will highlight their points of difference and agreement throughout the chapter. Second, since this study focuses primarily on the Nigerian context, I will concentrate on the presuppositions that underlie the constructive Christologies of the majority of the theologians and some of the grassroots Christologies that are emerging from lay Christians. Third, I will discuss the content and the implications of these Christologies extensively in chapters two and three. However, it is expedient to examine first the presuppositions that function as the backdrop to these Christologies. Without these presuppositions it will be difficult to understand and appreciate the contemporary interpretations and appropriations of the Christ-Event in Nigerian Christianity. Fourth, these presuppositions should not be confused with the *actual* contents or the specific historical contexts of each of the christological paradigms that I will examine in chapters two and three. Also, the presuppositions should not be conceived as independent christological models.

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<sup>1</sup> See the introduction for the discussion on John Taylor's christological questions and assumptions and their impact on African Christologies.

<sup>2</sup> For example, whilst the theologians who adopt the reconstructionist and gap and fulfillment presuppositions may be highly suspicious of some of the claims of the theologians who use primarily the destructionist presupposition, they all employ the solution presupposition. This will become clearer as I interact with the theologians and their articulations and reactions to the presuppositions.

Instead, they should be taken as the general assumptions and ideologies that underlie Jesus-talk in both Nigerian constructive and grassroots Christologies.

Every theologian operates with some assumptions. In some cases, the assumptions are clearly defined and the theologian is able to detect them and manage their influence on the texture of his or her work. Sometimes the theologian fails to clearly articulate his or her assumptions and, therefore, is unable to properly manage them. Some Nigerian theologians and the majority of Christian laity hardly bother to articulate clearly the presuppositions that shape their understandings of the Christ-Event. This makes it difficult and sometimes daunting for people who are not familiar with Nigerian Christianity to understand and appreciate the emerging Christologies. The presuppositions I examine in this chapter have emerged from the struggles of many Christians to construct an adequate relationship between the Christian faith and the indigenous religions, and to practice their faith within their multicultural, multi-religious, political and socioeconomic environment. I will classify and explore these presuppositions under four major categories; namely, Gap and Fulfillment, Destructionist, Reconstructionist, and Solution.

### **A. Gap and Fulfillment Presupposition**

The ‘gap and fulfillment’ presupposition is one of the oldest apologetic tools that some Nigerian theologians have employed to engage with the theological tension that emerges as they try to set out a theological meeting point for Christianity and indigenous religions.<sup>3</sup> This presupposition posits that there are ‘gaps’ in the indigenous religious understandings of God’s revelatory activities. The proponents of this view argue that there is a necessity to fill up these ‘religious gaps’ if the Nigerian people are to make sense of God’s purpose and salvific history, and also to appreciate the purpose and limits of their God-given culture and traditions. For them, the indigenous religions contain only some fragments of divine truth, and as such, are

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<sup>3</sup> For an earlier discussions on the fulfillment and ‘sublimation’ theories for the African context see Edwin Smith, *African Beliefs and Christian Faith: An Introduction to Theology for African Students, Evangelists, and Pastors* (London: United Society for Christian Literature, 1936); Malcolm J. McVeigh, *God in Africa: Concepts of God in African Traditional Religion and Christianity* (Cape Cod: Mass, Claude Stark, 1974), 155-162. Some North American black theologians have argued for the necessity of rooting ‘black theology’ in the indigenous religions of Africa. See J. Deotis Roberts, *Black Theology in Dialogue* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987), 41.

incomplete and are in dire need for a supreme and definitive fulfiller.<sup>4</sup> The majority of the theologians who operate with this mindset contend that it is only the Christ-Event that can effectively and definitively fill these religious gaps. Consequently, they introduce Jesus as the only one who can bring to a total fulfillment of the religious aspirations of the Nigerian people which they struggle to fulfill through some indigenous religious ways.

In the gap and fulfillment presupposition, Jesus does not need to destroy the core values and beliefs of the indigenous religions. The majority of the theologians and lay Christians who employ the gap and fulfillment presupposition have continued to agitate for the need to recognize the existence of God's imprints in the indigenous religions. The backdrop of this agitation is the attempt to discredit the view that considers the indigenous religions to be incompatible with Christianity. Therefore, it is important to articulate the content of the so-called divine imprints in the indigenous religions and to examine how they relate to Christianity's views of the Christ-Event.

Luke Mbefo has called upon Nigerian Christians (and indeed all African Christians) to excavate the divine imprints in their culture and religion. He challenges them to engage in this enormous task with a positive mindset.

...instead of a negative inference from the criticism of the early missionary Christianity, we are reminded with force and vigour of the values and the meanings of the heritage that is properly African – which were never called into dialogue in the colonial period of Christianity.<sup>5</sup>

By 'heritage', Mbefo means the religious and cultural traditions that the 'ancestors' embodied. These traditions define largely the identity of African peoples. And to require them to dissociate themselves from these traditions almost entails requiring them to forego their identity. For Mbefo, it is the determination to retain this identity that inspired some African writers to warn other theologians of the danger of making Christianity a foreign and superficial religion.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Osadolor Imasogie, *Guidelines for Christian Theology in Africa* (Achimota: African Christian Press, 1983), 78.

<sup>5</sup> Luke Mbefo, "Theology and African Heritage," *Bigard Theological Studies* 11, no. 1 (Jan–Jun 1991): 10.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

But what precisely are the traditions that define African peoples? The response to this question will differ depending on the theologian, his interest and context. Mercy Oduyoye subsumes these traditions into a ten-point category.<sup>7</sup> These are the belief in the divine origin of the universe; the belief that human beings are the custodians of the earth; the sense of wholeness of the person; the inquiry into “whether women are an integral part of humanity or merely appendages to the male”;<sup>8</sup> the belief that God delegates authorities to intermediary beings; the concept of covenant-making, the belief in the power of evil; the concept of reconciliation, some rites of passage such as marriage, naming ceremony, and burials; and the traditional liturgical practices such as drumming, dancing and extemporaneous prayer.

Returning to Mbefo’s understanding of the heritage of Africa, it is important to highlight his reconstruction of some of the possible issues that worried the elders when they encountered some Western Christian missionaries.

A typical question the elders posed was: such and such ancestor who stood for truth and justice, who never poisoned anybody and who was famous for his [or] her hospitality is he [or] she in this heaven you preach even without your baptism? If he is in heaven, then it is sufficient without your baptism to follow him there. If he is in hell, we do not want to be separated from such a good man. Our ancestors have left us a way that gives fulfillment to our life.<sup>9</sup>

The issue of reuniting with their ancestors was undoubtedly a primary concern of the majority of Nigerian people in the early era of the Western missionary expedition. It is, however, doubtful if it is still a major concern of many of the present-day Nigerians who are seriously losing grip of the sense of community that characterized the traditional societies.<sup>10</sup> My task here is to explore the indigenous traditions that

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<sup>7</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “The Value of African Religious Beliefs and Practices for Christian Theology,” in *African Theology en Route: Papers from the Pan-African Conference of Third World Theologians, December 17-23, 1997, Accra*, ed. Kofi Appiah-kubi and Sergio Torres Ghana (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979), 91. See also John S. Pobee, *Toward an African Theology* (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1979), 109-116.

<sup>8</sup> It is not clear if this feminist ideology is part of the traditional African religious beliefs and practices.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> This does not mean that a community orientation is no longer visible, but rather that it is gradually disappearing. And the possible causes are numerous, including urbanization, modernization, globalization and the influence of individualism.

some theologians believe are the consequences of divine manifestation. At the heart of these traditions are ethics and morality. And for some theologians, the notion of morality comes from God's self-disclosure. As Bolaji Idowu argues,

We find that in every age and generation, there is a direct contact of God with the human soul, the personal awareness of God on the part of man through God's own initiative. What man knows of God, what he discovers about God, comes as a result of this self-disclosure.<sup>11</sup>

The key idea here is 'divine revelation', and I will discuss it extensively in chapter four. At this point it is essential to recognize that in the thinking of some theologians who employ the gap and fulfillment presupposition, it is the divine revelation that is responsible for the ancestors' traditional ethics and morality. And the traditional way of life, to use the expression of Idowu, constitutes the "spiritual and cultural treasures" of Africans.<sup>12</sup>

The relationship between the indigenous heritage and the Christian gospel has continued to cause fierce theological tensions among many theologians. Whilst some like Idowu lean heavily towards a separation of the indigenous religions and Christianity, others agitate for a dialogue between them. The key problem of a theologian, Chris Ukachukwu Manus argues, is how to take seriously the divine revelations that are manifested in the indigenous religions and the command of Jesus to his followers to go and make disciples.

Throughout history, Christian scholars have established the fact that Christian revelation had been expressed in various circumstances and in different cultural settings. The deposit of faith had often been articulated in hardware concepts and propositions. But the Risen Lord charges his Church to go into the wide world to preach the gospel and to make disciples (Mt. 28: 16-20). Thus, revealed truth must, of necessity, encounter other nations, their values, and cultures.<sup>13</sup>

As we will see later, some theologians who use the 'destructionist presupposition' such as Yusufu Turaki will agree with Manus' argument. The point of contention is how to achieve this task whilst at the same time preserving the integrity of the gospel. According to Mbefo, one of the ways to embark on a meaningful

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<sup>11</sup> Bolaji E. Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (London: SCM Press, 1973), 56.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 205.

<sup>13</sup> Chris U. Manus, *Christ the African King: New Testament Christology* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1993), 14-15.

proclamation of the Christ-Event in Africa is to acknowledge that “there are aspects of African heritage that are totally for Christ and his Church”.<sup>14</sup> For him, an African theologian needs to explore the indigenous heritage with the intent to “to formulate a Christianity that is African in its expression”.<sup>15</sup> He argues that in order to achieve this great task, the theologians and Christians must see Christianity as the fulfillment of the indigenous religions.

By adopting these elements of traditional heritage through affirmation and denial we carry forward into Christianity those authentic interpretations of God who already revealed himself to our ancestors before Christianity came as fulfillment.<sup>16</sup>

The concept of fulfillment vis-à-vis Christianity and other religions was already in existence in the West in the early half of the twentieth century. Kenneth Cracknell has noted that this theory was prominent during the Edinburgh 1910 world missionary conference.<sup>17</sup> But it was the groundbreaking work of John Nicol Farquhar’s *The Crown of Hinduism* that made this concept popular in the missionary circles in the early twentieth century.<sup>18</sup> In this inspiring work, Farquhar compared some of the major themes of Christianity and Hinduism. His conclusion was radical:

We have already seen how Christ provides the fulfillment of each of the highest aspirations and aims of Hinduism.... Every true motive which Hinduism has found expression in unclean, debasing, or unhealthy practices finds in Him fullest exercise in work for the downtrodden, the ignorant, the sick, and the sinful. In Him is focused every ray of light that shines in Hinduism. He is the Crown of the faith of India.<sup>19</sup>

Edwin Smith, however, was one of the earliest individuals who proposed that Christianity fulfills rather than destroys the indigenous religions of Africa. In 1926, he wrote:

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<sup>14</sup> Mbefo, “Theology and African Heritage,” 10.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>17</sup> See Kenneth Cracknell, *Justice, Courtesy and Love: Theologians and Missionaries Encountering World Religions 1846-1914* (London: Epworth Press, 1995), 221.

<sup>18</sup> J. N. Farquhar, *The Crown of Hinduism* (1913; reprint, New Delhi: Oriental Books, 1971).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 457-458.

Christianity comes to Africans with greater power when it is shown to be not destructive but a fulfillment of the highest aspirations which they have tried to express in their beliefs and rites.<sup>20</sup>

The majority of Nigerian theologians who favour the gap and fulfillment presupposition see Jesus the Christ as the fulfillment of the religious longings and practices of their people. Most of these theologians argue that Jesus himself associated with and operated within the Jewish indigenous culture and religion. Jesus told his disciples that he did not “come to destroy the Law or the Prophets” but instead to “fulfill them”.<sup>21</sup> This is the key passage many Nigerian theologians reference in support of their fulfillment theory. Justin Ukpong is an example.

Jesus’ attitude toward the Torah was basically positive and transcended prevailing Jewish attitudes. Jesus introduced a new understanding of the Law and pointed to himself as its fulfillment.<sup>22</sup>

Since Matthew 5:17 is an important biblical texts on which many theologians build their fulfillment theory it merits a close examination. What exactly did Jesus mean by the Law and Prophets? How did he fulfill the Law and the Prophets? These are vital questions that can provide us with a helpful exegetical and theological framework for examining the connection between the fulfillment Jesus meant in this context and the fulfillment theory of some Nigerian theologians. Most biblical scholars agree that the ‘Law and Prophets’ in the Matthean context refer to the Hebrew Scripture.<sup>23</sup> John Nolland notes that the “Law defined the identity of the Jewish people”.<sup>24</sup> And it is most likely that it is the Law, and not the Prophets, that is the primary focus in this passage. Nolland observes,

‘The law was clearly central in all streams of Jewish faith, and the reading of the Law had primacy in the synagogue; it was the role of the Law to regulate Jewish life and practice. For all the Jewish groups of which we are aware the prophetic

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<sup>20</sup> Edwin W. Smith, *The Christian Mission in Africa: A Study Based on the Work of the International Conference at Le Zoute Belgium, September 14<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup>, 1926* (London: International Missionary Council, 1926), 40.

<sup>21</sup> Matthew 5:17.

<sup>22</sup> Justin S. Ukpong, “Christology and Inculturation: A New Testament Perspective,” in *Paths of African Theology*, ed. Rosino Gibellini (London: SCM Press, 1994), 53.

<sup>23</sup> See Margaret Davies, *Matthew* (JSOT Press, 1993), 51; Robert H. Smith, *Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament: Matthew* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989), 89.

<sup>24</sup> John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 218.

books had a supporting secondary role which no doubt was capable of being variously conceived....<sup>25</sup>

The Law, therefore, defined the culture and the religious worldview of the Jewish community. It is the “prophetic perspective [that] enabled the Law to be correctly apprehended” by the Jewish people.<sup>26</sup> It is difficult to know exactly what has prompted Jesus’ comments on his relationship to the Law and the Prophets since Mathew does not state clearly the situation. Some have suggested that the passage indicates a polemic against antinomians. Others have argued that some legalistic Jews who intended to scandalize Jesus were the most likely group of people that Matthew had in mind.<sup>27</sup> What is, however, clear in this passage is that Matthew negates the view that Jesus has come to annul the Law or the Prophets. On the contrary, Matthew argues that Jesus has come to fulfill the Law or the Prophets. But is it exegetically legitimate to say that Jesus fulfills the indigenous religious aspirations and practices of the Nigerian people on the basis of Matthew 5:17? Clearly, it will require a radical shift away from the context of the passage to make such a claim. Christologically, however, it is possible to construe Jesus as the one who fulfills the indigenous religious aspirations of the Nigerian people. But this requires appealing to the universality of the Christ-Event. Whilst the particularity of the Christ-Event, strictly speaking, limits Jesus only to his Jewish origin and context, its universality locates him beyond the parameters of his Jewish context. It is precisely on the ground of the universality of the Christ-Event that theologians can extend Jesus’ role of fulfillment to all cultures of the world. As Adeolu Adegbola argues:

The gospel is not primarily a new teaching about a way of life; it is not a new philosophy. Rather, it is a proclamation that in Jesus Christ, God has himself achieved the fulfillment of his purpose for the world, his rule has triumphed over all, in him, new creation has come into being, the new age has begun.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> R. T. France, *The Gospel According to Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 113.

<sup>28</sup> Adeolu Adegbola, “A Christian Interpretation of the African Revolution,” in *Christ and the Younger Churches: Theological Contributions from Asia, Africa, and Latin America*, ed. Georg F. Vicedom (London: SPCK, 1972), 39.

Some difficulties emerge when the gap and fulfillment presupposition is examined in light of the Christ-Event. One of the christological difficulties with the fulfillment theory lies in the understanding of the fulfillment work of Jesus vis-à-vis the indigenous religious aspirations of the Nigerian people. Unlike Judaism, there is no anticipation of a Messiah or someone who will fulfill the purported religious aspirations that are contained in the indigenous religions. Perhaps the idea of fulfillment falls into the category which John Mbiti, a prominent Kenyan theologian, has described as the christological concepts that are “historically rooted... and bound up with the Jewish eschatological hope” but which do not have any “parallels in African thought-forms, histories and traditions”.<sup>29</sup> Within the Jewish context, the idea of fulfillment fits perfectly well into the hope of a Messiah. Thus, for example, when Peter describes Jesus as the Christ,<sup>30</sup> he anticipates that the rest of the disciples (who are Jewish) and even the earliest Jewish followers of Jesus will understand the messianic concept and how Jesus fulfills this highly exalted position. The idea of fulfillment, in the sense the gap and fulfillment theoreticians use it, is strange to the indigenous religions of Nigeria. There are no indications of some ‘gaps’ and the anticipations of a fulfiller in the indigenous religions. Even in the case of the ancestor cult, it will require a massive distortion of this religious phenomenon to understand it as ‘myth’, which has arisen from Nigerians’ religious aspirations that is in need of fulfillment.<sup>31</sup> The fulfillment theory, therefore, appears to be a foreign thought that has no real bearing on the indigenous religious values, beliefs and practices.

Another problem with the gap and fulfillment presupposition is connected with the way in which Jesus fulfills the purported ‘gaps’ in these religious aspirations. Even if it is granted that there are religious aspirations in the indigenous religions which Jesus can fulfill, the question that remains is: how does Jesus fulfill these aspirations or purported gaps? Is it by merely completing the previous religious traditions and values of the ancestors? Or is it by replacing the previous religious

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<sup>29</sup> John S. Mbiti, “Some African Concepts of Christology,” in *Christ and the Younger Churches*, 58.

<sup>30</sup> Matthew 16:16.

<sup>31</sup> Tokunboh Adeyemo, *Salvation in African Tradition* (Nairobi: Evangel, 1979), 29; See Kwame Bediako, *Jesus in Africa: The Christian Gospel in African History and Experience* (Yaoundé: Regnum, 2000), 30.

values and traditions with a new one? In other words, should we understand the fulfillment in a qualitative sense (i.e. to change or correct the aspirations and values) or in a quantitative sense (i.e. to add to, to complete, or perfect the aspirations and values)?<sup>32</sup> Since Matthew has not clearly articulated the meaning of ‘fulfillment’, it is difficult to establish what the word means exactly in this context. This explains the plethora of meanings that theologians and biblical scholars have assigned to it.

The proponents of the gap and fulfillment presupposition contend that Jesus does not abolish the preparatory work of the ancestors but fulfills them. The Congolese theologian, François Kabasélé Lumbala, no doubt speaks for many African theologians when he argues:

Just as Christ, the one priest, does not abolish human mediations, but fulfills them in himself, so does he consummate in him the mediation exercised by our ancestors, a mediation that he does not abolish but which, in him, is revealed to be henceforth a subordinate mediation.<sup>33</sup>

For Lumbala, then, the mediatory work of Jesus supersedes that of the African ancestors. However, Jesus does not discard or abolish the work of the ancestors in order to function as the mediator between God and the African peoples. The idea of fulfillment here seems to be ‘perfecting’ the previous work of the ancestors. As another Congolese theologian, Bénézet Bujo, suggests, “Christ brings creation to its fulfillment and, together with the Father, leads the ancestors of African peoples into fullness of life”.<sup>34</sup>

But for the Nigerian theologian, Justin Ukpong, the fulfillment entails creating a new form of meaning. He contends that fulfillment in the Matthean context includes “a new understanding” of the Law,<sup>35</sup> which entails “restoring the

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<sup>32</sup> From the Early church through the medieval era, the predominant view of fulfillment was the idea of perfection. In this sense, Jesus perfects the imperfect elements in the Jewish Law. During the Reformation there was a shift in emphasis: it is “no longer the perfection of the law of the medieval exegesis but its correct interpretation by Jesus is now in the centre”. See Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1-7: A Commentary*, trans. Wilhelm C. Linss (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989), 261-265.

<sup>33</sup> François K. Lumbala, “Christ as Ancestor and Elder Brother,” in *Faces of Jesus in Africa*, ed. Robert Schreiter (London: SCM Press, 1991), 126.

<sup>34</sup> Bénézet Bujo, *African Theology in its Social Context*, trans. J. M. O’Donohue (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992), 86.

<sup>35</sup> Ukpong, “Christology and Inculturation,” 53.

original divine intention of the Law”.<sup>36</sup> Jesus does not merely complete the ‘gaps’ in the Law but introduces a new meaning of the Law. In the thinking of Ukpong, divine ‘love’ stands in the centre of the new meaning of the Law that Jesus has introduced.

Central to this new approach to the Law was love – the fact that God loves all persons both good and bad, as children, and we must likewise love all other persons to prove that we are God’s children.<sup>37</sup>

Again he postulates,

Jesus introduced a new understanding of the Law and pointed to himself and the fulfillment. He revealed God’s love and mercy...and emphasized what was already in the Old Testament – that God wants repentance, mercy love rather than the ritualistic observance of the Law.... This is how Jesus evangelized the Jewish religious world with the Good News and the new vision of God’s kingdom – he reinterpreted the people’s religious perception in a new way.<sup>38</sup>

An adequate understanding of Matthew 5:17 must present ‘fulfillment’ as an appropriate counterpart to ‘annul’ and must illuminate the teaching of Jesus in 5:21-48.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, it is most likely that Matthew wants his readers to know that Jesus does not undercut the Law and the Prophets, but as a good teacher, he interprets the Law with the intent to “enable God’s people to live out the Law more effectively”.<sup>40</sup> In addition, although the concept of ‘fulfillment’ in 5:17 may contain a christological content,<sup>41</sup> and may be the ground to extend the effect of the work of Jesus to the indigenous religions, it remains problematic to construe Jesus as the ‘fulfiller’ of the indigenous religious aspirations, practices and values of the ancestors. This is partly because the fulfillment theory is a prey to religious pluralism. To argue that Jesus is required to be proposed in order to deal with the ‘gaps’ in the indigenous religions is a prey to the growing belief in the uniqueness of every religion and its capacity to bring to its adherents the realizations of their aspirations. The issue here is that as more people come to conceive of the indigenous

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 218.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 219.

<sup>41</sup> Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, 265.

religions as self-sufficient, there will be no more ‘gaps’ for Jesus to fill up. The Christ-Event will consequently become irrelevant to the indigenous religious values, beliefs and practices of the people. This is a major weakness in the gap and fulfillment presupposition. Also, the gap and fulfillment presupposition overestimates the continuity between Christianity and the indigenous religions but underestimates their differences. This is the point that is highlighted in the ‘Destructionist’ presupposition to which I will now turn to examine.

## **B. Destructionist Presupposition**

The ‘destructionist presupposition’ does not only reflect a strong incredulity towards the idea of gap and fulfillment but also rejects its core thesis.<sup>42</sup> It is important to note that some theologians who adopt the gap and fulfillment presupposition and who also employ the reconstructionist presupposition will concede that some indigenous cultures need to be eradicated. But the uniqueness of the destructionist presupposition lies in its assumption that Jesus has to destroy the core of the indigenous religious teachings and practices of Nigeria in order to effectively extend the benefits of his work to the people. The destructionist presupposition rejects the idea of fulfillment, arguing that Jesus does not fulfill the indigenous religious values and practices of the ancestors. Yusufu Turaki makes this point:

God’s universal way of dealing with His fallen creation and humanity was revealed in Jesus the Messiah, His redemptive and reconciling work on the cross. Can African ‘intermediaries’ deal adequately with the theological question of the human fall and sin? There are no substitutes to Jesus the Messiah. Even where Jesus is thus recognized and admitted to be Lord and Saviour, He is not a successor or a fulfillment of anything within African religious pantheon and practice, as it was the case between Jesus and the Judaic System.<sup>43</sup>

Tokunboh Adeyemo makes a similar point:

Some...African theologians have asserted that Jesus came to fulfill not only the Old Testament but the African traditional expectations. Besides the fact that this is neither biblical nor traditionally true, it is pertinent to ask why the shadow is

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<sup>42</sup> The Protestants and Pentecostals are the predominant advocates of the destructionist presupposition.

<sup>43</sup> Yusufu Turaki, *The Unique Christ for Salvation: The Challenge of the Non-Christian Religions and Culture* (Nairobi: International Bible Society Africa, 2001), 224.

still embraced (that is, the Traditional Religion) when the perfect reality (Jesus Christ) has come? Why are the advocates of Traditional Religion soliciting a return to the imperfect, confused and unrealistic mythology?<sup>44</sup>

Underlying the destructionist presupposition is the belief that the work of Jesus Christ is unique and stands opposed to the purported mediatory works of the ancestors. This presupposition emphasizes the discontinuity between the indigenous religions and Christianity. Byang Kato is one of the earliest Nigerian theologians who considered the Christian gospel to be radically different from the indigenous religions. According to him, the attempt by some theologians to integrate Christianity into the indigenous religions is both christologically and pragmatically dangerous.<sup>45</sup> He argues that such undertaking is equal to encouraging a Nigerian Christian convert, who is supposed to be liberated from the evils and superstitions of his or her indigenous religion, to go back to them. For him, the indigenous religions cannot provide a valid solution to the Christian's spiritual problems.

The beliefs of African traditional religion only locate the problem; the practices point away from the solution; the Incarnate risen Christ alone is the answer. Christianity is a radical faith and it must transform sinners radically.<sup>46</sup>

For some destructionist theoreticians, the core of the indigenous religions and cultures is contra Christianity. This assumption, of course, is based on the idea that "culture is man-made" and is therefore under the influence of "Satan and his fallen cohorts".<sup>47</sup> Thus, "culture is ... a tool of the enemy of the gospel and does not yield easily to the need of the gospel".<sup>48</sup> What has remained unclear is if there are some aspects of the indigenous religions that are compatible with Christianity. According to Odey,

Those who have tried to baptize elements of African Traditional Religion into Christianity, for instance, ancestors, and communion of the saints, prove unconvincing. For one, eclectic enterprise adds too little. Then, there is a tendency towards a superficial parallelism with loss of real meaning. As it de-

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<sup>44</sup> Adeyemo, *Salvation in African Tradition*, 29.

<sup>45</sup> This understanding underlies what I will refer to in chapter two as 'Neo-Missionary Christology'.

<sup>46</sup> Byang H. Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa* (Kisumu: Evangel, 1975), 38.

<sup>47</sup> Onah Augustine Odey, "Superstitious Beliefs and Practices: A Challenge to the Gospel," *Uyo Journal of Humanities* 7 (2002): 145-164.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

emphasizes the force of the gospel, namely, that Christ liberates from sin and bondage of demonic forces, all who [are] held captive. It runs against the unique claim of Christianity that there is 'No other Name' and the liberating cry, 'Behold, I make all things new.'<sup>49</sup>

Many advocates of the destructionist presupposition such as Odey dismiss the idea that there are major valid areas of convergence between the gospel of Jesus Christ and the religious traditions. The logic of these suspicious attitudes toward the indigenous religions can be articulated as follows: Since culture is man-made, it follows that the indigenous religions are man-made and, therefore, cannot be equated with Christianity which is divine-made. This is precisely the argument of Kato when he bemoans the attempt of some theologians to contextualize Christianity in Africa.

Christianity cannot incorporate any man-made religion. But some theologians are seeking recognition of the so-called 'common ground' between Christianity and African traditional religions.<sup>50</sup>

Those who adopt the destructionist presupposition usually locate their Christology primarily in the biblical representations of Jesus Christ and the creedal christological formulations of the early church. Whilst acknowledging that a Christology designed for the Nigerian context should interact with the indigenous cultures and religions, some of the advocates of the destructionist presupposition insist on the supremacy of the Bible and the christological formulations of the early church on the matter of Christology. In this sense, then, the task of the theologian is to present the Christ-Event in a way that allows the "biblical teachings" about Jesus to address the entire Nigerian "worldview and its culture and religion".<sup>51</sup> And rather than seeking for the areas the indigenous religions agree and conflict with Christianity, the theologian's goal should be to discover what the Bible is saying about non-Christian religions.<sup>52</sup> In his examination of the ancestor-Christology paradigm, Peter Nyende, a Kenyan theologian, faults Kwame Bediako, Bénézet Bujo, and others on failing to engage seriously and comprehensibly with the New

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*, 17.

<sup>51</sup> Turaki, *The Unique Christ for Salvation*, 5.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

Testament teaching about Jesus.<sup>53</sup> Nyende shares the concern of Kato and Turaki on the need for African theologians to use the Bible as the standard for testing and measuring an authentic Christian Christology. For Kato, African theologians who desire to “indigenize Christianity in Africa” must not “betray Scriptural principles of God” in the process.<sup>54</sup>

What is at stake in the attempt to contextualize the Christ-Event, in the thinking of some advocates of the destructionist presupposition, is the finality and supremacy of Jesus Christ. Some of them fear that the finality of Jesus as the only way through which human beings can obtain divine salvation is in danger of underestimation. For Turaki, the uniqueness and finality of Jesus Christ underlie the validity of Christianity’s message of salvation.

Unless Christ is confessed and proclaimed as the unique Lord and Saviour of the whole world as attested to and affirmed by the Holy Scriptures, the prophets and the apostles, our Christian offer of salvation, peace, and justice to the world is meaningless and empty.<sup>55</sup>

Insofar as Jesus figures as the only Saviour of the world, the proponents of the destructionist presupposition contend that there is no salvation outside of Jesus Christ. According to Kato, it “is not arrogance to herald the fact that all who are not ‘in Christ’ are lost”. It is rather “articulating what the Scripture says”.<sup>56</sup> For him, the indigenous religions are devoid of soteriological content and simply have

clues which only highlight human dilemma, man’s craving for the Ultimate Reality, and yet constant flight from Him through the worship of idols....There is emphatically no possibility of salvation through these religions.<sup>57</sup>

Whether or not Kato’s exclusivist understanding of God’s salvation is conceded, it is clear that the destructionist presupposition construes Jesus not as a fulfiller of the purported religious aspirations that exist in the indigenous religions. Jesus rather

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<sup>53</sup> Peter T. N. Nyende, “Jesus the Greatest Ancestor: A Typology-Based Theological Interpretation of the Hebrews’ Christology in Africa,” (Ph. D. Dissertation, University of Edinburgh, 2005), 5-14.

<sup>54</sup> Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*, 16.

<sup>55</sup> Turaki, *The Unique Christ for Salvation*, 116.

<sup>56</sup> Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*, 16.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

stands as a redeemer who can liberate the people from the fears, superstitions, and satanic entanglements that permeate their indigenous religions.

The destructionist presupposition has continued to reverberate in Nigerian Christianity. The reasons for this are not too hard to discern. Some Christians have internalized the Western missionaries' derogatory estimation of the indigenous cultures and traditions.<sup>58</sup> Others, perhaps as a result of their denominational orientation, have continued to view everything that is associated with the indigenous religions as anti-Christianity. The consequent response is that these Christians have become highly suspicious of the compatibility of the indigenous religions and Christianity, and also have become unwilling to grant that there is a positive role of the indigenous religious customs in contextualizing Christianity in Nigeria. Some of these Christians continue to view the core beliefs of the indigenous religions such as ancestor worship as devilish and anti-Christian gospel. Some even go to the extent of insisting that it is unchristian for a Christian to take some medicines that are prepared by native doctors. Felix Ugochukwu in *Christianity in Nigeria: The Way Forward*, narrated a story of his encounter with a Christian who was open to take a traditionally prepared medicine to cure himself.

A brother we reckon high in [the Christian] faith was ill and there was itching all over his body as a result of drug reaction. He took drugs but to no avail, and [the] laboratory test showed nothing. I suggested the use of coconut. He broke one, drank the water and chewed the fruit and was expecting an instant healing. I explained to him that it was not like hunger that disappears as soon as one is fed.... To my greatest surprise, he said how he wished he could get what is called *Nsiattu*, [a word] in Igboland meaning 'poison neutralizer' or 'poison destroyer'. I asked: 'Do you know what you are actually requesting?' [I said to him] that is a concoction prepared by a native doctor under his gods. Even if it means death, a Christian should not request that.<sup>59</sup>

Ugochukwu also narrated a story of a Christian woman who heeded the advice of some of her non-Christian friends to contact a particular native doctor they knew could cure her sickness.<sup>60</sup> According to Ugochukwu, by contacting the native doctor, the woman sinned and has failed to acknowledge that "God's healing balm remains

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<sup>58</sup> See the introduction.

<sup>59</sup> Felix Ugochukwu, *Christianity in Nigeria: The Way Forward* (Owerri: Springfield, 2004), 6.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

available to faithful Christians always”.<sup>61</sup> It is important to recognize here that many Christians associate native doctors with the indigenous religions. And since in their thinking the indigenous religions are demonic, everything that is associated with it is demonic and anti-Christianity. But this understanding of the gospel and the indigenous religious traditions and customs of Nigeria seem to operate only at a surface level. At the deeper level, many Christians exhibit a dual allegiance: they leave Jesus to consult some indigenous sources for solutions to their problems when Jesus is slow to liberate them from their crises.<sup>62</sup>

The greatest problem of the destructionist presupposition is its inability to develop an adequate christological response to the issue of Christ and culture. This presupposition fits roughly into the category that N. Richard Niebuhr in his classical work *Christ and Culture* has dubbed “Christ against culture”.<sup>63</sup> Essential to the destructionist presupposition is the idea that loyalty to Jesus Christ entails a rejection of the ways of Nigerian indigenous cultural and religious thought forms which are believed to be under the influence and control of Satan. Since the mission of Jesus Christ in the world includes destroying the works of Satan, in order for Christians to demonstrate complete loyalty to Jesus Christ, they must continue his work by rejecting the ways of the ‘world’; that is, the world outside of the Christian church.<sup>64</sup> What the proponents of the destructionist presupposition fail to take into account is the logical and practical impossibility of a “sole dependence on Jesus Christ to the exclusion of culture”.<sup>65</sup> As Niebuhr argues,

Christ claims no man purely as a natural being, but always as one who has become human in culture; who is not only in culture, but into whom culture has penetrated.... If Christians do not come to Christ with the language, the thought patterns, the moral disciplines of Judaism, they come with those of Rome; if not with those of Rome, with those of Germany, England, Russia, America, India, or China.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> See chapter three.

<sup>63</sup> N. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (London: Faber and Faber, 1952).

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 58-63.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

One can add to the list the culture of Nigeria and any other African societies. The advocates of the destructionist presupposition underestimate the role of the cultures and traditions of Nigeria in understanding and appropriating the meaning and significance of the Christ-Event in their contexts. The consequence is a form of ‘docetic’ Christology. The proponents of the destructionist hypothesis have failed to account adequately for the humanity of Jesus Christ and how the Jewish culture provided the context for his gospel. They have also failed to acknowledge the existence of the dialectics exemplified in Jesus’ attitude towards human cultures. As a being that incarnated into human culture, Jesus undoubtedly took on human cultural forms although “without being dependent on or domesticated by them”.<sup>67</sup> Jesus does not need to destroy the indigenous religious traditions of Nigeria in order to effectively communicate to the people the divine salvation he embodies. Nigerian theologians also do not have to construe the indigenous religious thought forms of as totally incompatible with the person and work of Jesus Christ.

The destructionist presupposition underestimates the place of the culture of the hearers in their interpretation and experience of the meaning of gospel of Jesus Christ. The proponents of this presupposition need to rediscover that it is not possible for people to truly appreciate and experience the meaning of the Christ-Event in isolation from their own culture. As Graham Ward argues,

To do Christology is to engage in a christological operation; to enquire is to engender Christ; to enter the engagement is to foster the economy whereby God is made know to us. To do Christology is to inscribe Christ into the times and cultures we inhabit.<sup>68</sup>

A Nigerian Christology that fails to engage dialectically with the indigenous religions will hardly influence many Christians at a deeper level. One of the greatest needs of Nigerian Christians is to de-stigmatize the indigenous cultural forms and traditions and to use them as vital tools for re-interpreting the Christ-Event. The ‘reconstructionist’ presupposition, to which I will now turn, attempts to bridge the gulf between the gap and fulfillment and destructionist presuppositions.

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<sup>67</sup> Paul Louis Metzger, *The Word of Christ and the World of Culture: Sacred and Secular through the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 153.

<sup>68</sup> Graham Ward, *Christ and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 2.

### C. Reconstructionist Presupposition

Another presupposition that informs Jesus-talk in Nigerian Christianity, particularly amongst theologians, arises from the assumption that Jesus deconstructs the indigenous religions and reconstructs it in order to create a new religious worldview out of it. Although some proponents of the gap and fulfillment presupposition lean more toward the reconstructionist presupposition, this presupposition seeks to provide a bridge between the destructionist and the gap and fulfillment presuppositions. What the reconstructionist presupposition shares with the gap and fulfillment presupposition is the view that the indigenous worldview provides a valid context for interpreting and explaining meaningfully the Christ-Event in the Nigerian context. The reconstructionist presupposition, however, agrees with the destructionist presupposition that Jesus Christ does not merely fill up the purported gaps in the indigenous religions.

The majority of the theologians who employ this presupposition will claim that Jesus reconstructs the indigenous religions by challenging, sifting, transforming, and rebuilding it.<sup>69</sup> Justin Ukpong is a leading proponent of this view. Although he sees Jesus as a fulfiller, he construes fulfillment in the sense of reconstruction. This understanding of Jesus' relation to the indigenous cultures, for Ukpong, stems from Jesus' attitude towards the traditions of Judaism.

Using [some] elements of Jewish culture, [Jesus] sought to instil into the Law and the Jewish religion a new vision based on the Good News that he preached. This involved a challenge to this Jewish culture and religions to respond to the Good News and a challenge to people to rethink their basic beliefs, hopes, and institutions. Jesus issued this challenge from within the culture itself and not from outside of it.<sup>70</sup>

According to Ukpong, an adequate Christology will create enough room for Jesus to accommodate and reconstruct the cultures and traditions of Nigeria. The Kenyan theologian, J. K. Mugambi, has articulated a theological foundation for the reconstructionist presupposition. In *From Liberation to Reconstruction: African Christian Theology after the Cold War*, Mugambi writes:

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<sup>69</sup> Ukpong, "Christology and Inculturation," 41.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

Jesus of Nazareth enters history at a time when Judea is rife with the Messianic hope that some deliverer would come to liberate the people from the yoke of Roman imperialism. The critics of Jesus accused him of trying to destroy Judaism and its institutions. In response, Jesus replied that his mission was reconstructive rather than destructive.<sup>71</sup>

For Mugambi, the beauty, albeit the complexity, of reconstruction is that in the builders' master plan, "new specification may be made in the new designs, while some aspects of the old complex are retained in the new".<sup>72</sup> He argues that it is time African theologians moved from the state of liberation to reconstruction just as the people of Israel who returned with Ezra and Nehemiah and reconstructed their nation. He argues that the book of Nehemiah should become the "central text of the new theological paradigm in African Christian theology as a logical development from the Exodus motif".<sup>73</sup> He develops a broader concept of the reconstruction paradigm. According to him, a reconstructive theology must include a personal reconstruction, cultural reconstruction and ecclesiastical reconstruction. Personal reconstruction refers to the transformation that begins with the individual person. "Jesus teaches that constructive change must start from within the motives and intention of the individual".<sup>74</sup> The cultural reconstruction includes the religious worldview of a given society. He warns that African theologians are in danger of producing the theologies that are irrelevant to their people if they ignore their cultures.

Let each of us take our cultural background as the starting point of our theological quest. We do not have any other option, unless we intend to be superficial and redundant. If we wish to serve meaningfully and relevantly, then we must take our cultural and religious heritage seriously.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> J. N. K. Mugambi, *From Liberation to Reconstruction: African Christian Theology after the Cold War* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1995), 13.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 25.

The ecclesiastical reconstruction includes “management structures, financial policies, pastoral care, human resources development, research, family education, service and witness”.<sup>76</sup>

Although Mugambi has not fully developed a Christology that is built on a reconstructionist presupposition, his understanding of a theology of reconstruction is crucial for conceptualizing the content of this presupposition. Ukpong and others, who construe Jesus as the one that has not come to destroy the indigenous traditions of Nigeria, but to reconstruct them, contend that the Christ-Event must be interpreted to befit the cultural, religious and social needs of Nigerian Christians. The key difference between the gap and fulfillment presupposition and the reconstructionist presupposition is that whereas the former construes Jesus as the individual who *fills up* the gaps in the indigenous religions, the latter sees Jesus as the individual who radically criticizes and destroys some parts of the indigenous religious beliefs when necessary in order to effectively reconstruct and rebuild a new form of ‘culture and tradition’ for the Nigerian people.<sup>77</sup>

It is important to acknowledge that the indigenous worldview has continued to shape many Nigerian Christians. Construing Jesus as the one that destroys the indigenous worldview therefore will perpetuate a shallow understanding of the meaning and relevance of the Christ-Event in Nigerian Christianity. But rather than simply fulfilling or completing the gaps that exist in the indigenous religions, Jesus reconstructs them radically with the intent to create a new understanding of God and his creation – a worldview that is Nigerian and at the same time Christian. Understood in this way, the story of Jesus Christ would become good news to Nigerians who converted to Christianity from their indigenous religions. The Christian convert would not be under the fear of being removed from the cultures and traditions that define his or her identity as Nigerian.

Ogbu Kalu has argued that the African worldview is elastic in nature and has the “capacity to make room within its inherited body of traditions for new realities”

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>77</sup> Another difference between the gap and fulfillment presupposition and the reconstructionist presupposition is that whilst the former concentrates on the indigenous cultures and traditions of Nigeria, the latter goes beyond some of the obsolete indigenous cultures and traditions of Nigeria to engage with the contemporary concerns of Nigerians.

or foreign worldviews.<sup>78</sup> A reconstructionist presupposition explores the ‘openness’ of the indigenous religions. Ukpong challenges African Christians to adopt the presupposition of reconstruction in their practice of evangelism.

Correctly understood, the church’s mission is to evangelize human cultures and to transform the human race through the gospel message. This means effecting change in a Christian direction in the common meanings and values that inform the way of life of people. It involves a challenge to the common thinking and shared meaning in society.<sup>79</sup>

Kalu agrees with Ukpong, arguing that

Christianization process must take cognisance of the element of continuity in the religious lives of Africans instead of branding everything under the umbrage of syncretism.<sup>80</sup>

The reconstructionist presupposition in a sense assembles some of things the destructionist presupposition dismantles, and deconstructs some of the foundations of the gap and fulfillment presupposition with the intent to create a meeting point for Christianity and the indigenous religions. However, what many reconstructionist theologians have failed to articulate is the extent to which Jesus reconstructs the indigenous religions. How can we ascertain the precise elements of the indigenous religions or culture that need to be demolished and refurbished in order to construct a Nigerian Christology? How far does Jesus need to reconstruct the indigenous worldview of Nigeria? Would the core elements of the worldview remain untouchable after the reconstruction? Would the indigenous worldview still be recognizable after the reconstruction? These are some pertinent questions that the theologian who employs the reconstructionist presupposition must be ready to answer. The theologian must also avoid constructing a Christology on ‘syncretistic’ foundations that neither adequately represents the teachings of Christianity nor the indigenous religions. This is part of the worries of the theologians who adopt primarily the destructionist presupposition. The proponents of the reconstructionist presupposition have the burden to articulate the required balance that is needed to

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<sup>78</sup> Ogbu U. Kalu, “The Shape and Flow of African Church Historiography,” in *African Christianity: An African Story*, ed., Ogbu U. Kalu (Pretoria: University of Pretoria, 2005), 3.

<sup>79</sup> Ukpong, “Christology and Inculturation,” 41.

<sup>80</sup> Kalu, “The Shape and Flow of African Church Historiography,” 8.

faithfully represent the indigenous religious worldview of Nigeria and the meaning and significance of the Christ-Event.<sup>81</sup>

#### **D. Solution Presupposition**

The three foregoing presuppositions I have examined share the view that Jesus is a solution to human religious problems. For some advocates of the destructionist presupposition, human beings are in a fallen state, under the wrath of God and in need of a saviour. Jesus alone, and not the ancestors or the mediators in the indigenous religions, can provide a lasting and adequate solution to this human predicament. As Turaki argues,

The solution of man's condition does not lie in any religious ritual and ceremonies and sacrifices, for these are only mere human attempts at placating God (Hebrews 8-10). God cannot be appeased by any human religiosity. Man's efforts cannot be man's solution. Man needs a divine solution, which God has already provided in Jesus the Messiah. If 'intermediaries' often talked about in the African religious pantheon are meant to solve human problems, especially, man's estrangement from his Creator, this form of solution falls only within 'man's making of his own god'. The tradition and religion of the ancestors, even when invoked, fall under man's making of his own 'bridges' to God. Jesus the Messiah is that 'bridge' and the fulfillment of God's universal prophetic and messianic hope.<sup>82</sup>

Kato is also very critical of human nature. He contends that to be saved in the Judeo-Christian understanding "presupposes the lost condition for which salvation or deliverance is needed".<sup>83</sup> But Onah Odey articulates a holistic view of salvation. According to him,

Salvation [is] not necessarily a technical theological term, but simply denotes 'deliverance' from almost any kind of evil, whether material or spiritual. Theologically, however, it denotes the whole process by which man is delivered from all that interferes with the enjoyment of God's highest blessing; the actual enjoyment of those blessings. The root idea in salvation is deliverance from some danger or evil.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> I will explore these issues further in chapters four, five, six and seven.

<sup>82</sup> Turaki, *The Unique Christ for Salvation*, 145.

<sup>83</sup> Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*, 41.

<sup>84</sup> Onah Augustine Odey, "Superstitious Beliefs and Practices: A Challenge to the Gospel," *Uyo Journal of Humanities* 7 (2002): 145-164.

The salvation that Jesus brings, for Odey, embraces the idea of an already-not- yet tension. It actively affects the present and the future. He writes,

As in the teaching of Jesus (Matt 9:22) salvation throughout the New Testament is regarded as a present experience, but it is eschatological as well. In deed the blessing of salvation the believer has now [is] only a foretaste of what are to be [in the] coming age, after Christ comes. The salvation Christ brings is not merely deliverance from future punishment, but also from sin as a present power (Rom 6). It includes all the redemptive blessing we have in Christ, chiefly conversion, regeneration, justification, adoption, sanctification, and glorification. It provides a solution for the whole problem of sin, in all its many aspects.<sup>85</sup>

The proponents of the deconstructionist and gap and fulfillment presuppositions have argued that the salvation which Jesus enacts and embodies affects all aspects of human exigencies. The work of Jesus is a solution to the problems caused by human sins and which have imbued the cultural and religious traditions of Nigeria. The functional Christology of these two presuppositions tends to lean more to the humanity of Jesus Christ. For many of these theologians, Jesus provides a perfect example of what God intends human beings and their societies to be.<sup>86</sup> The tasks of the Nigerian theologian, in their thinking, are to present the gospel message about Jesus in a way that “exposes inhuman actions, ignorance, superstition,” to “broaden the border of Christian charity” and to teach people to “appreciate the love of God and the loftiness of human dignity and rights”.<sup>87</sup>

At the grassroots level, the majority of lay Christians see Jesus primarily as a solution to their spiritual, economic, and social problems. The grassroots Christologies of Nigerian Christianity exist in different oral forms, including songs, testimonies and prayer. Here I will examine a popular Christian song composed by James Arum.<sup>88</sup> Many Christian songs composed by some Christian musicians usually have powerful theological and christological contents. In some situations, songs play a creedal role, functioning as a short theological or christological expression of the

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Ukpong, “Christology and Inculturation,” 51.

<sup>87</sup> Anacletus N. Odemene, “The Church in Nigeria: Its Human Burden vis-à-vis its Divine Mission,” in *Witnessing Christ in Contemporary Nigeria*, ed. Anacletus N. Odemene (Port Harcourt: CIWA, 2005), 77.

<sup>88</sup> This song is partly in Igbo language and pidgin English and is most popular in south-eastern Nigeria.

cardinal beliefs of many Christians. In this song, Arum asks Jesus to “settle him so that he can rejoice with other people” whom Jesus has already ‘settled’ with prosperity and blessing.

*Ude mụ na asụ  
Akwa nke mụ na ebe  
Nani Jisọs bụ onye nwe m mara mkpa m  
Jisọs settle lụọ nụ mụ  
Ka mụ soro ibe mụ ñụria  
Jisọs settle lụọ nụ mụ  
Ka mụ kwụsị I nye gi nsogbu  
Mere m ihe nkem na ariọ*

My sobbing  
My crying  
It is only Jesus that understands my need  
Jesus, settle me  
So that I can rejoice with others  
Jesus, settle me  
So that I can stop worrying you  
Do for me the things I am requesting

One of the interesting things about this song is that Arum alludes to some of the sayings of Jesus to buttress his persistent request for a divine settlement or blessing. Arum begins by reminding Jesus of some of his promises that are contained in his Sermon on the Mount.<sup>89</sup>

*Ọ kwa gi sị anyị riọ, I sị na anyị ga ariọta?  
Na anyị kụọ aka na ụzọ, na ọnụ ụzọ ga emepe?*

Did you not tell us to ask; you said, ‘we would receive?’  
And that we should knock at the door, that the door would be opened?

Arum also alludes to Jesus’ invitation to people to come to him with their burdens.<sup>90</sup>

*I siri anyị ‘biakute gi anyị bụ ndị eboro ibu dị arọ  
Na I ga eme ka ibu arọ anyị bu dị nfe’  
Eburuwo mụ nsogbu uwa bịa na iru gi  
Ome nma I ga ekwa ka mụ buru ha laghachi?*

You said to us to ‘come to you all of us that are carrying heavy load  
That you would make our heavy loads to be weightless’  
I have brought my problems to your presence  
The benevolent one, would you want me to go back with the problems?

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<sup>89</sup> See Matthew 7:7-12; Luke 11:9-13.

<sup>90</sup> Matthew 11:28.

Arum buttresses his desire for a divine settlement by alluding to the parable Jesus told about a persistent widow and “a Judge who did not fear God”.<sup>91</sup>

The word ‘settlement’ which is the key to understanding this song is worthy of examination. There are several possible ways of understanding the contextual implications of the language of ‘settlement’ in Nigeria. But two contexts are particularly helpful. Firstly, the language of settlement goes hand-in-hand with apprenticeship. In most cases, some young adults live with some wealthy businessmen or businesswomen to learn trade. The duration of the training varies depending on the circumstances and the conditions of the agreement. At the end of the training, the businessman (normally called ‘master’) is expected to ‘settle’ or give a reasonable sum of money and other resources to settle the trainee. What is vital to remember in this context is that it is believed to be the ‘right’ of the apprentice, so long as he or she completes the training without offending his or her master, to demand a ‘settlement’ from his or her master.

Secondly, almost anyone living in Nigeria understands the language of ‘settlement’ to mean ‘paying off one’s way’. A popular example is the encounter between many motorists and the majority of police officers who work at numerous road checkpoints. Normally, when a police officer stops a car or a commercial bus he or she immediately asks the driver for ‘papers’. For anyone that is new to the country, the language of ‘papers’ may not make sense at all. But the majority of the people who live in the country know immediately that the officers are not really asking the driver to produce the documents of the vehicle, but rather (in most cases) to ‘settle’ or to give them money. Sometimes some police officers will detain the motorists who refuse to give them money. Here the idea is: if a motorist does not want the police officers to delay or continue to disturb the flow of his or her journey, then he or she must ‘settle’ them. Undoubtedly, some motorists who settle immediately do so most of the time grudgingly.

The christological problem with using the ‘language of settlement’ to explain Jesus’ idea of people asking, knocking and seeking, and his invitation to the people with heavy loads, is that it distorts the generosity and graciousness that propel God’s blessings. Unlike many motorists who give grudgingly to the police officers at road

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<sup>91</sup> Luke 18:1-8.

checkpoints, God, in the thinking of Jesus, gives generously and willingly.<sup>92</sup> Also, unlike the police officers who forcefully ask for settlement from the motorists and extort money, for Jesus, people who ask from God must do so within the confines of God's righteousness: "But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and other things will be added to you".<sup>93</sup>

Other crucial elements that need noting in Arum's song is the impatience and ungodly jealousy that subtly drive the whole concept of settlement. The following lines from the song will highlight these elements.

*Oge nke eruola. Mere mụ ihe imere ibe mụ. O kwa ọna abụ emere nwatakiri ihe emere ibe you, o kwa obi ga adi ya nma na elu uwa? Ya mere chorọ mụ my own share ka mụ soro ibe mụ yoba-ibara n'ime... ka mụ kwusi inye gi nsogbu.*

My time has come. Do for me what you have done for others. Isn't it [true] that when it is done for a child what has been done for others, the child will become happy? Therefore, give to me my own share so that I can rejoice with others... and so that I can stop disturbing you.

It is vital to highlight three major problems with the solution presupposition. First, as Arum's song has indicated, the desire to accumulate and possess health, wealth, and wellbeing stimulates and drives the idea of settlement. This desire contradicts, to use the language of John McDowell, the notions of self-giving and self-dispossessing that are exemplified in the Christian image of the triune God.<sup>94</sup> Rather than being driven by the spirit of accumulation and possessiveness, Nigerian Christians face the challenge to learn from Jesus who embodies self-giving. Second, the danger in construing Jesus as the one who settles people is that this understanding may lead a Christian into an ungodly comparison that reproduces hatred, covetousness and jealousy. Theologians and lay Christians must begin to see Jesus Christ as both an answer and a questioner. He does not only produce answers or solutions to human problems; he also questions people's understandings of their problems and the motives behind their desires for solutions. And third, what is at stake here is the politics of power. The quest for power informs partly Jesus-talk in contemporary Nigerian Christianity. This quest operates at a deeper level of the

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<sup>92</sup> Matthew 6:25-34.

<sup>93</sup> Matthew 6:33, *NASB*.

<sup>94</sup> John C. McDowell, *The Gospel according to Star Wars: Faith, Hope, and the Force* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 25.

struggles of the majority of theologians as well as lay Christians to liberate themselves from the 'bondage' of Western Christologies and to contextualize the Christ-Event so as to befit their history, experience, culture, indigenous worldview, and social location. This quest, as it will become clearer in chapters two and three, is shrewdly metamorphosing into 'icons of power and control' that strip Jesus of the power to critique and inform the emerging contextual Christologies. The implication of this state of affairs is that the majority of theologians and the Christian laity are consciously or unconsciously disempowering Jesus in order to achieve their christological, cultural, religious and social aspirations.

In conclusion, as I have already argued, it will be a mistake to assume that Nigerian theologians can be categorized neatly under any of these presuppositions. They share the quest to imagine and express the Christ-Event in the ways that connect with some cultural and existential issues that confront their contexts. The four presuppositions I have examined are unique in some respects; but as I have shown, they also overlap. In spite of their christological problems, these presuppositions inform the majority of the existing theologies and Christologies in Nigeria. They have contributed immensely to the uniqueness of the christological models that have been constructed by some key theologians. Some of the presuppositions also shape some of the emerging grassroots Christologies. The Revealer Christology model I aim to construct in this study, on the one hand, will draw insights from these presuppositions and, on the other hand, will differ from them, particularly from any claim that seem to discourage a dialectical engagement between the Christ-Event and the indigenous religions of Nigeria. I will now proceed to examine in the next two chapters some of the major christological models that exist in contemporary Nigerian Christianity.

## CHAPTER TWO

### CONSTRUCTIVE CHRISTOLOGIES OF CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN CHRISTIANITY

In this chapter, I examine some of the christological models that some key Nigerian theologians have constructed. For the purpose of clarity, I examine these models under three major headings; namely, neo-missionary Christology, culture-oriented Christology and liberation-oriented Christology. Although these Christologies sometimes overlap, it is important to note that they have pursued different agendas and have generated different kinds of questions and answers. Building on the christological presuppositions I examined in chapter one, I will question, articulate and critique these Christologies, paying attention to their historical contexts, agendas and contents. As we shall see, these Christologies are indicative of the persistent influence of the *Taylorian christological presupposition* that I examined in the introduction of this study.

The theologians I am going to examine have made unique contributions to the development of Nigerian (and African) Christologies and theologies. But I will argue that their Christologies have remained largely inadequate. The majority of them have fallen into a ‘dichotomist trap’ and have failed to engage appropriately with the dialectics that ought to characterize ontological Christology and functional Christology, and also the *tension* that shrouds the act of interpreting and appropriating the Christ-Event in human ever-shifting cultural and social contexts. Some of these theologians have continued to raise the questions which may have defined the identity of Nigerian Christianity in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries but which no longer bother many lay Christians today. While it is important to acknowledge the contributions of these Christologies in the making and development of contextual christological discourses in Nigeria, it is also necessary to critique them in order to see how adequately (or inadequately) they have understood and interacted with their immediate contexts and the Christ-Event.

## A. Neo-Missionary Christology

Christianity does not undertake to destroy national assimilation; where there are any degrading superstitious defects, it corrects them....<sup>1</sup>

These were the words of Samuel Ajayi Crowther, a rescued Nigerian slave, who later became the first Nigerian Anglican bishop of the Niger Dioceses. Crowther's contention exemplifies one of the earliest attempts by some Nigerian Christian converts to contextualize the Christ-Event and Christianity in Nigeria. But it is Byang Kato who has created what I describe in this study as the 'Neo-missionary Christology'.<sup>2</sup> According to Kato, whilst it is important for African theologians to write theologies that are relevant to their contexts, they must bear in mind that Christianity is superior to every culture and as such must remain the sole judge to determine the adequacy of their indigenous cultures and traditions.

Some [African] church leaders today frown [at] the missionaries for declaring the unique Lordship of Christ as presented in the Scriptures.... African Christians who have found it necessary to burn every idol have followed precedents set in the Scriptures (Acts 19). Christianity stands to judge every culture, destroying elements that are incompatible modes of expression for its advance, and bringing new life to its adherents, the qualitative life that begins at the moment of conversion and culminates eternally with the imminent return of our Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>3</sup>

Kato's foregoing words encapsulates the Neo-missionary Christology. Although the locution 'Neo-missionary' has not yet entered into the christological discourse in Nigeria, it seems to be the most appropriate expression that describes the type of Christology that emerged as a reaction to the 'Culture-oriented Christology' and the

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Jesse Page, *The Black Bishop: Samuel Ajayi Crowther* (New York: Fleming, 1908), 299.

<sup>2</sup> Although Kato lived a relatively short life, he has remained the most influential Evangelical theologian in Nigeria and arguably in Africa. He was born in 1936 in Nigeria and studied theology in ECWA Theological Seminary Igbaja, Nigeria and London Bible College. He completed his doctorate studies in theology at Dallas Theological Seminary, Texas, USA, in 1974 (a year after he was elected general secretary of Association of Evangelicals of Africa and Madagascar). He became the vice-president of the World Evangelical Fellowship (WEF) in 1974 and in 1975 became the chairman of WEF's theological commission. He died in December 1975. Kato only published one book before his death but wrote and presented several theological papers on theology some of which have now been published.

<sup>3</sup> Byang H. Kato, *Biblical Christianity in Africa: A Collection of Papers and Addresses* (Achimota: African Christian Press, 1985), 29.

Missionary Christology.<sup>4</sup> Broadly conceived, the Neo-missionary Christology tries to create a compromise between the Missionary Christology and *some* indigenous cultures of Africa.<sup>5</sup> It relates to the Missionary Christology dialectically: on the one hand, the Neo-Missionary Christology adopts some of the presuppositions of the Missionary Christology; and, on the other hand, it parts ways with the Missionary Christology by creating a new and contextually-driven hermeneutic for interpreting the Christ-Event.

### **1. Neo-Missionary Christology in relation to Missionary Christology**

Kato, technically speaking, did not write a Christology. But he was a sort of a generalist, writing on different aspects of Christian theology. However, his Christology permeates his soteriology and theology of religions, and his work remains foundational to the development of the Neo-Missionary Christology. He sets his theological work against the backdrop of what he considers as the problem of universalism and syncretism (embedded in the emerging African theology and ecumenical theology), which he perceives as a threat to the “belief in Christ as the only way of Salvation”.<sup>6</sup> His description of this religious phenomenon and the danger it poses to Christology is sharp:

The stage is well set for universalism in Africa. Universalism means the belief that all men will eventually be saved whether they believe in Christ or not.<sup>7</sup>

Again he writes,

It is not neo-colonialism to plead the uniqueness and finality of Jesus Christ. It is not arrogance to herald the fact that all who are not ‘in Christ’ are lost. It is merely articulating what the Scriptures say.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See the introduction for discussions on the ‘Missionary Christology’ as used in this study. I will examine the meaning and content of the ‘Culture-oriented Christologies’ later in this chapter.

<sup>5</sup> It will be misleading to assume that every Christology that belongs to the category of ‘Neo-Missionary’ shares the same level of enthusiasm for the Missionary Christology.

<sup>6</sup> Byang Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa* (Kisumu: Evangel, 1975), 11. Kato sees African Theology as “a funeral march of Biblical Christianity and a heralding of syncretism and universalism”. *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

Regardless of what anyone thinks of Kato, his theology and Christology continue to have influence on African theological and christological discourses.<sup>9</sup> His greatest contribution to African theology is perhaps his insistence on situating the Bible in the centre of Christian theology.<sup>10</sup> Keith Ferdinando argues that Kato “was committed to certain non-negotiable presuppositions”, and fundamental among them “was the belief that the Bible was the unique Word of God, the ultimate source and authority” for theological expression.<sup>11</sup> Kato guarded jealously the centrality of the Bible in theology so much so that he warned that his contemporaries who were more open to cultural dialogue emasculated the classical view of the Bible and salvation.

Having thrown away the authoritative basis of the Word of God, man leaves the door open for a man-made message. It is no wonder that liberals cannot come to an orthodox understanding of salvation.<sup>12</sup>

Interpreters of Kato differ on the relevance of his work to African contextual Christology (and theology in general). But they agree that he held a high (Evangelical) view of the Bible. The Ghanaian theologian, Kwame Bediako, for example, describes Kato as a biblicist whose theology was rooted in the tradition of North American Christianity, and represented a “reaction and rebuttal of” the project of African theology.<sup>13</sup> David Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, on the contrary, paint a positive

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<sup>9</sup> Although Kato’s works constituted primarily an intellectual engagement with some African theologians like Bolaji Idowu and John Mbiti, he demonstrated a keen interest in engaging with Western theological scholarship. His only Major work was *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*. Kato’s influence on African theological discourse persists as evidenced in the annual lectures some Nigerian seminaries (e.g. ECWA Theological Seminary Igbaja) organize in commemoration of his theological work. Also some Nigerian influential Evangelical theologians like Tokunboh Adeyemo and Yusufu Turaki draw inspiration from Kato’s theological presuppositions. See Y. Turaki, “The Theological Legacy of the Reverend Doctor Byang Kato,” *African Journal of Evangelical Theology* 20, no. 2 (2001): 133-155..

<sup>10</sup> Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and in Modern Africa* (Oxford: Regnum, 1992), 412.

<sup>11</sup> Keith Ferdinando, “The Legacy of Byang Kato,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 28, no. 4 (2004): 169-174.

<sup>12</sup> Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*, 16.

<sup>13</sup> Bediako, *Theology and Identity*, 386.

picture of Kato, presenting him as a theologian whose work models an authentic biblical Christian theology.<sup>14</sup>

It is misleading to construe Kato either as completely anti African theology, or as the only African theologian who took the Bible seriously in the construction of theology in Africa in the 1970s. To buttress this contention, I will explore Kato's views of some indigenous cultures and religions and their relationship to Christianity. It is important to note that Kato was sometimes critical of some missionaries' theology and cultures, although some of his critics do not always acknowledge it. He argued that some of the early Western missionaries were culprits of the error and arrogance of cultural hegemony.

One common error...is the lumping together of some fundamental Biblical principles with the western culture and repudiating both. The error begins with some early missionaries who identified the kingdom of God with Western civilization. This naïve concept is rejected today.<sup>15</sup>

Also, Kato indicts a particular missionary, who worked in Nigeria in 1918, for describing the ethnic group among whom he worked he worked in a degrading way by presenting them as

‘The people of low type... [who lived] for the most part in crude nudity. The older men and women can recall the taste of human flesh. They are all lazy.... They do not know God’.<sup>16</sup>

Kato employs the same standard to evaluate the compatibility of Western and African cultures with what he considers to be the ‘gospel’. For him, a Western culture or an African culture can co-exist with biblical Christianity so long as it does “not imprison the gospel”.<sup>17</sup>

He, however, underestimates the ambivalence that undergirds the messages of Jesus Christ and the variant ways his followers, particularly the New Testament writers,

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<sup>14</sup> David J. Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models* (Leicester: Apollos, 1989), 96-112.

<sup>15</sup> Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*, 175.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

have explained the meaning of the gospel of Jesus to the people of their own contexts.<sup>18</sup> Because he has failed to interact thoroughly with the complexity of the Christian gospel and cultures (even though he was aware of the complexity),<sup>19</sup> he presented an image of Jesus Christ, like in the Missionary Christology, that aimed to conquer and eliminate some indigenous religions and cultures of Africa. For example, he rejected Mbiti's African theology because, for him, Mbiti did "not feel that African traditional beliefs should be wiped out".<sup>20</sup>

## 2. Neo-Missionary Christology and the Making of Nigerian Contextual Christology

The Neo Missionary Christology, unlike the Missionary Christology, as we will see later in this chapter, acknowledges the need to root the gospel of Jesus Christ in the Nigerian context.<sup>21</sup> Tokunboh Adeyemo, a Nigerian theologian who has embraced Kato's theological ideologies, hints this shift. He expresses his dissatisfaction with the dependence of many Nigerian and African churches "on their parents in Europe and North America for their theology, liturgy and funds".<sup>22</sup> He goes on to argue that the time for the African churches to break with some of the Western theological ideas, funds, and hymns is overdue.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> See Justin S. Ukpong, "Christology and Inculturation: A New Testament Perspective," in *Paths of African Theology*, ed. Rosino Gibellini (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1994), 40-61; I. Howard Marshall, "Culture and the New Testament," in *Gospel and Culture: The Papers of Consultation on the Gospel and Culture, Convened by the Lausanne Committee's Theology and Education Group* (Wheaton: Lausanne Committee for Word Evangelization, 1979), 21-46; Bruce J. Nicholls, "Towards a Theology of Gospel and Culture," in *Gospel and Culture*, 69-82; Dean Apel, "Towards a Samburu Christology," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 23, no. 5 (1996): 356-367.

<sup>19</sup> Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*, 174.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>21</sup> Byang Kato, "Theological Issues in Africa," *Bibliotheca sacra* 133 (1976): 146.

<sup>22</sup> Tokunboh Adeyemo, "African Evangelicals in the '80s," in *Serving Our Generation: Evangelical Strategies for the Eighties* (Colorado Springs: World Evangelical Fellowship, 1980), 33.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

It is a misrepresentation of Kato to construe him as presenting completely an anti contextual Christology or theology. Ferdinando observes that the

*Theological Pitfalls* itself, as well as many of [Kato's] articles, addressed some of the issues of the Africa of 1970s and are themselves a move toward a contextual approach.<sup>24</sup>

In one of his ten-point proposals on how to “safeguard biblical Christianity in Africa”, Kato challenges African Christians to

express Christianity in a truly African context, allowing it to judge African culture and never allow the culture to take precedence over Christianity. To do otherwise would isolate African Christianity from historical Christianity....<sup>25</sup>

Again he asserts,

Evangelicals who hold the Bible as their basic source for Christian theology must learn to move beyond the divinely revealed source to the human dimension where the action is. They must discover how best to relate to the human situation in all areas including the socio-economic arena.<sup>26</sup>

Kato is sympathetic with the agenda of African Theology only when it means relating a “Christian theology to the changing situations in Africa”.<sup>27</sup> He rejected some of the contextual approaches some theologians such as the Kenyan theologian, John Mbiti, and the Nigerian theologian, Bolaji Idowu, have developed and argued that they were “defending African traditional religions and practices that are incompatible with biblical teaching”.<sup>28</sup>

The reason some African theologians see Kato's theological work as North American in approach and perhaps even irrelevant to the project of African contextual theology is connected with his conflicting attitude towards the indigenous religions and cultures of Africa. On the one hand, Kato recognizes the need to promote some African cultures and the identity of the African peoples through constructing a contextual

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<sup>24</sup> Ferdinando, “The Legacy of Byang Kato,” 169.

<sup>25</sup> Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*, 182.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

theology and, on the other hand, he appears to be highly critical of some African cultures, viewing them as incompatible with a ‘biblical Christianity’.

Kato presents his positive view of some African indigenous cultures in the light of Christology.

The attitude of Christians toward cultural renaissance need not be negative. Culture as a way of life must be maintained. Jesus Christ became a man in order to save men. In becoming incarnate, He was involved in the Jewish culture – wearing their clothes, eating their food, thinking in their thought patterns. But while He went through all that, He was without sin, addressing both Jewish and Gentile people authoritatively as the Son of God. Jesus would not have come to make Africans become American Christians [or] to cause Europeans to become Indian Christians. It is God’s will that Africans, on accepting Christ as their Saviour, become Christian Africans. Africans who become Christians should therefore remain Africans wherever their culture does not conflict with the Bible. It is the Bible that must judge the culture. Where a conflict results, the cultural element must give way.<sup>29</sup>

This lengthy quotation indicates that Kato is pro-contextual Christology. But he also seems to treat some indigenous cultures and religions of Africa harshly and sometimes regards them ‘holistically’ as incompatible with what he construes as a biblical Christianity. He contends that when an Evangelical “rejects veneration of African traditional religions” he or she does so for the sake of “safeguarding the unique gospel of Christ”.<sup>30</sup> For him, Jesus relates to the non-Christian religions and cultures “not by filling up the measure of idolatry but by transformation”.<sup>31</sup> He accuses Mbiti of giving “the impression that both Christianity and non-Christian religions are valuable and deserve co-existing”.<sup>32</sup> In his assessment of B. Schuyler’s criticism of some Westerners for their degrading conception of African peoples and their worldviews, he dismisses the idea that the indigenous religions can contribute positively to the spiritual formation of many African Christians. He writes,

For anyone who has been involved in ‘pagan’ religion, the suggestion for ‘integral Christianity’ or ‘evolution of African from pagan to Christian beliefs’ is like telling an ex-cancer patient that it was a mistake that he received a complete cure. The

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 177.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 70.

dominating fears and superstitions concerning the spirit world are so dreadful that an instantaneous and complete cure is what Jaba people need.... African traditional religions only locate the problem; the Incarnate risen Christ alone is the answer. Christianity is a radical faith and it must transform sinners radically.<sup>33</sup>

Some theologians are critical of Kato's theological work. To cite one example, Mercy Oduyoye, a notable feminist theologian, contends that Kato's reason for studying some African indigenous religions "is to expose the idolatry that they are and to reduce their hold on the culture of the people".<sup>34</sup> Oduyoye also argues that Kato's condemnation of the indigenous religion of the Jaba people stems from the fact that he employs the standard of a "Western Christian attitude toward the primal worldview of African beliefs and practices."<sup>35</sup>

The Neo-missionary Christology presents us with a picture of Jesus who is undergoing an identity crisis: the Jesus who is neither truly Western nor truly Nigerian. This particular image of Jesus pervades Kato's theological struggle to contextualize the Christian gospel in Nigeria (and Africa at large) while at the same time holding unto his North American-shaped theology and Christology. The difference between Kato and some of his contemporaries who constructed contextual theologies lies partly in his approach. Kato construed the Bible as the Word of God and as the ultimate source of Christian theology that must judge every culture.<sup>36</sup> For him, "Christianity should be

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 38. For Kato, Jesus Christ is a "fulfillment of the Old Testament and of the deep spiritual need of the human hearts, *but He is not the fulfillment of African traditional religions or any other non-Christian religion*". Ibid., 155.

<sup>34</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflections on Christianity in Africa* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1986), 61.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>36</sup> It is important to recognize that the Neo-Missionary Christology is a contextual Christology like the Culture-Oriented Christology and Liberation-Oriented Christology. The difference between them is that the Neo-Missionary Christology can be regarded as "dogmatic contextualization" while Culture-Oriented and Liberation-Oriented Christologies can be classified as "existential contextualization". Bruce Nicholls defines 'dogmatic contextualization' as the approach that "begins with a concern for biblical theology as a fixed authoritative orienting point of contextualization", and 'existential contextualization' as the approach that begins with culture and "seeks to develop a dialectical interaction between questions" of a particular human history and the "existential understanding of the Word of God". See Bruce J. Nicholls, "Toward a Theology of Gospel and Culture," 69-70.

judged by what its Founder has said in His Word....”<sup>37</sup> What Kato perhaps ignores is the fact that the Bible itself is a product of culture. Colin Gunton has pointed out that the

biblical books emerged out of a process of human engagement with God, as Israel and the apostolic Church lived out and lived within the historical events which were determinative of faith.<sup>38</sup>

The cultures and indigenous religions (at least Judaism and Hellenism) of the authors of the Bible inform its structures and contents. Since Kato ignores this truth about the Bible, he assumes that it was unwarranted to develop some non-biblical images or local metaphors to explain the dialectic of the universality and particularity of Jesus Christ. Also, he underestimates the importance of the ‘reader’ in biblical hermeneutics. While a reader-response hermeneutic is problematic, and is by no means the only lens through which to interpret the biblical text, it nonetheless provides a helpful way to engage with the dynamic journey from an ‘author’ to a ‘text’ and to a ‘reader’. He, like some Western missionaries fails to create a sufficient ‘theological space’ for Africans to read the Bible from the perspectives of their history and experience. Therefore, his idea of a ‘biblical Christianity’ should be suspected. He construes the Bible as the Word of God in a propositional sense<sup>39</sup>. But he undermines the nature of the Bible as a ‘living text’, which implies that it should not function as an oppressive tool, suppressing indiscriminately the non-Jewish and non-Greco-Roman cultures, but rather as a guide to understanding the redemptive history of God that is revealed in the Christ-Event.

The image of Jesus who is neither truly Western nor truly Nigerian poses at least three problems for Nigerian Christianity. First, this image of Jesus makes it almost impossible for many lay Christians to understand who Jesus truly is and how he can relate meaningfully to them. Second, a Jesus who is undergoing an identity crisis helps

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<sup>37</sup> Kato, “An Evaluation of Black Theology,” *Bibliotheca sacra* 133 (1976): 245.

<sup>38</sup> Gunton, *Intellect and Action: Elucidations on Christian Theology and the Life of Faith* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 43.

<sup>39</sup> Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*, 173. Kato fails to recognize that the expression “Word of God” technically refers to the sections of the Bible where God is presented as speaking directly through someone, for example, the prophets. See John Goldingay, *Models for Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 204.

to perpetuate the religious schizophrenia that exists already in Nigerian Christianity: a situation in which many Christians continue to see Jesus as a foreign ‘god’ that is only to be consulted when the indigenous gods and ancestors are unable to solve their problems. Third, a Jesus who is not contextualized to benefit and at the same time critique the experiences, history and the indigenous traditions will continue to hamper the attempt of some contextual theologians to develop some images of Jesus Christ that are relevant to Nigerian Christianity.

The images of Jesus Christ that some theologians have developed for Nigerian Christianity need not be exactly the same as the ones contained in the Bible. This is not to suggest a denial or a weak idea of the authority of the Bible. But we must avoid using the Bible as a tool for coercion. The Bible must not be invoked “to suppress free inquiry”, to use the phrase of Daniel Migliore, into newer ways of understanding the meanings and significance of Jesus in the contemporary human contexts.<sup>40</sup> The mosaic of pictures of Jesus represented in the Bible should only function as elastic parameters for testing the adequacy of the representations of him that emerge from within Nigerian Christians’ experiences and contexts. Therefore, the biblical representations of Jesus Christ must not repress the possibility of some new christological expressions. The task of a contextual theologian, therefore, transcends a mere translation of the christological images in the Bible into a local equivalence. The task must include discovering some genuine local concepts, pictures and images that have the capacity to communicate effectively and relevantly the meaning and significance of the Christ-Event to Nigerians. This new christological adventure explains the rise and subsistence of the Culture-oriented Christology and liberation-oriented Christology. I will examine these two models in the remainder of this chapter.

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<sup>40</sup> See Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 2ed (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 44.

## **B. Culture-Oriented Christology**

The Ghanaian theologian, Kwame Bediako, in *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion*, poses the question: “Is Christianity suitable to the Africans?”<sup>41</sup> He then proceeds to delimit the task of his project, a task that underlines the thrust of the entire book, by posing another question: “Will African Christianity be able to find viable intellectual grounds upon which to validate and secure its African credentials?”<sup>42</sup> Bediako’s questions have occurred in various forms in the writings of some Nigerian theologians. Set in the broader context of the correlation between the indigenous religions and Christianity, the following assumptions underscore the intent of these questions: the translatability of Christianity into the African cultural and religious thought, and the possibility of constructing some viable African contextualized Christologies.<sup>43</sup>

The Culture-oriented Christology seeks to re-express Jesus Christ in terms of some Nigerian indigenous cultures and religious thought forms. I will examine the two major models that have emerged in contemporary Nigerian Christianity; namely, the Guest Christology and the Ancestor Christology models.

### **1. Guest Christology**

Enyi Ben Udoh is no doubt one of the pioneers of the Culture-oriented Christology in Nigeria.<sup>44</sup> In his 1983 doctoral dissertation titled the “Guest Christology: An Interpretative View of the Christological Problem in Africa”, Udoh develops a

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<sup>41</sup> Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), 3.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>43</sup> See Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, 1-6; Sanneh, “The Horizontal and the Vertical in Mission: an African Perspective,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 7, no. 4 (1983): 165-171.

<sup>44</sup> The writings of some Nigerian theologians, such as Bolaji Idowu, of course, predate Udoh’s work. But Udoh’s work was different because it concentrated primarily on Christology whilst Idowu’s works were on African theology and indigenous religions.

christological model from the indigenous notion of a 'guest'.<sup>45</sup> A guest in the Nigerian indigenous societies is "considered *sacred*" and is consequently "treated with *respect* and *care*".<sup>46</sup> Since guests are treated with dignity and respect, Udoh argues that the construal of Jesus as a guest provides a christological platform to address the problems of "faith schizophrenia" – the dilemma of devoting simultaneously to Christianity and African indigenous religions.<sup>47</sup> Udoh states that his major task is to

undertake a dialectical initiation of Christ and Africa to one another in a manner that does not alienate or dissolve the integrity of either party.<sup>48</sup>

For him, there are two christological problems that face African Christians. The first is Africans' perception of Jesus Christ as an "an [illegal] alien".<sup>49</sup> As an illegal alien, many Africans conceive of Jesus Christ as different from them. Udoh goes on to argue that the image of Jesus Christ as an illegal alien makes him "liable to be rejected, doubted and excluded from the mainstream".<sup>50</sup> He traces this idea of Christ as a stranger to Nigeria back to the nineteenth-century European mission, particularly the Scottish missionary activity in Calabar.<sup>51</sup> But inspired by Pepper Clark's *Plays from Black Africa*, Udoh explores the positive aspect of a legal stranger or a guest for a contextual Christology. He consequently argues that construing Jesus Christ as a legitimate guest is an effective way "to bring Africa and Christ closer to one another".<sup>52</sup> As a legitimate

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<sup>45</sup> E. B. Udoh, "Guest Christology: An Interpretative View of the Christological Problem in Africa," (Ph. D. Dissertation, Princeton Theological Seminary, 1983). The work has been published by Peter Lang.

<sup>46</sup> Gregory Ikehukwu Olikenyi, *African Hospitality: A Model for the Communication of the Gospel in the African Cultural Context* (Veroffentlichungen: St. Augustin, 2001), 106. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>47</sup> Udoh, "Guest Christology," 263.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 212.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 225.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 206-208.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 209.

guest in Africa, Jesus Christ will become a guest who is accorded every possible honour and generosity, but who in turn is expected to conform to the cultures and customs of Africa.<sup>53</sup>

The second christological problem facing African Christians, according to Udoh, is the image of Jesus Christ as a divine being. Udoh contends that the depiction of Jesus Christ as a divine messenger or son is “problematic in African religious experience”.<sup>54</sup> This problem, for him, arises because the

African belief system discounts all claims which elevate any human individual to becoming a divinity as presumptuous and arrogant. In West Africa, this creed is compressed in pidgen English *interalia: God no bi mann, mann no bi god*.<sup>55</sup>

Again he writes, “because God never could become incarnate in human form or vice versa for Africans”, the belief that Jesus Christ is a divine “messenger or son” escapes them.<sup>56</sup> Thus, for Udoh, in the African indigenous religions, “it is an anathema for any historical being to claim for himself ...the divine prerogatives”.<sup>57</sup> He cites the Ibibio cosmology as an example.<sup>58</sup>

God does not need a messenger. Ibibio cosmology assigns him limitless sphere... an ultimate authority. There are no prophets and no temples in Ibibio religion. Directly, the clan communicates [with God] in words, and dramatic gestures but direct appeals to God are rare and confined to crisis situation. Indirectly, it is done through *elders*, dead or alive, by the use of rituals and prayers.<sup>59</sup>

Udoh is dissatisfied with the images of Jesus Christ as a stranger and as a divine being. Conversely, he proposes a Guest christological model, which for him, will take care of the gulf between Jesus Christ and Africa, and the issue of ‘faith schizophrenia’.

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<sup>53</sup> Matthew Schoffeleers, “Folk Christology in Africa: The Dialectics of the Nganga Paradigm,” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 19, no. 2 (1989): 157-183.

<sup>54</sup> Udoh, “Guest Christology,” 80.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 81. The expression *God no bi mann; mann no bi god*’ can be translated into a standard English as ‘Man is not a god; God is not a man’.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 210.

<sup>58</sup> Ibibio is one of the ethnic groups in Nigeria.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

To address the problem stemming from the image of Jesus Christ as an illegal alien, Udoh proposes that Africans need to play the role of a host and make Jesus go through the “initiation act...by which [his] image as a guest is transformed into one of a constitutional citizenship”.<sup>60</sup> Ukachukwu Chris Manus points out that Udoh sees the rite of naturalizing Jesus Christ in Africa as a two-way process. First, Africans must be willing to allow Jesus Christ to become ‘one of them’ by offering him the opportunity to undergo the rite of naturalization. And second, Jesus Christ himself needs “to submit to the process of inculturation”.<sup>61</sup> Udoh puts it in this way:

The Christological significance of this is that Jesus is far from knowing all the social forms and experiential road signs of the African. Like any other guest, his understanding of the new environment is limited. A host has the responsibility of taking him on a tour of his world.<sup>62</sup>

But to become an African, Jesus does not need to be “biologically African”.<sup>63</sup> Through the ‘ritual of adaptation’ or naturalization, Jesus can become a full member of every African community. Once Jesus undergoes this rite, Africans will become less suspicious of him and consequently will “rely on him for answers to their deep religious questions”.<sup>64</sup>

Udoh defines a “cultural naturalization rite” as a “ceremony which, when performed, transforms a guest into a legitimate member of the clan”.<sup>65</sup> This ritual varies from one ethnic group to another. In some cases, as Udoh argues, it involves “drinking cold water”, and in some cultures it may be a more complex ceremony.<sup>66</sup> For Udoh, this rite is very important, not only because it changes the status of Jesus Christ from that of

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 215.

<sup>61</sup> U. C. Manus, *Christ, the African King: New Testament Christology* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1993), 57.

<sup>62</sup> Udoh, “Guest Christology,” 227.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 225.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 230.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 194.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 196.

a guest to a citizen or a kin, and possibly a lord, but also the rite compels Africans to see themselves as hosts of Jesus Christ and the Christian faith.<sup>67</sup>

Since for Udoh, the image of Jesus Christ as a divine figure or messenger is ‘offensive’ to many Africans because for them “God has no need for prophets”, and God cannot become a man,<sup>68</sup> he argues that an adequate Christology for Nigeria must divest Jesus Christ of his divine garb and restore him to the status of a human being.

A comprehensive Christology seeking to re-communicate God through Jesus of Nazareth effectively to Nigerians must make the historicity of Christ the starting point of its reflection. It would have to restore to him the full human status about which the scriptures speak. Only humans belong to human community, share human anxiety, needs, thoughts and participate in transforming the human world.<sup>69</sup>

Against this backdrop, Udoh employs a low-Christology (or Christology from below) approach.<sup>70</sup> But unlike some theologians who use Christology from below and then work their way up to a high-Christology (i.e. a Christology that does not divest Jesus of his divinity),<sup>71</sup> Udoh’s Guest Christology seems to have no room at all for the divinity of Jesus Christ.<sup>72</sup> According to him, “‘faith-schizophrenia’ is rooted in the claim that Jesus is divine”.<sup>73</sup> To buttress this contention, he asserts,

As an ordinary, normal and Jewish male, Jesus does not raise serious problems for the African. His historicity is, therefore, incontestable even among non-Christian Africans. At issue is his divinity compounded by the Scottish emphasis in Nigeria.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> He writes, “if [Africans] become aware of [their] role as host to [the Christian] faith both in terms of [their] obligation and loyalty, then there would be no need to see [themselves] as being in exiles in [their] home or strangers to the faith which [they] helped to plant and continue to nurture”. Ibid., 214.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 83, 211.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 222.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> For example see Elochukwu E. Uzukwu, “Inculturation and Liturgy (Eucharist),” in *Paths of African Theology*, 95-114; and Justin Ukpong, “Christology and Inculturation: A New Testament Perspective,” 40-58.

<sup>72</sup> Udoh, “Guest Christology,” 223. Also he avers, “Full humanity of Christ is a prerequisite for a proper institution of the guest ceremony. That is because this ritual process is possible only in a human world”. Ibid., 224.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 263.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

Again he argues,

Whereas the Christian creeds affirm the divinity and the universal relevance of Jesus Christ, the traditional [i.e. indigenous religious] statement – *deity no bi mann, man no bi god* – nullifies it as presumptuous and ‘ungodly’.<sup>75</sup>

He concludes that many African peoples have rejected legitimately the divinity of Jesus Christ.

If the missionaries charged Africans with ‘paganism’ and religious ignorance because they rejected the divinity of Jesus, Africans consider Jesus’ divinity blasphemous.<sup>76</sup>

It is clear that Udoh’ Guest Christology seeks to express Jesus Christ in a way that resonates with the cultures and experiences of Nigerians and other African peoples. As I have argued earlier, some Nigerian theologians have awakened from their christological slumber to discover that the Missionary Christology does not fit properly into the history and experience of many Nigerians. Driven by the desire to make Jesus Christ meaningful in the Nigerian context, Udoh undertakes a noble adventure of exploring a new christological paradigm for engaging with the Christ-Event.

That Jesus appeared to be an unwelcome guest in Africa was a corollary of the way some Western missionaries in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries presented him. Udoh maintains that most of the images of Jesus exported to Africa by the missionaries differ significantly with the biblical images of Jesus Christ.<sup>77</sup> And, for him, recognizing this difference is crucially important in order for an African theologian to undertake genuinely and successfully the task of a contextual Christology.

There are, however, some major problems with Udoh’s Guest Christology paradigm. He has built his Christology on a dubious foundation; namely, that African indigenous religions and cultures do not have provisions for the possibility of a deity becoming human. It is important to highlight the two major fallacies of this assumption.

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 263-264.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 264.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 214.

First, the expression or slogan *mann, no bi god; god no bi mann*, (literally ‘man is not a god’; ‘god is not a man’) does not express the idea that God cannot penetrate the human world by coming in the form of a human being, or in any other form. Rather, the slogan expresses the magnitude of the power, benevolence and knowledge of the Supreme Being or other gods when compared with the weakness and frailty of human beings. This idea comes out clearly in the popular Igbo name *Maduabuchukwu* (an equivalent of *mann no bi god*), which literally means ‘human beings are not God’. When some Christian parents give this name or a similar name to their child, they are not suggesting that God does not have a messenger. It is rather a name that signifies the ways many Christians wrestle with the infinite power of God. For example, some mothers give the name to their children if doctors told (or people mocked) them that they could not have any children. The idea here is that God is the one that has the final say in matters of such magnitude. The slogan *mann no bi god*, whether used by Christians or indigenous religionists is a honorific expression aimed at communicating the majestic powers of the Supreme God or the lesser gods.

The second fallacy is that it is untrue that Africans believe that God does not have and need messengers or prophets. One of the popular christological models in Africa is the ‘Ancestor Christology’. I will discuss this model later in this chapter. Here it suffices to say that many ethnic groups in West Africa revere ancestors as messengers and mediators of gods, and even of the Supreme Being. As Uchenna Ezeh has argued:

The ancestral cult is the heart of the African tradition and culture. The presence of the ancestors is felt in the daily life of the traditional African community. They are God’s agents in the maintenance and control of the universe. They act as intermediaries between God and man, and between man and the divinities.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> U. A. Ezeh, *Jesus Christ the Ancestor: An African Contextual Christology in the Light of the Major Dogmatic Christological Definitions of the Church from the Council of Nicea (325) to Chalcedon (451)* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2003), 285. See also James L. Cox, *Rational Ancestors: Scientific Rationality and African Indigenous Religions* (Cardiff: Cardiff Academic Press, 1998), 35-55.

In some cases, some of these ancestors are apotheosized heroes. An example is *Sango*, the god of thunder in the Yoruba cosmology.<sup>79</sup> To argue that the possibility of a divine messenger is strange to Africans is totally unfounded and underestimates the holistic nature of the spiritual world and human world in African indigenous cosmologies. Even the Ibibio cosmology, which Udoh cited as a proof for the absence of divine intermediaries, has provision for ancestral reverence. Udoh recognized this, although trivialized it, when he argued that the presence of ancestors during the ritual of adaptation was only symbolic.

Another problem with Udoh's Guest Christology model is that it undermines the divinity of Jesus Christ and the universal significance of his work. He fails to engage with the biblical representation of the ontology and the dialectics of the universality and particularity of the work of Jesus Christ. It is dubious and unwarranted to misrepresent the person and the extent of the work of Jesus Christ for the purpose of a contextual Christology. Thus, although Udoh aimed to develop a truly indigenous Christology that would break radically with the Missionary Christology and the Neo-Missionary Christology, he has constructed a christological paradigm that both misrepresent Nigerian indigenous cosmology and the biblical representations of Jesus Christ.

## **2. Ancestor Christology**

The understandings of Jesus Christ as a chief ancestor, a proto-ancestor, a brother ancestor, a true ancestor and so on perhaps make the Ancestor Christology the most influential paradigm in contemporary African Christian christological discourse.<sup>80</sup> The reason may well be connected with the claim that the cult of the ancestors proffers

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<sup>79</sup> See Bolaji E. Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (London: SCM Press, 1973), 186; Idowu, *Olódùmarè: God in Yoruba Belief* (London: Longmans, 1962), 90-91; O. Imasogie, *African Traditional Religion* (Ibadan: University Press, 1985), 35-38.

<sup>80</sup> A good summary of Ancestor Christology model as understood in contemporary Africa is Diane B. Stinton's *Jesus of Africa: Voices of Contemporary African Christology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2004), 112-142.

the best “theological meeting point” for Christianity and African indigenous religions.<sup>81</sup> I will concentrate primarily on the work of the Nigerian theologian, Uchenna A. Ezeh. In *Jesus Christ the Ancestor*, Ezeh undertakes the task of expressing the mystery of Jesus Christ as God-human from the perspective of the indigenous concepts of the ancestors in Africa. On the basis of the assumptions that the “ancestral cult is the heart of the African tradition and culture”,<sup>82</sup> and that “ancestors stand as the middle point between the visible and invisible worlds”,<sup>83</sup> Ezeh contends that to present Jesus Christ as an ancestor opens up “a mutually enriching encounter for a dialogue between Christianity and the African culture”.<sup>84</sup>

One thing that distinguishes Ezeh’s Ancestor christological model from other proponents of this view is that he situates this paradigm, not only within an African indigenous cosmology, but also within the christological debates of the early church.<sup>85</sup> After examining the christological issues leading to the Councils of Nicea in 325 A. D., Ephesus in A.D. 431 and Chalcedon in 451 A.D., Ezeh argues that the introduction of the non-biblical expression *homoousios* by the Councils to express the view that Jesus Christ has the same nature with God the Father should propel Africans to express him “through the resources of the African cultural categories”.<sup>86</sup> In addition, the reference to the christological circumference that the Councils created provides Ezeh with a standard to test the validity of his Ancestor Christology. He writes,

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<sup>81</sup> Caritas McCarthy, “Christology from a Contemporary Perspective,” in *Pluralism and Oppression: Theology in World Perspective*, vol. 34, ed. Paul F. Knitter (Langham: United Press of America, 1991), 34. See also R. Moloney, African Christology,” *Theological Studies* 48, no. 3 (1987): 509.

<sup>82</sup> Ezeh, *Jesus Christ the Ancestor*, 285.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> Bénézet Bujo, the most influential proponent of this view in Africa, argued that his Proto-Ancestor is legitimate because the early church ascribed to Jesus Christ several titles that originated from their cultural repertoire. See Bujo, “Nos ancêtres, ces saints inconnus,” *Bulletin de Théologie Africaine* 1 (1979): 165-178; Bujo, *African Theology in its Social Context*, 119.

<sup>86</sup> Ezeh, *Jesus Christ the Ancestor*, 200.

Through the resources of the core African cultural symbol of the ancestor and the analysis and the application of the Christological definitions of the Church in her first five centuries of her existence, this African confession of Christ as the ancestor is weighed on the balance of the classical Christological orthodoxy. This ancestral Christological model is truly African and no less Christian.<sup>87</sup>

Ezeh endeavoured to remain faithful to the Chalcedonic confession of the dual natures of Jesus Christ. Again, drawing upon the insights from the word *homoousios*, he argues that this word signifies that the “radically immanent God-man can be understood from the African sense of solidarity”.<sup>88</sup> To him, the incarnation enables Jesus Christ to fit into the category of African ancestors.<sup>89</sup> Of course, the difficulty in using a local metaphor to describe the Christ-Event in Africa, as Ezech observes, is that the “belief in Christ” is not found in the indigenous worldviews unlike the idea of the Supreme God.<sup>90</sup> For him, however, the non-existence of the “belief in Christ” in the African indigenous cosmology does not mean that Africans are incapacitated from a cultural thought form that could explain effectively the Christ-Event. The task of a Culture-oriented Christology, therefore, is to present Jesus Christ in a way that allows him to incarnate into an African culture in order to speak to

African ‘souls’ as they are as Africans in their categories that can elicit such examinations ‘God has come to us in the form and language of men’ (Acts 14:11) and so we can hear them proclaiming the mighty deeds of God in our own language (Acts 23:11).<sup>91</sup>

Ezeh sees the Ancestor Christology model as the “attempt from the anthropo-cultural resources to develop an analogous concept of Christ”.<sup>92</sup> Although he acknowledges the existence of some other paradigms of the Ancestor Christology, he seems to favour the paradigm of the ‘brother Ancestor Christology’.

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 201.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 237.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 199-200.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 200.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 201.

By his incarnation Christ became one of us, our brother. He is in a transcendent status that enables him to mediate between God and the human being as Ancestor not just because of his redemptive death but because he stays in a special relationship with God the Father as God-made man who is God.<sup>93</sup>

The ‘brother ancestors’ belong to the category of family ancestors. Family ancestors are those ancestors that belong specifically to a given family. These ancestors were the head of their families before they died. And since death is not believed to constitute a terminus of these ancestors, they continued to communicate with and to supervise the affairs of their families. These ancestors are responsible to ensure that the property of their family members is protected. Their families consult with them at both social and religious occasions, including at birth, puberty, marriage and death.<sup>94</sup>

Ezeh, however, differentiates the ancestorhood of Jesus Christ from African brother ancestors. This difference lies in his divinity:

His being of the same nature with the Father makes him an Ancestor of special class. He is both like and unlike his brother African Ancestors. There is a kind of parallelism here. He then becomes the exemplar of the African Ancestors by his pre-eminent role of mediation.<sup>95</sup>

Again he postulates,

As a model of behaviour, [Jesus] transcends the African ancestors because his transcendental status is not just that he enjoys closeness with God but that he is also God. His divinity elucidates his superiority over and above the moral standard in the African ancestral relation.<sup>96</sup>

The Congolese theologian, Francois Kabasélé Lumbala, argues in the same direction. He describes Jesus Christ as the “true elder” brother ancestor.<sup>97</sup> For him, Jesus alone merits this title because he has truly demonstrated his elder-brother function by “taking responsibility for our wrongs [and] in performing expiation for us (Isaiah. 53:4-5;

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 201.

<sup>94</sup> Kwesi A. Dickson, *Theology in Africa* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1984), 69.

<sup>95</sup> Ezeh, *Jesus Christ the Ancestor*, 201.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 301.

<sup>97</sup> The oldest son is believed to be genealogically and culturally closer to the ancestors in many traditional societies of Nigeria.

Hebrews 8-10)".<sup>98</sup> Charles Nyamiti, a Tanzanian theologian, is another prominent proponent of the brother Ancestor Christology paradigm. He argues that the elder 'brother-ancesthood' typology bears the "closest analogy" to Christ.<sup>99</sup> He sees the concept of the ancestral cult as a pointer to "a relationship which is directly or immediately linked with our eternal life", and a relationship that exists between God and us.<sup>100</sup> In his comparison of an African ancestral brotherhood and Christ's brotherhood ancestorship, he postulates five similarities.<sup>101</sup> Among the stimulating things that permeate his thinking are the notions that Africans share consanguinity with Christ through his "Adamite origin" and that just as "the living and their brother ancestor have common immediate father and mother", so also "the first Person of the Trinity is the common and immediate Father and mother of Christ and His earthly members".<sup>102</sup> Like Ezeh and Lumbala, Nyamiti highlights the need to recognize the "profound differences" between Jesus Christ and the African ancestors. To him, the difference stems from the superiority of Jesus Christ's ancestral function that is rooted in his pre-existence.<sup>103</sup>

Some proponents of the Ancestor Christology argue that conceiving of Jesus Christ as an ancestor emphasizes a soteriological dimension of the Christ-Event. For Ezeh, the soteriological dimension is precisely located in the death of Jesus Christ.

Through the ancestral figure, humanity is in relationship with God. In the ancestral understanding, death is seen as a decisive means of reaching a fulfilment of the human person realised in the transcendental life with God. It belongs to the human nature but being linked with God. It is soteriological. It means salvation for man. Death belonging now to the human nature which God assumed as his own, through

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<sup>98</sup> F. Kabasélé Lumbala, "Christ as Ancestor and Elder Brother, in *Faces of Jesus in Africa*, ed., Robert Schreiter (London: SCM Press, 1991), 122.

<sup>99</sup> Nyamiti, *Christ as Our Ancestor: Christology from an African perspective* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1984), 16.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 19-20.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid, 21.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 27.

his incarnation in Christ, one can rightly then say that ‘he dies’. As the Ancestor, [Jesus’] death has also this soteriological dimension. His death is life.<sup>104</sup>

Nyamiti agrees with Ezech on the soteriological value of the death of Christ vis-à-vis his ancestorhood. He writes, “it is only through His death and resurrection that [Jesus] became our Brother Ancestor in fullness”, and so he “could fully exercise His ancestral mediation”.<sup>105</sup>

Ezech, like many other African theologians, undertakes the task of contextual Christology with caution and a sense of awe, knowing that the Christ-Event is a mystery. He observes,

The idea of ...ancestor Christology is to express the mystery of Christ through the analogous ancestral African cultural symbol. Alongside the ancestor title are other titles such as the chief, the master of...initiation, and healer, through which the African seek[s] to express his or her faith in Christ. Each of these titles highlights some aspects of the inexhaustible nature of the incarnate Son of God who is God.<sup>106</sup>

An Ancestor Christology is attractive to many African theologians, and is undoubtedly the paradigm that strikes a familiar chord in the ears of many African peoples. In order to appraise thoroughly the problems and contributions of the Ancestor Christology model to the development of contextual Christologies in Nigeria and in Africa at large, I will examine the foundations on which this paradigm is constructed.

### **a. Humanness Argument**

Ezech, as we have seen, builds his Ancestor Christology on the incarnation of Jesus Christ. He points out that the incarnation implies an amalgamation of divinity and humanity in Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ. For him, therefore, Jesus Christ qualifies as an Ancestor (although in an analogical sense) on the basis of taking on a human nature. He writes,

Even though ancestorship is a purely human title, it can also be applied to the incarnate Christ following the same principle of the *communicatio idiomatum*.... By making man’s history become God’s history, the incarnate Son of God would

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<sup>104</sup> Ezech, *Jesus Christ the Ancestor*, 239.

<sup>105</sup> Nyamiti, *Christ as Our Ancestor*, 27.

<sup>106</sup> Ezech, *Jesus Christ the Ancestor*, 307-308.

consequently been seen as an ancestor which is the highest perfection of human being in the African culture.<sup>107</sup>

Nyamiti develops his brotherhood ancestorship on the same biological ground:

African brother-ancestorship is founded on consanguinity and the supernatural status of the ancestors after death. Christ's relationship to men is also linked with consanguinity... on the account of His Adamite origin. The difference here lies in the fact that being Adamite in character Christ's brotherhood transcends all family, clan, tribal or racial limitations.<sup>108</sup>

Ezeh moves in the same direction when he argues that "Christ the Ancestor is transcultural".<sup>109</sup> For him, "Jesus Christ the ancestor introduces a new relationship which is neither based on sex nor colour or race".<sup>110</sup> Thus, Jesus Christ, Ezeh continues, "points us to the common fatherhood of God and this means the brotherhood and sisterhood of all people".<sup>111</sup>

Building an Ancestor-Christology on the genealogy of Jesus Christ no doubt proffers a helpful tool to express the universal effect of his work in the ancestral-oriented world such as Africa. However, it is important to note that the biological argument for an Ancestor Christology underestimates the relevance of the question: how could Jesus who was biologically a non-African become an African ancestor?<sup>112</sup> This question is crucially important because the ancestors are considered in many societies in Nigeria to be the 'real owners of the land' and the custodian of their clan's traditions.<sup>113</sup> These beliefs about ancestors will only make sense if the ancestors are indigenes of Nigerian societies. Since the criterion of becoming an ancestor in the African worldview includes raising family, leading an exemplary life of obedience to the laws of the family

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 306.

<sup>108</sup> Nyamiti, *Christ as Our Ancestor*, 20.

<sup>109</sup> Ezeh, *Jesus Christ the Ancestor*, 311.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> The biological argument also fails to deal with the particularity of Jesus Christ, as an individual who was born into and lived in a particular context.

<sup>113</sup> See Dickson, *Theology in Africa*, 61.

or society, it is essential for the theologians that develop the ancestor christological models to pay serious attention to the foregoing question about the eligibility of Jesus' ancestorhood and to develop a meaningful theological response to address the question.<sup>114</sup>

## **b. Mythological Argument**

Ezeh does not use a mythological argument to substantiate his Ancestor Christology. But some African scholars such as Kwame Bediako use it. For Bediako, it is necessary to construe the cult of the ancestors as a groundless myth in order to see how Jesus displaces and fulfills the aspirations of African peoples.<sup>115</sup> He maintains that Jesus Christ displaces the ancestors because they “need saving, having originated from among us”.<sup>116</sup> And since “there is no valid alternative to Jesus Christ”, according to Bediako,

the question is no longer: why should we relate to Jesus of Nazareth who does not belong to our clan, family, tribe and nation? [But] how may we understand more fully this Jesus Christ who relates to us most meaningfully and most profoundly in our clan, family, tribe and nation?<sup>117</sup>

When examined critically, the reason Bediako provides for the displacement of the mediatory functions of the African ancestors suffers an internal incoherence. If Jesus Christ displaces the works of the ancestors because he does not “need saving” unlike the ancestors, it follows that ancestors in the first place did not exercise any valid salvific mediation. Bediako seems to have noticed this theological incoherence, and therefore, depicts the ancestral cult as a myth and groundless.

Since the ancestral function, as traditionally understood, is now shown to have no basis in fact, the way is open for appreciating more fully how Jesus Christ is the

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<sup>114</sup> John Parratt, *Reinventing Christianity: African Theology Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 135.

<sup>115</sup> Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa*, 26.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

only real and true Ancestor and Source of life for all mankind, fulfilling and transcending the benefits believed to be bestowed by lineage ancestors.<sup>118</sup>

The role of ‘myth’ in the conceptualization of some religious beliefs has generated a lot of debates.<sup>119</sup> To designate the ancestral cult as a ‘myth’ in the sense that Bediako uses it tends to eclipse the historical reality of the cult. Some Africans continue to believe that they can communicate with their ancestors through divination and other metaphysical means. A serious researcher of this cult must come to grips with the reality that some Africans believe that they hear from and relate to their ancestors. For example, Idowu observes that many families in the traditional Nigerian societies consult with an oracle each time a child is born to discover the ancestral spirits that dwell within the child.<sup>120</sup> Therefore, Bediako’s depiction of the cult of the ancestors as a myth, and his argument against the validity of this cult as traditionally construed is misleading.<sup>121</sup>

### c. Soteriological and Ethical Argument

Bénézet Bujo situates his Ancestor Christology on a soteriological foundation and not on a biological ground. He writes,

to call [Jesus] ‘Proto-Ancestor’ means precisely, that he is believed to be the ‘firstborn among all the ancestors’, and this is not on a biological, but in a soteriological level of re-birth to a mystical and supernatural life and mode of existence”.<sup>122</sup>

For him, the “proto-ancestrality” of Jesus Christ as the firstborn of God “makes irrelevant any racial or tribal barrier”.<sup>123</sup> Ezech, like Bujo, contends that to see Jesus Christ as an Ancestor has both soteriological and ethical values. He writes,

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>119</sup> See Cox, *Rational Ancestors*, 35-55; Wole Sonyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

<sup>120</sup> Idowu, *African Traditional Religion*, 79.

<sup>121</sup> If Bediako’s contention for the invalidity of the cult of the ancestors is correct, then it follows that there is no convincing correlation between Jesus and the ancestors.

<sup>122</sup> Bujo, *African Christian Morality at the Age of Inculturation* (Nairobi: Paulines, 1990), 82-3.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 21.

...we maintain that the African cult of the ancestors epitomises the African quest for salvation (soteriology), goodness in the community (ethics)... Through his incarnation, these Africa values are perfectly fulfilled in Christ as perfect God and perfect man. Hence Jesus Christ is the Ancestor par excellence, who as God-man perfectly mediates salvation to the people. His moral authority to the community is from the point of view of service. In this way he becomes the perfect fulfillment of all the Africa aspirations or quest integrated in the cult of the ancestors.<sup>124</sup>

Situating the relationship between Jesus and the ancestors of Africa in soteriology is enigmatic. The primary theological difficulty with this view is that it unnecessarily 'overloads' the cult of the ancestors with the redemptive concepts most of which derive from Christianity's worldview. While it is true that African traditionalists believe in the ancestors' mediation between the physical world and the spiritual world, it is misleading to deduce *redemptive* acts from this belief.<sup>125</sup> Strictly speaking, the ancestors do not function as redemptive agents. They are rather guardians of the ethos of the land, and in some contexts the means of accessing the spiritual world.

When placed in its proper context, the mediatory work of the ancestors is *didactical* and *ethical* rather than *redemptive* as construed in some Christian soteriologies. The ancestors' primary concern is to ensure that the living community continues to obey the ancestral laws,<sup>126</sup> which is important for the joy, blessing and prosperity of the living.<sup>127</sup> This does not mean that there is no sense in which the mediation of the ancestors could be described as *soteriological* for one of the results of obeying the instructions of the ancestors is escaping the anger of gods or the Supreme God. But we should recognize that the ancestors do not function as *redeemers*, but as *guides* to the knowledge of the spiritual world. It is not enough to situate the functional

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<sup>124</sup> Ezech, *Jesus Christ the Ancestor*, 316.

<sup>125</sup> Soteriology in this sense incorporates both the Christian claim that it is in the death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ that God exposes and deals decisively with the sin and guilt of human race, and the cosmic, and holistic nature of God redemptive work. Salvation from the biblical point of view goes beyond mere socioeconomic redemption which the majority of contemporary African theologians emphasize and almost at the expense of some other aspects. See Kä Mana, *Christians and Churches of Africa: Salvation in Christ and Building a New African Society* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2004).

<sup>126</sup> This includes bringing judgement on violators of the laws of the Land.

<sup>127</sup> Cox, "Spirit Mediums in Zimbabwe: Religious Experience in and on Behalf of the Community," *Studies in World Christianity* 6, no. 2 (2000), 192.

difference between Jesus Christ and the ancestors on the context of ‘quantitative difference’ as Nyamiti has done.<sup>128</sup> Granted that Jesus Christ and the ancestors are models of a ‘good life’, and that as the perfect archetype of the Christian life Jesus exemplifies an unprecedented model of conduct, it is essential to acknowledge also that Jesus functions, not only as the ‘model’ of good living, but also (primarily) as the one who produces the Christian life through the believer.<sup>129</sup>

Furthermore, it is also important to note that the Christian life is possible through the mediatory work of Jesus Christ. On a soteriological ground, the mediatory work of Jesus Christ stands different from that of the ancestors because while the former is the redeemer of the whole world including Africa (as many African theologians claim), the latter’s mission is non-redemptive (in the sense of dealing with the sin and guilt and appeasing God as Scripture speaks about Jesus), but rather didactical. The ancestors concentrate on guarding people to keep the laws of the land. Another theological problem with the Ancestor Christology paradigm is that it lays heavy emphasis on the mediatory work of Jesus and African ancestors. Christologically, the danger is that this type of Christology can lead to the understanding of Jesus as a mere middleman who connects God and humans. Pannenberg right warns against this kind of mediatory Christology. He writes,

There are Christologies that have no interest at all in the immediate presence of God himself in Jesus – neither accidentally nor substantially – but are simply interested in Jesus’ mid-position between God and man. It can be that such Christologies presuppose the doctrine of the unity of God and man in Jesus Christ, but are nevertheless primarily concerned with the independent mid-position of Jesus and less interested in the coincidence of the divine and the human spheres. Rather, a third thing, the figure of the mediator, is inserted between these two spheres.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> According Nyamiti, “Christ is, like the African Ancestors, the model of behaviour for His brethren and is the source of Christian tradition. But, here again, His divine status should alone suffice to show His eminent superiority in this regard. For being God-man He is of necessity infinitely more perfect as model of conduct than the African ancestors can ever be”. See *Christ as Our Ancestor*, 21.

<sup>129</sup> Galatians 2:20.

<sup>130</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus – God and Man*, trans. L. L. Wilkins and D. A. Priebe (London: SCM Press, 1968.), 123.

The Ancestor Christology, therefore, needs to take the ontological question about Jesus' identity seriously. The proponents of this model must recognize that it is christologically inadequate to discuss the work of Jesus in isolation from his person.<sup>131</sup>

### **C. Liberation-Oriented Christologies**

My interest here is to explore and critique the concept of 'liberation' as developed in some theological discourses in Nigeria. I will focus on feminist Christology. This is because it is the major christological model and a form of liberation theology that has engaged with the 'liberation motive' and some cultural issues that concern contextual Christology. Although I will highlight some of the arguments of some key Latin American, South African, Asian and Western liberation theologians, and also critique some of the ideologies of liberation theology, my aim is to converse with Nigerian feminist Christology. I will concentrate on its contributions to the development of contextual Christology and how the Revealer Christology model I will construct later in this study differs from it.

The name 'liberation theology' comes of Latin America and represents the novel works of some theologians who created a theological paradigm that sort to expose oppression, exploitation and poverty as sinful and unwarranted.<sup>132</sup> Also, many liberation theologians seek to inspire poor people to reject their condition, to restrain from being indifferent to their situation, and to fight against all forces, individuals and systems that perpetuate their condition. Liberation theology, as Alfred Hennelly has rightly pointed out, has transformed the "lives of persons, communities, nations, and world's Christian churches" as well as a host of people "who previously paid little attention to the life and

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<sup>131</sup> See chapter four for discussions on the problems of constructing a Christology that underestimates the ontology of Jesus Christ.

<sup>132</sup> See Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1973); José Miguez Bonino, *Rome to Be People* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979); Leonardo Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1978); Jon Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1978); James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 2d ed. (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1986); and Albert Cleage, *Black Messiah* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1968).

words of Jesus Christ”.<sup>133</sup> In Africa, the theme of liberation has continued to reverberate in the theological works of some individuals, particularly feminists and the theologians who write from the context of apartheid in South Africa.<sup>134</sup>

As a discourse, ‘liberation theology’ is complex and difficult to articulate insofar as it includes liberation discussions that arise from the experiences of the poor and the oppressed, and also transcends the methodological boundaries created by the theologies that concentrate on abstract ideas and ignore real human experiences. Jon Sobrino in *Christology at Crossroads*, for example, criticizes the Chalcedonian christological formulation, insisting that it is too abstract and fails to resonate with people’s experiences of Jesus Christ.<sup>135</sup> For Lisa Isherwood, liberation theologians argue that it is not enough to “create doctrines about Jesus”. On the contrary, she contends that an adequate Christology, must present Jesus Christ in a way that allows him to become “part of the ongoing dialogue between the oppressed and oppressors”.<sup>136</sup> One of the key aims of liberation theologians is to create a ‘hyphen’ that will connect orthopraxy and orthodoxy. For example, in *The Power of the Poor in History*, Gustavo Gutiérrez wrote:

Practice is the locus of verification of our faith in God who liberates by establishing justice and right in favor of the poor. It is also the locus of verification of our faith in Christ, who laid down his life for the proclamation of the kingdom of God and the struggle for justice.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Alfred T. Hennelly, *Liberation Theologies: The Global Pursuit of Justice* (Connecticut: Twenty-Third, 1997), 9.

<sup>134</sup> Allan Aubrey Boesak, *Black Theology Black Power* (London: Mowbrays, 1976); Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “Christian Feminism and African Culture: The ‘Hearth’ of the Matter,” in *The Future of Liberation Theology: Essays in Honor of Gustavo Gutiérrez*, ed. Marc H. Ellis and Otto Maduro (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1989), 441-449; Basil Moore, ed., *Black Theology: The South African Voice* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 1973); Ronald Nicolson, *A Black Future? Jesus and Salvation in South Africa* (London: SCM Press, 1990), 163-212.

<sup>135</sup> Sobrino, *Christology at Crossroads*, 3-5. See chapter four for my conversation with the Chalcedonian christological formulation.

<sup>136</sup> Lisa Isherwood, *Liberating Christ* (Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 1999), 49.

<sup>137</sup> Gutiérrez, *The Power of the Poor in History: Selected Writings*, trans. Robert R. Barr (London: SCM Press, 1983), 17.

In spite of its complexity and diversity, at the heart of liberation theology is the quest to construct the theologies and Christologies that are rooted in people's everyday experience of poverty, life of deprivation and their struggle against oppression and marginalization.<sup>138</sup> Unlike some 'traditional' ways of doing theology or Christology that begin with abstract discussions on the ontology of God or Jesus Christ, liberation theologians begin with the experiences of people who are starving, suffering, dehumanised, exploited and oppressed. Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff have argued that liberation theology exists and makes sense because of its "prophetic and comradely commitment to life, cause, and struggle" of the poor.<sup>139</sup> "Liberation theology", for them, "was born when faith confronted the injustice done to the poor".<sup>140</sup> The 'poor' in their thinking must include all people who are being "exploited by the capitalist system, the underemployed, those pushed aside by the production process..., the laborers of the countryside, and the migrant workers with only seasonal work".<sup>141</sup> Writing specifically about the African context, Laurenti Magesa argues that liberation theological discussions must engage seriously with the

questions of excessive wealth in the midst of dehumanizing poverty and vice versa; questions of exploitation of the majority of African peoples by internal and external forces; questions of political domination by domestic and international power brokers; questions of suppression of the African cultures by dominant conceptions of life by means of refutation and ridicule; [and] questions of monopolies of power by ecclesiastical oligarchies at the expense of the liberty of the people of God.<sup>142</sup>

Although the positions and emphases of liberation theologians will vary depending on their social and ecclesiastical contexts, they share the burden to critique

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<sup>138</sup> Christopher Rowland, "Introduction: The Theology of Liberation," in *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, ed. Christopher Rowland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 1-2; Ronald G. Musto, *Liberation Theologies: A Research Guide* (London: Garland, 1991), xxiv.

<sup>139</sup> Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Liberation and Theology: Introducing Liberation Theology*, trans. Paul Burns (Kent: Burns and Oates, 1986), 3.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-4.

<sup>142</sup> Laurenti Magesa, "Christ the Liberator and Africa Today," in *Faces of Jesus in Africa*, ed. Robert J. Schreiter (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991), 154.

inhuman misery and the commitment to explore the meaning of the Christ-Event, particularly how this event can bring new life and hope to people who experience injustice, poverty, and all forms of oppression.<sup>143</sup> Thus, Christology is central to most liberation theological discussions. The key questions are: how are Christians to speak of Jesus Christ in the face of senseless and unnecessary human sufferings and poverty? How can the image of Jesus Christ as a ‘suffering servant’ stimulate movement of liberation and criticism of oppression? And how are we to develop a Christology that is rooted in people’s struggle for self-determination and search for political and economic liberation?

According to Gustavo Gutiérrez, a theology of liberation seeks to “understand the grace and salvation of Jesus Christ in the context of the present and from the situation of the poor”.<sup>144</sup> In *Black Theology Black Power*, Allan Aubrey Boesak, the South African theologian, highlights the theme of liberation in Black theology and locates it within Christology. He writes:

Black Theology is the theological reflection of black Christians on the situation in which they live and on their struggle for liberation: Blacks ask: What does it mean to believe in Jesus Christ when one is black and living in a world controlled by white racists? And what if these racists call themselves Christians also?<sup>145</sup>

In 1989, Mercy Oduyoye posed a radical challenge to African peoples and the systems that perpetuate the dehumanizing experiences of women. She argued that any “element in African culture that is not liberating for women will not liberate all the energy required for Africans’ well-being”.<sup>146</sup> She went on to describe ‘women feminist theologians’ as those “who have refused to give up the church and who are putting up resistance to the male takeover of the religion of Jesus of Nazareth”.<sup>147</sup> Later in this

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<sup>143</sup> Marie Giblin, “Jesus Christ in Liberation Theologies,” in *Liberation Theology: An Introductory Reader*, ed. Curt Cadorette, et al. (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1994), 78.

<sup>144</sup> G. Gutierrez, “The Task and Content of Liberation Theology,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, 19.

<sup>145</sup> Boesak, *Black Theology Black Power*, 1-2.

<sup>146</sup> Oduyoye, “Christian Feminism,” 441.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

chapter, I will examine some of the criticisms that some feminist theologians have directed against indigenous cultures and churches in Nigeria. At this point, I will move on to critique some of the approaches and objectives of liberation theology.

Several criticisms have been directed against liberation theology. An exhaustive interaction with them is beyond the scope of this chapter. However, I will highlight some of them that relate to the objectives of this chapter and the Revealer Christology model that I aim to develop. Some of these criticisms come from among liberation theologians. For example, many feminist theologians criticize the liberation theologians who write against oppression and marginalization that stem from some economic systems but have ignored the oppression and suffering of many women that are rooted in some ecclesiastical and cultural systems of their societies.<sup>148</sup>

Some non-liberation theologians have been highly critical of the hermeneutic and ideologies of liberation theologies and Christologies. Some of the critics have accused liberation theologians of concentrating mainly on some narrative biblical texts and ignoring prophetic texts.<sup>149</sup> Some have accused liberation theologians of using the “Marxist analysis of social reality as a frame of reference for reading” and interpreting the Bible and have questioned the legitimacy of this hermeneutic.<sup>150</sup> Roger Haight, however, has argued that although some liberation theologians have studied Marxist thought and use it as a framework to “analyze the social condition of the poor”, there are many who know very little of Marx and Marxism.<sup>151</sup> He also argues that although some liberation theologians use Marxist language, they have “not incorporated an integral Marxist vision of reality, which would be incompatible with Christian faith”.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> I will explore these criticisms later in this chapter.

<sup>149</sup> See Rowland, “Introduction: The Theology of Liberation,” 9.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Roger Haight, “Liberation Theology” in *The Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Joseph A. Komonchak, Mary Collins and Dermot A. Lane (Dublin: Gilland and Macmillan, 1987), 573.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

The key source of liberation theological discourse, as I have pointed earlier, is human experience, particularly the experience of the people who are poor. In chapter three, I will explore and critique in detail the place of religious experience in Nigerian grassroots Christologies. Here, it suffices to note that liberation theology has created a bridge that connects academic Christologies and popular or grassroots Christologies. This is one of the tasks of the Revealer Christology model that I aim to develop in this study. It is time theologians and the people who do not have any formal theological training discovered that their theologies must inform and shape each other. Jürgen Moltmann has correctly argued that academic theology and popular theology

must relate to each other, show consideration for each other, and learn from each other. If academic theology does not find its way to ordinary people, it loses its foundation. Without the church, Christian theology cannot exist as a university discipline. It will become diffused and lose itself in the science of religions. On the other hand, popular theology loses its reasonable character if it pays no attention to academic theology, or if it despises that theology's competence.<sup>153</sup>

Whatever criticisms we present against liberation theology, it is vital to recognize that an adequate contextual Christology must be able to interpret and appropriate the meaning and significance of the Christ-Event in a way that engages seriously with the real life experiences of people. It must be able to locate the suffering of Jesus Christ within the suffering of people who are dying of starvation and the people who are victims of oppressive systems. Liberation theologians have reminded us that Christians should not remain indifferent to the situation of the poor and that "following Jesus has practical social and political consequences".<sup>154</sup>

However, liberation theologians' emphasis on human experience and their use of the dehumanizing conditions of the poor and the oppressed as the source of their theologies and Christologies are problematic. To successfully achieve their task, most liberation theologians employ 'Christology from below' approach.<sup>155</sup> The key problem

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<sup>153</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *Experience in Theology: Ways and Forms of Christian Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2000), 11.

<sup>154</sup> D. D. Webster, "Liberation Theology," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 637.

<sup>155</sup> See chapter four for discussions on the relationship between low and high Christologies.

with this approach is that it creates a dichotomy between the divinity and humanity and also the person and work of Jesus Christ.<sup>156</sup> Liberation theologians need to recognize that it is inadequate to argue that human situations (particularly the experiences of the poor) must determine the meaning and significance of Jesus Christ. Whilst we cannot rediscover fresh meanings of the Christ-Event, and interpret and appropriate Jesus Christ relevantly in our contexts without locating him within concrete human experiences, we make a mistake when we assume that human experiences must determine his person and work. Throughout this study, I will argue that although Jesus identifies with human contexts (for example, experiences of suffering, pain, poverty, rejection and oppression), as the God incarnate, he escapes any attempt by us to reduce and confine him to our local (idolatrous) images and categories.

The liberationist theme of the ‘option for the poor’ or the claim that God is always on the side of the poor is somewhat misleading. God does not identify with the poor any more than he identifies with the rich. Also, God does not criticize the rich any less than he criticizes the poor. The point I aim to establish is that the ‘rich’ and the ‘poor’ can engage (and historically have engaged) in the activities that are oppressive and sinful. For example, the rich people who service their wealth and status quo by exploiting other people, who use their wealth to perpetuate injustice, and who refuse to use their resources to ameliorate the condition of the poor are oppressive and sinful. The poor who steal, kill, and engage in some despicable acts such as sacrificing parts of their body, their children or parents in order to improve their conditions are also oppressive and sinful.<sup>157</sup> It is inadequate to describe sin and salvation simply as ‘social actions’. An adequate Christian theology must define sin to include human beings’ (all people – the poor and the rich, white and black, oppressors and oppressed) rejection of God’s offer of relationship to them in and through the Christ-Event. It must also define salvation in a

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<sup>156</sup> In chapter four, I will develop a model that allows for a simultaneous interaction between ‘Christology from below’ and ‘Christology from above’, and a simultaneous conversation between the divinity and humanity and also the person and work of Jesus Christ.

<sup>157</sup> I will explore this claim further in chapter three under the emerging themes from the grassroots Christologies of Nigerian Christianity.

way that transcends liberation from sinful political and socioeconomic structures to include God's holistic liberation of humanity.<sup>158</sup>

Liberation theologians must be able to move from 'liberation' to 'reconstruction'. They must not only become involved practically in alleviating and ameliorating the conditions of the oppressed; they must also develop their Christologies and theologies in a way that promotes self-criticism. Their theologies and Christologies must be able to raise and answer the questions: what will Jesus look like if he is interpreted and appropriated in a way that engages with the situation of the poor? And what will the situation of the poor, their struggles for liberation and the approach they use in dealing with injustice look like when they are examined in light of the Christ-Event? Throughout the remainder of this study, I will explore how this kind of questions must inform an adequate contextual Christology that is designed for Nigerian Christianity.

Returning to African Christology, it is important to note that the 'Liberation and Inculturation' models are the two major approaches that are predominant in the christological discourses of most theologians.<sup>159</sup> Three things are necessary are noteworthy. First, liberation-oriented Christologies correlate to a culture-oriented Christologies: both models discuss liberation and cultural issues.<sup>160</sup> Jean-Marc Ela, the Cameroonian theologian, has correctly argued for the integration of inculturation and liberation in theological discussions. He writes:

Everything that specifically marks the Christian tradition today is questioned, if one watches those Africans who live in oppression and suffer under the injustice of ideological, social, political, and economic structures.... What must be deepened... if faith is to move ahead, is the ability of the gospel to respond to the situation that can no longer be covered up: 'the powerful and most irreversible aspiration that people have for liberation'. So critical reflection on the relevance of an African Christianity requires us to identify the structures or strategies of exploitation and

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<sup>158</sup> See chapter seven for discussions on sin and salvation of humanity.

<sup>159</sup> C. Nyamiti, "Contemporary African Christologies: Assessment and Practical Suggestion," in *Paths of African Theology*, 64. In this study, I have described these models as culture-oriented and liberation-oriented Christologies.

<sup>160</sup> See Jean-Marc Ela, *My Faith as an African*, trans. John Pairman Brown and Susan Perry (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988).

impoverishment against which Africans have always struggled, finding their own specific forms of resistance within their cultures.<sup>161</sup>

Second, although some Nigerian liberation-oriented Christologies bear many features of the liberation theologies and Christologies that exist in Latin America, South Africa, Asia and North America, they differ because of the uniqueness of the questions, concerns and cultural contexts that shape them. Third, the concept of liberation has not yet occupied a central place in the constructive Christologies of most Nigerian theologians. Further research is required in this area. Among the reasons for this is a misleading understanding of the relationship between the tasks of ‘African theology’ and ‘Black theology’. Some theologians have construed *inculturation* as the primary task of African theology and *liberation* as the key task of Black theology.<sup>162</sup> Theologians must begin to explore in their theologies and Christologies the questions that are rooted in the experiences of the people who are poor and oppressed and their struggles against poverty and all forms of political and socioeconomic injustices. Two things are noteworthy. First, the theologians who separate ‘inculturation’ and ‘liberation’ have forgotten too quickly that these concepts inspired some earliest African theologians’ rejection of most Western theologies which they believed promoted or failed to critique cultural hegemony, colonial oppressive systems, racism and apartheid. Second, it is important for theologians to recognize that Jesus Christ embodies liberation. I will examine this claim further in chapters six and seven. It suffices to note here that the Christ-Event demonstrates the action of God to critique oppressive systems and to liberate the people who are oppressed. When theologians separate the concepts of liberation and inculturation they endanger the relevance of Jesus Christ, particularly how their Christologies can critique and undo indigenous, governmental and ecclesiastical structures that are oppressive.

As I have already indicated, I will concentrate primarily on some Nigerian feminist Christologies. I have chosen to explore feminist Christology here because it is

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<sup>161</sup> Ela, *My Faith as an African*, xvii.

<sup>162</sup> See Emmanuel Martey, *African Theology: Inculturation and Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993), xi.

the key model that has integrated liberation and inculturation motives. On the one hand, some feminist theologians have criticized the Western theologies that failed to engage with the indigenous cultures and religions. On the other hand, some of these theologians have criticized the indigenous cultures that perpetuate the oppression of women and have begun to seek for a christological examination of the marginalized and impoverished conditions of women.

From the onset, it is important to note that a ‘Nigerian feminist Christology’ does not yet exist as a well-defined and structured entity. As we will see later, some Nigerian feminist theologians at this stage have only incorporated Jesus-talk into their broader theological discussions. But given that this is a crucially important form of liberation theology that is developing in Nigerian Christianity, it merits an extensive exploration.

### **1. Feminist Christology**

Feminist theology gained prominence in Christian theological discourse in the 1960s.<sup>163</sup> But women’s involvement in biblical theology began in the nineteenth century with the works of people such as Sarah Grimké and Elizabeth Cady Stanton.<sup>164</sup> It was not until the 1980s that some feminist theologies and movements emerged in sub-Saharan Africa. Although many African women had always used non-public and non-academic ways to establish their significant places in their societies that the male-dominated cultures have veiled, their irruption into Christian theological discourse began in 1980. The Ibadan conference organized by Daisy Obi, who was then the director of the Institute of Church and Society of the Christian Council of Nigeria, was momentous because it signalled a new era for some Nigerian and other African women

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<sup>163</sup> Colin Greene, *Christology in Cultural Perspective*, 220. See also Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 3; Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: Morrow, 1984).

<sup>164</sup> The publication of *The Woman’s Bible* in 1895 and 1898 triggered a paradigm shift in biblical theological discourses. See Luise Schottroff, Silvia Schroer and Marie-Theres Wacker, *Feminist Interpretation: The Bible in Women’s Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 3-5.

theologians.<sup>165</sup> Soon after, some African women began to join the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT).<sup>166</sup> The ‘World’s Women’ meeting in Nairobi, Kenya in 1985 also boosted the courage of some African women to fight for their liberation from the oppressive actions, networks, and policies of men. Furthermore, the establishment of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians in 1989 also empowered and created more opportunities for African women to develop some theological and christological responses to the dehumanizing conditions of women in many African societies.<sup>167</sup>

Feminist Christology is very difficult to define because it encompasses several contours that have both united and divided many feminists. Several concepts including ‘queer theory’, ‘postmodernism’, ‘postcolonial theory’, ‘feminist theory’, ‘gendered body’ and ‘sexual body’<sup>168</sup> are shaping the nature and agenda of feminist worldview(s).<sup>169</sup> However, central to the feminist worldview is the liberation and empowerment of women: a march to rediscover the eclipsed and marginalized freedom of women to exist not as the ‘other’, and a march to preach the ‘gospel’ of equality, mutuality and reciprocity in the patriarchal world in which they live. Serene Jones notes two concomitant goals that derive from some feminist liberative movements. The first is to “identify the various forms of oppression that structured women’s lives”. And the

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<sup>165</sup> Mercy Oduyoye, “Gender and Theology in Africa Today,” available from [http://www.thecirclecawt.org/focus\\_areas?mode=content&id=17292&refto=2629ecirclecawt.org](http://www.thecirclecawt.org/focus_areas?mode=content&id=17292&refto=2629ecirclecawt.org); Internet; accessed 4 August 2006.

<sup>166</sup> Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*, 39.

<sup>167</sup> Oduyoye, “Jesus Christ,” 153.

<sup>168</sup> See Marcella Althaus-Reid “‘Pussy, Queen of Pirates’: Acker, Isherwood and the Debate on the Body in Feminist Theology,” in *Embodying Feminist Liberation Theologies*, ed. Beverley Clark (London: Continuum, 2004), 160; Lisa Isherwood, *Introducing Feminist Christologies* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001); Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Christology* (London: SCM Press, 2005).

<sup>169</sup> Most of these theories and worldviews have not fully reflected in the Christologies of African feminists.

second is the attempt to create ways that will ensure “an alternative future [for women] without oppression”.<sup>170</sup>

Some feminist Christologies launch attacks against the societal and ecclesial systems that encourage or help to perpetuate injustice, oppression, violence and marginalization carried out against women and all people. It is noteworthy that the exact ‘targets’ of the feminist christological discourses vary depending on the experience and context of the theologian. But it seems, recognizing the risk of oversimplification, that the numerous targets of most feminist Christologies can be categorized into two; namely, the ‘world of males’ and the ‘world of humans’. A feminist Christology, which targets the ‘world of males’, sees men as the principal antagonists of women – in this case, feminism is seen as anti-male. This understanding of feminism was predominant in the early development of feminist movements.<sup>171</sup> Some feminist theologians who belong to this category focus primarily on the liberation of women. Their works are directed specifically to women with the intent to ignite in them the desire to stand up and fight for their liberation from any oppressive systems created by the ‘world of male’.

Conversely, some feminist theologians who aim to reconstruct and redefine what it means to be ‘human’ define broadly their target as the ‘world of humans’ – they target all persons (male or female) who define humanity on the basis of gender or colour. They seek for the liberation of all persons and even for ecological liberation.<sup>172</sup> Susan Parsons and Mercy Oduyoye are examples of such feminists whose goal is to redefine humanity. Parsons views the ethics of feminism as consisting in the attempt to provide a scheme for “understanding our identity as human persons, our place in the overall order

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<sup>170</sup> Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, 3.

<sup>171</sup> For discussions on the early development of feminist movements and Western Feminist Christolog(ies), see Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987). M. Daly, *Beyond the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation* (London: Women’s Press, 1986); E. S. Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (London: SCM Press, 1983); Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam’s Child, Sophia’s Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* (London: SCM Press, 1995)

<sup>172</sup> Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, 6; see essay in *Ecofeminism and the Sacred*, ed. Carol Adams (New York: Continuum, 1993),

of things, and the ways in which the fulfillment of our humanity might come about”.<sup>173</sup>

The Nigerian theologian, Mercy Oduyoye, shares a similar idea. She argues that

feminism is not the word *of* the female, it is the word of all who are conscious of the true nature of human community as a mixture of those things, values, roles, temperaments, etc., that we dichotomise into feminine and masculine.<sup>174</sup>

Oduyoye insists that a feminist theology is geared toward enabling all humans to “attain the fullness of their being” and to “liberate human community from entrenched attitudes and structures that cannot operate unless dichotomies and hierarchies are maintained”.<sup>175</sup>

In the thinking of Parsons and Oduyoye, feminism is not necessarily anti-male; it is rather an inclusive terminology that conveys the agitation of some women (and men) to re-examine the nature of human beings without employing the oppressive female-male dichotomy.<sup>176</sup>

For many Nigerian Christians, the words ‘feminism’ and ‘feminist Christology’ trigger off some cultural problems.<sup>177</sup> A persistent suspicion has shaped this negative understanding of a feminist approach to Christology. This is the idea that feminism is a deadly western-oriented movement that is cutting deep into the cultural structure of some indigenous customs and traditions: a cultural structure which empowered male to become strong and superior but disempowered female to become weak and inferior. Feminism, for some Nigerians who hold this view, is foreign and revolutionary, albeit destructive, in the sense that it is empowering women to be equal with men and even sometimes disempowering men in order to make women the stronger and superior

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<sup>173</sup> Susan Frank Parsons, “Accounting for Hope: Feminist Theology as Fundamental Theology,” in *Challenging Women’s Orthodoxies in the Context of Faith*, ed. Susan Frank Parsons (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), 1-2.

<sup>174</sup> Oduyoye, “Feminism: A Pre-condition for a Christian Anthropology,” *African Theological Journal* 11, no. 3 (1982): 193-194.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

<sup>176</sup> Christologically, this is a representative understanding of the humanity of Jesus Christ in “a generic sense as that which transcends gender and is therefore inclusive of both male and female”. Greene, *Christology in Cultural Perspective*, 240.

<sup>177</sup> Oduyoye, “Feminist Theology in an African Perspective,” in *Paths of African Theology*, 166-167. The harsh negative attitudes toward feminism in Nigeria may not be entirely unconnected with the indigenous estimation of females as subordinates to males.

individuals. The common saying in Nigeria “whatever a man can do a woman can equally do if not better” proves the suspicion of such Christians. But feminism, for some Christians who are sympathetic to its history and agenda, is a helpful movement that can help women realize their full potentials as the people who are created in the image of God and who are essentially equal with men. What perhaps remains obscure to many Nigerian Christians is the relevance of any Christology that is feminist-oriented. Therefore, it is important to discuss three developments that have functioned as a backdrop to the emergence of feminist Christologies in Nigerian Christianity. All of these developments are rooted in the experiences of women who are struggling to regain freedom to exist in the andocentric systems of their churches and the society at large.

#### **a. Patriarchal-Structured Cultures and Customs of Indigenous Nigeria**

In Nigeria, as well as in many societies in Africa, many women live under some oppressive cultures and systems. Traditionally, some men consider women and children to be inherently inferior. For some men, for example, the word ‘men’ does not simply signify gender but more importantly a ‘class’ or ‘status quo’. For instance, some men are sometimes described derogatively as ‘women’ because they are lazy or cowards. Conversely, the word ‘women’ represents both the gender and class of people who may not have any significant leadership roles in their societies. All females are believed to have inherited a low status and should remain subordinate to men. When they want to escape from this cultural web, some men see such acts as disobedience to the laws of the Supreme Being, the ancestors and the gods of the land, and ultimately a threat to the ‘world of men’. As Oduyoye observes,

In Africa, the very idea of a ‘free woman’ conjures up negative images.... The single woman who manages her affairs successfully without a man, is an affront to patriarchy and a direct challenge to the so-called masculinity of men who want to ‘possess’ her. Some women are struggling to be free from this compulsory attachment to the male. Women want the right to be fully human, whether or not they choose to be attached to men.<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> Oduyoye, *Beads and Strands: Reflections of an African Woman on Christianity in Africa* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002), 69.

Many indigenous cultures and traditions of Nigeria are undoubtedly male-centred. This, however, does not mean that some cultures and traditions do not promote respect for women. The problem, it seems, is the conditions under which many women live in their homes, clans, and the society at large. Most indigenous cultures configure respect and significance of women mainly in the perspectives of men. Sadly, some men continue to see women as ‘sex objects’ for the gratifications of their sexual desires, or as ‘wombs’ whose sole purpose is to bear children for men. Oduyoye laments this state of affairs:

We have been brought up to believe that a woman should always have a suzerain, that she should be ‘owned’ by a man, be he father, uncle, or husband. A ‘free woman’ spells disaster. An adult woman, if unmarried, is immediately reckoned to be available for the pleasure of all males and is treated as such. .<sup>179</sup>

The agony of many women, which Oduyoye expresses sharply, is the oppressiveness of the cultures and traditions that define a woman’s identity only in relation to the values and demands of men. Therefore, the march for liberation is situated in freeing women from their “compulsory attachment to men”.<sup>180</sup> Some Nigerian feminist theologians see this attachment as one of the causes of the dehumanizing treatments that many women experience.

Rosemary Edet, whilst recognizing that the widowhood ritual imposed on women “may or may not be out of malice”, contends that the ritual exposes women to hostility, enormous sufferings and health hazards.<sup>181</sup> The requirements of some clans for widowhood ritual are disgusting and preposterous. For example, a widow is usually considered the prime suspect in her husband’s death. Under a ‘barbaric’ method of establishing whether she is guilty or innocent, some cultures in Nigeria require the widow to drink part of the water that is used to wash her husband’s corpse. When the widow refuses to drink the water, the clan will ostracize her and subjugate her to horrendous sufferings.

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<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

<sup>181</sup> Rosemary N. Edet, “Christianity and African Women’s Ritual,” in *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition, and the Church in Africa*, ed. Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2001), 31.

## **b. Emancipation of Women from the Oppressive Ecclesial Systems**

In the church too, women feel that they also suffer injustice and oppression. Some feminist theologians have given a distress call to Nigerian churches to rediscover the ‘priesthood of all believers’. Edet wonders why churches “continue to choose their leaders from the educated, predominantly male, middles classes,” and why there “are no women bishops”.<sup>182</sup> Also she questions the reason, in some local churches, women are teachers “who do not participate to any great extent in church theological and political discussions, and whose views are not taken into account”.<sup>183</sup> Modupe Owanikin argues that some “Nigerian custom and tradition recognize the priesthood of women”. She contends that churches who are opposed to women leadership must learn from the indigenous religions as a way to contextualize Christianity.<sup>184</sup> Chukwudi Okolo is an example of some Nigerian men who are highly critical of the dehumanizing treatment of women in the church. He notes that the “Nigerian woman is fast coming of age” and gradually becoming aware of her conditions. For Okolo, this phenomenon is justified, and the “church in Nigeria needs [to be] aware of the Nigerian woman’s diverse socio-cultural realities, difficulties” threatening her existence.<sup>185</sup> Daisy Nwachukwu argues that this estimation of women is also apparent in the indigenous religions.<sup>186</sup> Nwachukwu challenges women to wake up from their slumber and to express their dissatisfactions with the ecclesial and cultural traditions that perpetuate the “rites and rituals” that foster female oppression.<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>182</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid., 37-38.

<sup>184</sup> R. Modupe Owanikin, “The Priesthood of Church Women in the Nigerian Context,” in *The Will to Arise*, 217.

<sup>185</sup> Chukwudi B. Okolo, “The Church and the Nigerian Woman,” *AFER* 27, 368-369.

<sup>186</sup> Daisy N. Nwachukwu, “The Christian Widow in African Culture,” in *The Will to Arise*, 65.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

Although many feminist theologians draw insights from diverse ideologies, Christology has remained central to their quest for the liberation of women from all forms of marginalization and oppression. Oduyoye argues forcefully for the need to acknowledge the liberative effect of the Christ-Event on African women.

African women are heard loud and clear singing the redemptive love of Jesus the liberator. Jesus accomplishes God's mission by setting women free from sexism, oppression, and marginalisation through his death and resurrection, and both women and men are made members of God's household and of the same royal priesthood as men.<sup>188</sup>

Oduyoye raises some vital christological issues here but does not explore them. However, her aim is clear: to argue that the Christ-Event is the ground on which many Nigerian women who are oppressed can breathe liberation and also draw encouragement to criticize oppressions and their oppressors. At the heart of the reconstruction of African Christologies from the feminist perspective is the criticism of a problematic anthropology that is prevalent in some African theological discourses and the attempt to eliminate all "limitations to the fullness of life envisaged in the Christ-Event".<sup>189</sup> For Oduyoye, Jesus embodies the liberation for all humanity and therefore stands in opposition to the oppression of women in Africa. She argues that

in the heightened debate surrounding the role of women, some Africans are puzzled when Christian women say that it is the will of Christ... that women should be free to respond to the fullness God expects of all human beings.<sup>190</sup>

According to her, the humiliating status of many women in Africa is a contradiction to the essence of Christianity, a religion that promotes liberation and freedom. She criticizes African Christianity for remaining largely indifferent to the ordeal of women. To use her words,

It is my experience that Christianity, as manifested in the western churches of Africa, does little to change sexism, whether in church or in society. I believe that the experience of women in the church in Africa contradicts the Christian claim to promote the worth (equal value) of every person. Rather, it shows how Christianity

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<sup>188</sup> Oduyoye, "Jesus Christ," 156.

<sup>189</sup> Oduyoye, *Beads and Strands*, 68.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

reinforces the cultural conditioning of compliance and submission and leads to the depersonalisation of women.<sup>191</sup>

I will explore further the concept of liberation in some of the writings of Nigerian feminist theologians in the following section.

### **c. Liberation from Western Colonization and Missionary Christology**

For many Nigerian feminist theologians, the ‘enemies’ are not only the aspects of indigenous cultures and ecclesiastical systems that are oppressive, but also Western colonization, and the Missionary Christology. Rosemary Edet and Bette Ekeya underscore this assumption.

Under the colonial rule women fared no better, for all the disabilities of Western Christian culture were added to the already burden of African situation.<sup>192</sup>

Teresia Hinga, the Kenyan scholar, expresses the role of the West in the subjugation of African women as follows:

Going back to history, we recall that during the period of colonial and imperial expansionism, the prevailing image of Christ was that of Christ the conqueror. Jesus was the warrior King, in whose name and banner (the cross) new territories, both physical and spiritual, would be fought for, annexed, and subjugated. An imperial Christianity thus had an imperial Christ to match. The Christ of the missionaries was a conquering Christ.<sup>193</sup>

Hinga, however, points out the ambivalence of the missionaries’ attitudes toward the subjugated in Africa. She observes that some Western missionaries established “centres of refuge” where some women who were “trying to break away from unsatisfactory marriages or harsh parental control” took shelter.<sup>194</sup>

Relatively, Teresa Okure, a Nigerian biblical scholar, sees Jesus’ post-resurrection message to Mary Magdalene for his disciples recorded in John 20:11-18 as

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<sup>191</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>192</sup> Edet and Ekeya, “Church Women of Africa: A Theological Community,” in *With Passion and Compassion*, 5.

<sup>193</sup> Hinga, “Jesus Christ and the Liberation of Women,” in *The Will to Arise*, 187.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid., 189.

the foundation on which the unity of Christian communities is to be built. Jesus' usage of the possessive pronouns 'your' and 'my' to describe the relationship that is now existing between his followers and his Father, and between him and his Father, for Okure, underscores a 'new relationship' in which all Christians are to "relate to one another in Jesus as blood brothers and sisters relate to one another".<sup>195</sup> Okure goes on to argue that this new form of relationship must inspire "the so-called Christian countries of the west to care for their less fortunate sisters and brothers in the two-thirds world".<sup>196</sup> Of course, it is someone who is totally disconnected from the economy of Nigeria that will be unaware of the enormous amount of foreign aid that goes into the countries. But Okure's contention emerges powerfully in that she is not interested in the 'act of giving aid'; instead she is primarily concerned with the 'motive' underlying the act of caring or giving. A 'sense of duty' and not a 'sense of benevolence', argues Okure, should be the motive behind the caring and aid that some countries in the West provide for the poor countries. She contends that the "belittling relationship that often exists between donors and receivers should give place to a genuine sharing not only of goods but of technology and skills".<sup>197</sup>

Some Nigerian feminist Christologies present Jesus as a liberator. This image of Jesus as a liberator serves two primary purposes. First, in the thinking of the majority of these theologians, Jesus is a liberator who de-stigmatizes and liberates women and all human beings from the oppressive sexist conditions, patriarchal cultures, and ecclesial traditions. Inherent in this thinking, is the contention that Jesus reconstructs the sexist dichotomy of male/female and introduces a radical meaning of humanity. Jesus Christ, for them, embodies true humanity. Drawing upon the ways Jesus related to some women in the Gospel stories and the experience of women, some feminist theologians argue forcefully for the need to eradicate any intellectual framework that degrades women.

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<sup>195</sup> Teresa Okure, "Jesus and Mary Magdalene," in *Oxford Readings in Feminism: Feminism and Theology*, ed. Janet Martin Soskice and Diane Lipton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 318.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, 324.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*

Second, the image of Jesus Christ as a liberator is intended by some feminist theologians to stimulate many women to arise from their underserved state of humiliation. This is evident in the most powerful charge Okure gives to African feminist theologians:

Let us eject from our attitudes and subconscious all prejudices and inferiority complexes about ourselves as Africans and as a women. Let us promptly obey Jesus who awakens us from sleep and authorizes and empowers us to undertake responsible theological action and reflection.<sup>198</sup>

To Okure, women have a serious part to play in liberating themselves from their oppressive conditions. Jesus has opened a new horizon and a new way of viewing humanity and liberation. Nigerian women, therefore, are to draw encouragement from Jesus and must aim at achieving total liberation and true humanness.

A major element that distinguishes many Nigerian feminist Christologies from some feminist Christologies emerging in Europe, Latin America, and North America is the emphasis on the *work* of Jesus Christ and not on the *gender* of Jesus Christ. For many Nigerian feminist theologians, the gender of Jesus does not warrant the suspicion of the possibility of ‘a male Saviour effectively saving women’.<sup>199</sup> They see Jesus’ attitude towards some women in the Bible as persuasive evidence that he criticized and deconstructed cultures that subjugated women, and re-constructed a new paradigm that upholds the dignity of women.<sup>200</sup> As Edet writes,

Jesus was revolutionary. He liberated the woman with the issue of blood and restored the son of the widow of Nain. He never tortured them, nor segregated them, nor demanded purifications rites.<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>198</sup> Ibid. See also “The Will to Arise: Reflections on Luke 8:40-56,” in *The Will to Arise*, 227.

<sup>199</sup> In the West, however, the question ‘can a male saviour be able to save women?’ is one of the defining questions on which some feminist Christologies are built. It is the influence of this question that perhaps made Naomi Goldenberg to argue that in order to “develop a theology of women liberation, feminist have to leave Christ and the Bible behind”. See Goldenberg, *The Changing of the Gods: Feminism and the End of the Traditional Religions* (Boston: Beacon, 1979), 22. Rosemary Radford Reuther, “Can Christology be Liberated from Patriarchy?” in *Reconstructing the Christ Symbol*, ed. M Stevens (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 7-29; Daphne Hampson has also argued that no authentic Christology is compatible with feminism. See Hampson, “Feminism and Christology,” in *Oxford Reading in Feminism*, 287-299.

<sup>200</sup> See Okure, “The Will To Arise: Reflections on Luke 8:40-56,” in *The Will to Arise*, 221-230.

<sup>201</sup> Edet, “Christianity and African Women’s Ritual,” 37.

Some Nigerian women have always expressed their experiences which have traumatized their lives through writing, through aesthetical forums such as dancing and painting, and through speech acts such as poems and storytelling. But their experiences have not been truly heard and accorded due place in the church. Many Nigerian women, represented by some women theologians, want their experiences to become a 'text' for doing Christology. Furthermore, it is not that some men have not acted as spokespersons of women, for some men have condemned and called for the eradication of cultures and traditions that empower men to maltreat their wives, widows and indeed all women. But women want to speak for themselves. They want to be their own advocates; they want to stand up and declare their freedom themselves. As Oduyoye notes,

Women's spirituality is qualitatively different from that of men because women's experience of socioeconomic realities differs from that of men.... When women read the Bible, they often hear what is unheard by men. Thus, women's biblical theology originates at a different depth.<sup>202</sup>

Again Oduyoye and Musimbi Kanyoro express their suspicion of male's theology.

African women theologians have come to realize that as long as men and foreign researchers remain the authorities on culture, rituals and religion, African women will continue to be spoken of as if they were dead.<sup>203</sup>

This suspicion of some Nigerian feminist theologians seems to be justified when we consider that some of the images of Jesus Christ in the Nigerian constructive Christology are shaped by patriarchy. One example is the Ancestor Christology model. Usually, it is only men that are readily associated with the ancestor cult. Ezeh, the key proponent of the Ancestor Christology, acknowledges that this is one of the arguments raised against the Ancestor Christology paradigm.<sup>204</sup>

The quests to contribute to the academic discourse and for self-expression are not peculiar to the Nigerian women. Kwok Pui-lan explains that these quests are embedded in the struggle of all women in the world who are marginalized. Writing specifically from the context of postcolonial discourse, she asserts:

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<sup>202</sup> Oduyoye, "Feminist Theology in an African Perspective," 167.

<sup>203</sup> Oduyoye and Kanyoro, "Introduction," in *The Will to Arise*, 1.

<sup>204</sup> Ezeh, *Jesus Christ the Ancestor*, 310.

Women's articulation of their experiences of colonization is so new; these women have been much represented, but until recently have not been allowed the opportunities to represent themselves. Even if they have 'spoken', their speech acts are expressed not only in words but in forms that the academic and cultural establishments either could not understand or deemed insignificant.<sup>205</sup>

How would a Nigerian woman speak freely about her experiences of Jesus and expect them to inform the Christology of her church or denomination without immediately putting herself in the theological line of battle with men who doubt her 'right' and capability of such enterprise? Oduyoye correctly observes that even when some African women venture to do theology "they model themselves on male theology, or else they would have to seek men's approval for what they write".<sup>206</sup> The emergence of feminist Christology in Nigerian Christianity has begun to draw out sharp criticisms against the male-dominated ways of interpreting Jesus the Christ. The legitimacy of the concern of feminist theologians is unquestionable. The liberation call which they make is unavoidable. One wonders how Nigerian Christians (both men and women) can justify some of the practices and ill-treatment women undergo in their clans, homes, and more disappointingly in the church. The ritual of widowhood has become more and more oppressive on women. Whether or not a feminist Christology-talk in Nigerian Christianity has succeeded in its agenda depends on the angle one examines it. But what is undeniable is that, although gradual, some Christians are beginning to acknowledge the importance of women for the vibrant existence and subsistence of Christianity. For example, many women in some Pentecostal churches closely stand, teach and minister with their husbands who are founders of churches.

Another phenomenon that is worthy of recognition is the fact that the impact of some feminist Christologies is felt mainly on the surface level. Some of these Christologies have appealed only to a few men and women who are learned. But the idea of 'feminist Christology' is still off-putting and inaccessible to numerous women and men who do not have any formal theological education. The irony is that the majority of

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<sup>205</sup> Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2005), 30.

<sup>206</sup> Oduyoye, "Feminist Theology in an African Perspective," 167.

Nigerian women who continue to suffer injustice and oppression have not gone through the university or any formal education at all. They live in the deep parts of some Nigerian villages and have no access to the scholarly works of Nigerian feminist theologians. The challenge for feminist theologians and indeed for all Christians in Nigeria is to reach out to such women with a ‘liberative gospel’ through workshops, preaching and any other techniques that are suitable to their contexts. What this entails is that a Nigerian feminist theologian has the responsibility to bring his or her Christology down from an ivory tower (which earns him or her respect and fame in the world of academia) and direct it into the rural areas and villages where many women are still being maltreated and oppressed.<sup>207</sup>

Finally, an adequate contextual Christology designed for Nigerian Christianity should present Jesus Christ as the figure who dismantles all forms of oppression emanating from a gender and sexist cultural web. Another danger the feminist theologian faces is the tendency to overemphasize the ‘particularity’ of Jesus Christ to the extent of reducing him to a tool for achieving some selfish agenda. The tension between ‘Black feminist Christologies’ and what could be called (for lack of a better expression) ‘White feminist Christology’ exemplifies this danger. For some Black American feminist theologians, the idea of feminism has originated from and has served the need of some White middle-class women. Thus, some Black American feminist theologians differentiate the feminist theology which arises from the experience of Black Americans from the feminist theology that emerges from within the experience of the White middle-class Americans.<sup>208</sup> Nigerian feminist theologians have the task of producing the Christologies that have the capacity to critique the oppressive concepts

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<sup>207</sup> Some feminist theologians who are members of the Circle of Concerned African Women are beginning to move in this direction, reaching out to some women in the villages.

<sup>208</sup> Jacquelyn Grant, “Black Women’s Experience as a Source for Doing Theology,” in *Constructive Christian Theology in the Worldwide Church*, ed. William R. Barr (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 346. Grant has argued that “Womanist theology begins with the experience of Black women as its point of departure. The experience includes not only Black women’s activities in the larger society but also in the churches, and reveals that Black women have often rejected the oppressive structures in the church as well”. Grant, “Womanist Theology: Black Women’s Experience as a Source for Doing Theology, with Special Reference to Christology,” in *Black Theology: A Documentary History*, vol. 2: 1980-1992, ed. James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993), 278.

and worldviews that emanate from both men and women. Daisy Nwachukwu has argued that some of the humiliating customs women undergo in Nigeria were initiated by women themselves.

Some of the obnoxious and repressive role functions of women, whether in religion or in social matters, were formulated in the distant past by powerful elderly women for the purposes of female disciple in the areas of wifely submission, chastity, good maternal care, and for the maintaining femininity.<sup>209</sup>

A Nigerian feminist Christology should, therefore, guard against the danger of an opposite error. Jesus Christ should be allowed to dismantle the oppressive customs initiated by men against women, women against women, and women against other women, and indeed every form of oppression and dehumanizing cultures.

In conclusion, I have examined in this chapter some of the major christological models that exist in contemporary Nigerian Christianity. I argued that they are concerned with the issue of contextualizing the person and work of Jesus Christ to benefit the religious, cultural, political and socioeconomic experience of the Nigerian people. The Missionary Christology has provided the context for the Neo-missionary Christology, the Culture-oriented Christology and the Liberation-oriented Christologies. A key question that drives many theologians to construct contextual Christologies is: ‘what would Jesus Christ look like if he was expressed with the indigenous thought forms and if he was located within the history of the experiences of Nigerians?’ Many theologians have wrestled with this question and have made some original contributions to the development of contextual Christologies. As we have already seen, some of these models have some serious christological problems. They have not allowed the person and work of Jesus Christ to critique their contextual approaches and agendas. In addition, whilst these christological models claim to be contextual, they seem not to engage seriously with the christological concerns of many Christians who do not have any formal theological training. The concerns include the existential significance of Jesus for the issues of poverty, fear of evil spirits, the danger of insecurity, and quest to achieve wellbeing. This will become evident as I explore in the next chapter some of the

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<sup>209</sup> Nwachukwu, “The Christian Widow in African Culture,” 66.

grassroots Christologies. I will also explore further some of the theological problems of the models that I have examined in this chapter throughout the remainder of the study.

## CHAPTER THREE

### GRASSROOTS CHRISTOLOGIES OF CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN CHRISTIANITY

In this chapter, I will concentrate on the some grassroots Christologies that emerged from the qualitative fieldwork research – individual interviews – I conducted in Aba (one of the major cities in southeast of Nigeria) from February to July 2006. The chapter is divided into two major sections. First, I begin by describing the methodology I have employed. This includes the rationale for undertaking the research and the procedures that I have used for data collection and analysis. I also articulate the relationship of this chapter to the overarching theses and objectives of this study. Second, I will examine the christological issues and themes that emerged from the interviews and articulate the conclusions that I have drawn from the analysis of the data. I will also interact with the two major sources of grassroots Christologies; namely, the Bible and religious experience. I will explore some of the key contexts that inform and shape the grassroots Christologies. Finally, I will examine the ‘solution-oriented’ ideology that underlies many of the grassroots Christologies.

#### **A. Methodology**

##### **1. Research Rationale**

African theology...has remained far too academic, and is for the most part irrelevant to what is going on in African society today.<sup>1</sup>

The Congolese theologian, Bénézet Bujo, in the foregoing observation articulates a major problem that confronts many contextual theologies and Christologies in Africa. For too long, Bujo laments, many theologians have written the theologies and Christologies that never get “beyond the lecture halls of universities and congresses [and] mostly outside of Africa”.<sup>2</sup> The observation of Bujo provides a broad context for this chapter. Many Nigerian theologians have constructed some Christologies that discuss some of the issues that bothered Christians in the nineteenth and the early part of the twentieth centuries but have ignored the contemporary issues that many lay Christians wrestle with in their daily lives and how such issues inform and shape

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<sup>1</sup> Bénézet Bujo, *African Theology in Its Social Context*, trans. John O’Donohue (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992), 70.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 70

their interpretations and appropriations of the Christ-Event. But if a contextual theologian wants to be relevant to the majority of Nigerian lay Christians today, he or she must begin to construct the Christologies that move beyond a peer-driven conversation.<sup>3</sup> In addition, he or she must interpret and appropriate the Christ-Event in the ways that are rooted strongly in, to use the words of Kenneth Ross, “how ordinary people understand the identity and meaning of Jesus Christ”.<sup>4</sup>

The quests to discover how lay Christians in Nigeria perceive Jesus Christ and how their Christologies compare to the major constructive models that theologians have written are the two major reasons for the inclusion of this chapter in this study. Theologians make a mistake if they assume that they already know what many lay Christians in their communities think and believe about Jesus Christ without taking time to converse with them. I argue that no constructive Christology is truly contextual if it fails to take seriously and engage with the living experiences of people. A contextual Christology must go beyond “formal written expressions to include informal expressions, for example in worship, prayer, preaching, artwork, drama, gesture and symbols”.<sup>5</sup> Although I will make reference to some written texts in this chapter, I will focus primarily on the oral Christologies.

## 2. Research Procedure

I used a qualitative field research approach.<sup>6</sup> This method fits the objectives of this chapter because it promotes active conversations between a researcher and the interviewees.<sup>7</sup> It allows a researcher, to use the words of Uwe Flick, to gain access to the experiences of the interviewees in their own natural contexts.<sup>8</sup> A qualitative

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<sup>3</sup> Laity here refers to Christians who do not have a formal theological training.

<sup>4</sup> Kenneth R. Ross, “Current Christological Trends in Northern Malawi,” *Journal of African Religion* 27, no. 2 (1997): 160-176.

<sup>5</sup> Diane Barbara Stinton, “Jesus of Africa: Voices of Contemporary African Christology from Selected Textual and Oral Sources,” (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Edinburgh, 2001), 31.

<sup>6</sup> The meaning and the nature of ‘qualitative research’ have become more complex in the wake of the descriptions that are associated with this form of research. What is noteworthy is that many researchers have moved away from construing qualitative research as simply an alternative to ‘quantitative research’. They see qualitative research as a unique method that is most appropriate to specific forms of ethnographical research. See Uwe Flick, *Designing Qualitative Research* (London: Sage, 2007), 1; David Silverman, *Doing Qualitative Research: A Practical Handbook* (London: Sage, 2000), 7-11.

<sup>7</sup> Robert C. Bogdan and Sari Knopp Biklen, *Qualitative Research for Education: An Introduction to Theory and Methods* (Boston: Ally and Bacon, 1982), 27-30.

<sup>8</sup> Flick, *Designing Qualitative Research*, x.

method, unlike, a quantitative method requires a *descriptive interpretation* of the experiences of the interviewees rather than on a *statistical evaluation*.<sup>9</sup> As we will see later, this method allows me to use a ‘conversation analysis’ approach to analyze the data.

### **a. Data Collection and Rationale for the Field Research Sites**

It is impossible to cover all the churches in Nigeria in a single piece of research work. Therefore, it is important to reiterate that I conducted my research in Aba, a city in southeast of Nigeria. Although the interviewees are born in Nigeria, come from different ethnic groups and are affiliated to different church denominations, there are still limitations that the selection of the field sites pose. Thus, when I speak of ‘Nigerian Christianity’, I am aware of the roles and risks of generalization. However, as it become clear later in this chapter, many Christians in Nigeria, irrespective of their denominational differences, their ethnicity, and varying understandings of Christ-Event, share a solution-oriented mindset.<sup>10</sup>

Churches in contemporary Nigeria can be categorized roughly into two dominant church groups; namely, *Mission churches* and *Locally initiated churches*.<sup>11</sup> The *mission churches* are those that Western missionaries established and which have to a great extent retained the theological and liturgical traditions of the mother churches. The *locally initiated churches* are those that some Nigerians founded and which may not have any direct connection with Western missionaries.<sup>12</sup> Some of the founders of these churches may have at one time been members of the mission churches but left to found their churches for reasons such as liturgical and theological differences.

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<sup>9</sup> Silverman, *Doing Qualitative Research*, 7.

<sup>10</sup> The issue of ‘generalizability’ or ‘transferability’ in qualitative research concerns how the findings of a given research site can be applicable to other settings or contexts. ‘Sampling’ is an integral part of ‘generalization’ in both qualitative and quantitative forms of research. The key assumption here is that the variables and similarities that exist in the selected research site can also occur (in some recognizable and identifiable form) in the wider population of the broader context of the study. See Catherine Marshall and Gretchen B. Rossman, *Designing Qualitative Research* (London: Sage, 1989). It is only on the ground of sampling and generalization that I am able to speak of ‘Nigerian grassroots Christologies’ based on the individual interviews I conducted among five churches in Aba.

<sup>11</sup> It will be an oversimplification to think that Christians who, for instance, identify themselves as Pentecostals do not share some theological views of the Evangelicals.

<sup>12</sup> These churches belong to the group many African theologians and scholars of religions describe as AICs (African Independent or Indigenous Churches).

I selected five churches; namely, the Roman Catholic Church, the Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Church of West Africa (hereafter ECWA), Christian Pentecostal Mission (hereafter CPM), and Christ Holy Church, a.k.a., Nation Builders (or *Odoziobodo*).

The following reasons informed my selection of the research sites. First, the churches represent the major church groups in Nigeria. Since my main objective was to gain access to the grassroots Christologies in ‘Nigerian Christianity’, it was necessary to interview Christians from the denominations that represent the major church groups. The key reason for this is to test the regularity, variability and similarity in the responses of the interviewees.<sup>13</sup> Second, I have established a rapport with the pastors and priest of the selected five churches. I taught theology in ECWA Theological Seminary in Aba in the summers of 2003-2005. During this period, I visited the churches and spoke to their leaders about my plan to conduct interviews in their churches for my doctoral research.<sup>14</sup> Third, the members of these churches spoke Igbo and/or English languages fluently. Since I understand the two languages, I was able to deal with the practical difficulties that are associated with language, meaning, translation and interpretation during data analysis. Fourth, Aba is a major city where people from different ethnic groups reside. This made it possible for me to interview people from different ethnic groups without travelling to their home towns.

The primary source of data collection is individual interviews. The interviewees participated voluntarily. I used a semi-structured approach, which revolved around six pre-set questions.<sup>15</sup> I asked other follow-up questions based on the interviewees’ responses to the pre-set questions with the intention to probe their Christologies.<sup>16</sup> The questions I asked the interviewees were open-ended and were designed to elicit the interviewees’ perceptions of Jesus Christ.<sup>17</sup> I interviewed ten

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<sup>13</sup> I have highlighted and engaged with the variables and similarities in the interviewees’ responses throughout this chapter.

<sup>14</sup> In 2005, I conducted pilot interviews in three of the five churches – ECWA English Church Aba, Christian Pentecostal Mission and the Presbyterian Church. The pilot interviews helped me to test the objectives of the research and to modify my research and interview questions. I lived and studied in Aba for seven years. This helped me to deal with some geographical issues, particularly in locating and visiting the research sites.

<sup>15</sup> As we will see later, this approach has informed the *conversation analysis* and *meaning of interpretation* approaches that I employed in analyzing the data. See Appendix 1 for the pre-set questions.

<sup>16</sup> I used adverbs such as ‘how’ and ‘why’ to introduce the subsequent questions I asked the interviewees to probe their responses to the pre-set questions.

<sup>17</sup> The duration of the interviews varied, ranging from 20 to 50 minutes.

volunteers from each of the five churches. In each church, I interviewed a pastor (and in the case of the Roman Catholic Church, a priest) and nine lay people. I used both English and Igbo languages for the interviews, depending on the interviewee's choice. In a few cases, some of the interviewees spoke both English and Igbo languages. I recorded all the interviews with an audiotape recorder and transcribed them myself.<sup>18</sup>

## **b. Ethical Issues**

There are important ethical issues that are of paramount importance to qualitative research. These are informed consent, the rights of the interviewees, anonymity, confidentiality, fairness and objectivity in interpreting the responses of the interviewees.<sup>19</sup> I observed these ethical codes during the interviews, the transcription of the interviews and in writing up my critical analysis of the themes that emerged from the interviews. Although I informally notified the pastors and priest of the selected churches in 2005 of my intention to carry out interviews in their churches, I made a formal request and got their permission before conducting the interviews in 2006.<sup>20</sup> I also explained the objectives and purpose of my research to the interviewees and obtained their consents before conducting the interviews.

I explained to all the interviewees that I would record the interviews on tape. I also told them to tell me to stop the recorder if there were things they did not want to be on tape. In addition, I explained to all the interviewees that the information they give will be strictly confidential and will be used specifically for the purpose of my doctoral research. I also explained to the interviewees who are lay Christians that their church leaders would not have access to the tapes or my transcripts of the interviews.<sup>21</sup> I explained to all the interviewees that I would use pseudonymous

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<sup>18</sup> I transcribed the interviews in their original languages.

<sup>19</sup> Marshall and Rossman, *Designing Qualitative Research*, 69-77; Tim Rapley, *Doing Conversation, Discourse and Document Analysis* (London Sage, 2007), 23.

<sup>20</sup> I gave all the pastors, priest and interviewees the official *letter of introduction* I obtained from the University of Edinburgh. I also gave them the *Informed Consent Form* that I designed for the research. The form contains the ethical codes, objectives and purpose of my research.

<sup>21</sup> I explained to the interviewees that the goal of the research is to gain access to their personal views, and not the official view of their churches, of Jesus Christ.

names and not their real names in my research except they have permitted me to use their real names.<sup>22</sup>

### **c. Methods of Data Analysis**

There are several ways of analyzing an interview.<sup>23</sup> Steinar Kvale has identified eight modes; namely, meaning coding, meaning condensation, meaning interpretation, linguistic analysis, conversation analysis, narrative analysis, discursive analysis and deconstruction analysis.<sup>24</sup> I have employed both the ‘conversation analysis’ and ‘meaning interpretation’ modes for coding and analyzing the data.<sup>25</sup> According to Kvale, a *meaning interpretation* approach involves interpreting “the meaning of interview text” in a way that goes beyond “a structuring of the manifest meanings of what is said to a deeper and more critical interpretations of the text”.<sup>26</sup> *Conversation analysis* “examines the minute details of talk-in-interaction, which has become widely accessible with the advent of a tape recorder”.<sup>27</sup> Uwe Flick has noted that the key factor in this approach is demonstrating how conclusions are based on detailed transcription of the interviews and “how to present excerpts from the material in an accessible and readable way”.<sup>28</sup> In “conversation analysis, comparison is in many cases oriented towards a more general model... which is juxtaposed to the concrete case that is being studied”.<sup>29</sup>

These methods fit my goal of gaining access to the existing grassroots Christologies in Nigerian Christianity by interviewing a few people from the selected research sites. They also fit my goal of interacting and analyzing the data from a theological perspective by probing the responses of the interviewees. They provided me with the hermeneutical framework and context to engage in a rigorous interaction with the data. I have quoted some excerpts in the chapter. One of the reasons is to

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<sup>22</sup> Some of the interviewees requested that I used only their first names.

<sup>23</sup> See Renata Tesch, *Qualitative Research: Analysis Types and Software Tools* (London: Falmer Press, 1990).

<sup>24</sup> Steinar Kvale, *Doing Interviews* (London: Sage, 2007), 104.

<sup>25</sup> I used Nvivo 7 (computer assisted qualitative data analysis software) in coding the data.

<sup>26</sup> Kvale, *Doing Interviews*, 107.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>28</sup> Flick, *Designing Qualitative Research*, 106.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

ensure a fair and objective representation of the interviewees' understandings and perceptions of Jesus Christ. What follows is a critical examination and presentation of the themes and conclusions that have emerged from my analysis of the data.

## **B. Emerging Issues and Themes in Nigerian Grassroots Christologies**

### **1. Sources of Grassroots Christologies**

The issue of the sources of Christology has generated debates among many Nigerian (and other African) theologians. No consensus, however, exists among these theologians on where to draw resources and insights when interpreting the Christ-Event. The conversations on the issue of the sources of African Christology appear to exist on two related levels.<sup>30</sup> On the one level, there are those who concern themselves with the nature of the possible sources of a contextual Christology. Among the competing sources are the Bible, the indigenous religious worldviews and church traditions. On the second level, others debate on the type of relationship that should exist among the possible sources. For example, some concern themselves with the question: should the Bible be placed above other sources of Christology? The majority of Nigerian lay Christians take the issue of the sources of Christology for granted. But a close examination reveals that the Bible and religious experience are the two major sources.<sup>31</sup> In what follows, I will examine how these sources function as the foundation of some of the oral Christologies that exist in contemporary Nigerian Christianity.

#### **a. The Resourceful Role of the Bible**

According to Benedict Ufomadu, a member of ECWA, "it is in the Bible that we know about Jesus Christ". This was her response to question 'from where do you get your knowledge of Jesus Christ?'<sup>32</sup> Amadi's (a Presbyterian) response to the same question is as follows: "Jesus to me is the saviour of the world; he is the Son of

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<sup>30</sup> See Charles Nyamiti, "Contemporary African Christologies: Assessment and Practical Suggestions," in *Paths of African Theology*, ed. Rosino Gibellini (London: SCM Press, 1994), 62-77. Diane B. Stinton, *Jesus of Africa: Voices of Contemporary African Christology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2004), 22-24.

<sup>31</sup> Some of my interviewees made reference to their church teaching or tradition.

<sup>32</sup> Benedict Ufomadu, interview by researcher, tape recording, Aba, 28 May 2006.

God according to what is written in the scripture, and that is what I believe”.<sup>33</sup> The answers of Ufomadu and Amadi are representative of the predominant responses that many of the interviewees gave when I asked them questions regarding the sources of their Christologies. Many of the interviewees made reference to the Bible to buttress their understandings of the person and work of Jesus Christ.

The resourceful role of the Bible, particularly the New Testament, in coming to the knowledge of Jesus Christ is not contested in christological discourse in Nigeria and beyond. This is not to suggest that all theologians take the representations of Jesus Christ in the Bible to be historically authentic. Rather, many theologians usually draw upon some biblical representations of Jesus Christ when they discuss the Christ-Event. Two reasons can be advanced for this state of affairs. First, the Bible is the only major collection of books and epistles written about Jesus the Christ by some individuals who lived with him and/or experienced him in some ways.<sup>34</sup> As John Macquarrie argues,

Although the knowledge that comes to us from the New Testament is mediated knowledge... we can experience through the language even today something of the power of that person whom we call Jesus Christ.<sup>35</sup>

The second reason many Christians in Nigeria consider the Bible normally as a source of Christology is because, even when Christians claim that they experience the risen Christ, their experience of him most times stems from some biblical christological narratives. The words of Humble Douglas, a member of ECWA, attest to this: “I call Jesus my Saviour because I have experienced him, and because of what history laid down for us. And I was taught from the Bible”.<sup>36</sup>

That many Christians consider the Bible as a source of Christology is not striking. But what is striking is their understanding of the nature of the Bible. Using the Bible as a resourceful tool for gaining knowledge of the Christ-Event is the key thing that connects the grassroots Christologies and the constructive Christologies of theologians. But a crucial question is: do Christians who are not theologically trained read the Bible in the same manner many Nigerian theologians read it? At first the question may seem too obvious to need stating. However, the complexity of the possible answers and the necessity of this question emerge sharply when we

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<sup>33</sup> Amadi, interview by researcher, tape recording, Aba, 10 April 2006.

<sup>34</sup> An example is the Apostle Paul (Acts 9).

<sup>35</sup> John Macquarrie, *Christology Revisited* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1998), 85.

<sup>36</sup> Humble Douglas, interview by researcher, tape recording, Aba, 17 June 2006.

recognize that there are differences between the agenda of many contextual theologians and many lay Christians. Whereas many Christians who are not theologians are seeking to *experience* a Jesus who hears and solves their spiritual, psychological and physical problems when they pray to him, many theologians are seeking to construct *contextually* and interpret the Christ-Event with the indigenous categories.<sup>37</sup> The key issue here is that the difference in the resourceful roles of the Bible in the Christologies of many theologians and in the grassroots Christologies is not simply hermeneutical. Rather, it chiefly lies in how they construe the nature of the Bible and their purpose in reading it. The majority of contextual theologians view the Bible as a ‘church’s special book’ and read it christologically with the intent to deconstruct some images of Jesus in it which are strange to the indigenous worldview. On the contrary, most lay Christians view the Bible as ‘God’s book’ and read it christologically with the intent to experience Jesus’ power to solve spiritual, psychological and physical problems.

For many Nigerian lay Christians, the Bible is the ‘Word of God’. Writing on the use of the Bible among the Igbo of southern Nigeria, Anthony Nkwoka asserts,

To the Igbo, the Bible is a living book, the unique Word of God Almighty, Creator and Controller of the universe. Apart from the fact that it is ‘*Bible Nso*’ (The Holy Bible), it is the Messenger-gift of an awfully holy and all-terrible God and is therefore very different from any other book! An irreverent handling of it is regarded as an insult to God, which no sane person should engage in.<sup>38</sup>

The question: ‘What do lay Christians mean when they refer to the Bible as the *Word of God* or a *divine book*?’ provides us with a platform to investigate the role the Bible plays in shaping the contents of some grassroots Christologies of Nigerian Christianity. This is a very difficult question to answer because the majority of these Christians do not bother to engage in a discussion on the origin of the Bible. They seem to settle with the idea that the Bible is the *Word of God* without questions. However, when pressed further, it seems that they use the expression *Word of God* in a ‘propositional sense’; that is, they see the Bible as a set of divine propositions. It is

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<sup>37</sup> See David Tuesday Adamo, “The Use of Psalms in African Indigenous Churches in Nigeria,” in *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories and Trends*, ed. G. West and Musa Dube (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 336; Itumeleng Mosala, “The Use of the Bible in Black Theology in South Africa,” in *The Unquestionable Right To Be Free: Essays in Black Theology*, ed. I. Mosala and Buti Tlhagale (Johannesburg: Skotaville, 1986), 175-199; Gerald O. West, “Reading the Bible Differently: Giving Shape to the Discourses of the Dominated,” *Semeia* 73 (1996): 21-41; *Ibid.*, *The Academy of the Poor: Towards a Dialogical Reading of the Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999).

<sup>38</sup> A. O. Nkwoka, “The Role of the Bible in the Igbo Christianity of Nigeria,” in *The Bible in Africa*, 327.

noteworthy that many Christians who hold the propositional revelatory view of Scripture are indebted partly to North American missionaries, especially those of the Evangelical tradition. Some of those missionaries who laboured in Nigeria were already influenced by the propositional model of revelation espoused by some theologians, such as, B. B. Warfield, Carl F. H. Henry and Gordon Clark.<sup>39</sup>

In the thinking of some Christians who construe the Bible as the *Word of God* in a propositional sense, the content of the Bible is trustworthy. To quote Humble Douglas, when he was asked if some of the things that are written in the Bible about Jesus may be untrue, he responded: “Well if they are not true it means that the existence of the universe will not be true”.<sup>40</sup> While it is not clear how the truthfulness of the christological content of the Bible is a warrant for the truthfulness of the existence of the universe, what Douglas appears to be saying is that if the existence of the universe cannot be doubted then whatever the Bible says about Jesus Christ equally cannot be doubted. At the heart of the propositional revelatory model of the Bible is the belief that the content of the Bible must be true and reliable because it proceeds from God. Therefore, whatever the Bible says about Jesus Christ must be true.

To seek to subsume the Bible under a single model will eclipse the diversities that characterize the collection of books that form parts of the Bible. Nigerian theologians are not strangers to the debates on the nature of the Bible and hermeneutics. Justin Ukpong has categorized the history of African biblical interpretation into three phases. Phase 1 (1930s-70s) comprised of a reactive and apologetic hermeneutic and “focused on legitimizing African religion and culture” through comparative studies. In phase II (1970s-90s), African biblical scholarship moved from the level of polemic to proactive. At this level they construed “African context as a resource for biblical interpretation,” and employed inculturation and liberation hermeneutics. In phase III (1990s), according to Ukpong’s assessment, the pendulum swung to a reader-response hermeneutic: ordinary readers (and African contexts) became the “subject” of biblical interpretation.<sup>41</sup> Like most periodization,

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<sup>39</sup> See Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority* (Waco: Word, 1976).

<sup>40</sup> Douglas, interview by researcher, tape recording, Aba, 17 June 2006.

<sup>41</sup> Justin S. Ukpong, “Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa: Historical Hermeneutical Directions,” in *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories and Trends*, 12.

Ukpong's three phases run the risk of superficiality. He recognizes this pitfall when he notes that these phases intersect.<sup>42</sup>

Getting a 'correct' hermeneutical paradigm to interpret the Bible is the least worry of the majority Nigerian lay Christians. Some of them read it with the intent to discover what God or Jesus Christ is saying to them. Most times they read the Bible literally and claim all the divine blessings that are contained in it. For them, these blessings are their portions and will manifest in their lives. But they fail to recognize that inadequate views of the nature and the purpose of the Bible affect greatly the theologies and Christologies that are constructed from it.

## **b. Religious Experience**

Alvin Plantinga, one of the leading philosophers in North America, has written this about 'religious experience':

'religious experience' is construed in a thousand different ways to cover a vast and confusing variety of cases; the question as it stands is multiple ambiguous and, in fact, we are probably better off boycotting the term.<sup>43</sup>

A religious experience is notoriously slippery. Understandably, many people (both in the West and Africa) are reluctant to take religious experience seriously. The scepticism of people regarding most religious experiences can be explored from phenomenological, psychological, and theological spectrums. In psychology, it is difficult to know if an acclaimed religious experience is a hallucinatory experience or an experience that occurs as a result of a mental disorder.<sup>44</sup> For some anthropologists and sociologists, the phenomenon of religious experience poses a conundrum because it is not always clear if a given experience is a historical fact; that is, if it happened, authentic, original, and verifiable. Some theologians discard religious experience because they consider the cognitive input or interpretation of a given religious experience a threat to some already established traditions, especially if the interpretation suggests some new innovations.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 182.

<sup>44</sup> See W. H. Clark, et al, *Religious Experience: Its Nature and Function in the Human Psyche* (Springfield: C. C. Thomas, 1973); William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (reprint, New York: University Books, 1963)

<sup>45</sup> See Larry W. Hurtado, *How on Earth Did Jesus Become a God? Historical Questions about Earliest Devotion to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 180-186; Roger Haight, *Dynamics of Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2001), 51-67.

In spite of the incredulity towards religious experience, this phenomenon cannot be ignored in any serious interpretation of the development of Christianity. As Ronald Nash observes:

Based on my observation...far more people are religious believers because of religious experiences they've had than because of arguments they've heard. Even the few Christians I've met who appear sometimes to disdain the religious experience (or at least more extreme religious experience) of others and claim that their faith is grounded not on experience but on God's revelation in Scripture overlook an important point. The revealed texts are products of the religious experiences of the inspired human authors who penned them.<sup>46</sup>

Nash notes the intrinsic connection between Christian scripture and religious experience. Roger Haight buttresses this connection: "The first genetic source for the scriptures...lies in religious experience".<sup>47</sup> Religious experience is difficult to test because partly it is grounded in subjectivism. In addition, the emergence of some stories of religious experiences that appear to be too extreme has made some scholars all the more sceptical about this phenomenon. My concern here is not to defend or deny the reality and validity of religious experience, but rather to explore how this religious phenomenon informs some grassroots Christologies of Nigerian Christians. Whilst some Christians consider some religious experiences to be delusive, they continue to honour and accept this phenomenon as a valid way of experiencing the risen Jesus Christ.

The influence of some religious experiences on how Christians construe the person and work of Jesus Christ is not peculiar to Nigerian Christianity. It goes back to early Christianity. Larry Hurtado has argued that "revelatory experiences were crucial contributing factors in producing the important religious innovations that mark early Christianity".<sup>48</sup> For him, it is the religious experience or encounter between Christians and the risen Christ that has fostered the "cultic devotion that is given to Christ" even at an astonishingly early period.<sup>49</sup> I will highlight three types of religious experiences that exist in Nigerian Christianity. The first is *conversion religious experience*. This type of religious experience involves an inward change of heart, deriving from an individual's decision to 'surrender' to and trust in Jesus as the

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<sup>46</sup> Ronald H. Nash, *Faith and Reason: Searching for a Rational Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 143.

<sup>47</sup> Roger Haight, *Dynamics of Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2001), 94.

<sup>48</sup> Hurtado, *How on Earth Did Jesus Become a God?* 192.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 198-204.

Saviour. For many Christians, it is the Holy Spirit that initiates this religious experience. This inward change (although expected to be outwardly demonstrated in lifestyle) caused by the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit, argues Plantinga, is an element in the “divine response to human sin and the human predicament, a predicament in which we human beings require healing, restoration, and salvation”.<sup>50</sup> Ernest Mbefo, a member of Christian Pentecostal Mission, locates his knowledge of Jesus Christ within the framework of this type of religious experience. Responding to the question on the sources of his Christology, he says:

This is by personal experience...because you can't tell who somebody is except you have come close to him [and have] been able to interact with him; from there you can now know who that person is. I came in contact with Jesus in 1991, 24 January, that's exactly when I gave my life to Christ.<sup>51</sup>

Although it is difficult to know the actual event that happened to Mbefo the moment he “gave [his] life to Jesus”, what is clear is that this religious experience, as he claims, has transformed his life and his view of Jesus the Christ. Again he says:

Jesus has taught me a lot of lessons by experience. When I [say] by experience, I mean [through] experience I have been able to find out that whatever he says stands.<sup>52</sup>

It is noteworthy that this religious experience is posterior to hearing the gospel message about Jesus. The experience of John Okpara, also a member of Christian Pentecostal Mission, is an example.

Well, I wouldn't say that people told me [about Jesus]. Nobody preached to me. I wasn't born again by preaching. Nobody preached to me. I, one day sat down, you know, looked at my life and said 'no' I don't think I am getting it right. So, I went into a church; nobody talked to me. I didn't answer any altar call. I just sat down and listened to the Word of God. I compared it with how I was living my life and I knew that I was getting it wrong and I decided as a person to change. And to embrace the character of Christ and that was it. I said, yes, this is the real one and that is why I am born again today; that is why I see him as my Saviour. Not just that I read him in the Scripture, not that pastor preached to me, no, it is a personal encounter. It is a personal experience.<sup>53</sup>

Perhaps what Okpara means when he said that “nobody preached to me” about Jesus is that he did not come to know who Jesus Christ is by having a one on one conversation with a preacher. Certainly, he heard about Jesus Christ when he went to the church and, to use his words, “listened to the Word of God”.

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<sup>50</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 180.

<sup>51</sup> Ernest Mbefo, interview by researcher, tape recording, Aba, 24 May, 2006.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> John Okpara, interview by researcher, tape recording, Aba, 24 May 2006.

It is also important to note that conversion religious experience varies from person to person depending on his or her family or denomination backgrounds. For example, many Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians readily talk about this kind of radical inward experience. Perhaps this is because in the Evangelical and Pentecostal traditions, there is emphasis on individual or personal encounter with Jesus. Conversely, many Roman Catholics and members of Christ Holy Church rarely talked about this type of radical inward change.

The second type is 'revelatory' *religious experience*. A revelatory religious experience can take different forms. Some of the interviewees claim that this type of religious experience can occur in a dream, vision, trance, by hearing a strange voice, and so on. This type of religious experience, however, is usually associated with a divine call to ministry and in some cases leads to theological or ecclesiological innovations. Some pastors of the African Independent or Initiated Churches (AICs) claim to have had this religious experience and use it as the reason for establishing their churches. Of course, this type of experience is not restricted to pastors of AICs. Evangelical, Presbyterian, Pentecostal pastors, and some priests of the Roman Catholic tradition also claim to have experienced a divine call to ministry. An interviewee who simply wanted to be addressed as Reverend Peter (a Presbyterian pastor) describes his call to ministry which took place in a Presbyterian church in Aba as follows:

When I came into the church, I now saw my dirtiness; my filthiness was all over me. And I said: 'God I am not worthy to be here, look at your children singing praises unto your name. What have I got to do with them? Somebody like me, a wretched sinner'...A time came and the power of God came upon me [and] I started speaking things and even giving them messages, which they themselves had not received at that time. God told me that there was a ring somebody invoked into that pulpit and that they should pray to destroy it. While I was releasing these messages, you know, looking at my appearance or maybe they have seen me once or twice, they did not believe me. They started beating me saying that 'it was evil spirit that was troubling me'; they started beating and injured me.<sup>54</sup>

The testimony of Peter highlights the suspicion that is associated usually with revelatory religious experience. But for Peter, it was this experience that has led him to give up his business ambitions to become a pastor. In some cases, some of the individuals who claim to have this kind of religious experience may hesitate at first before responding to the divine call. Sometimes they respond to the call after encountering further religious experiences.

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<sup>54</sup> Peter, interview by researcher, tape recording, Aba, 14 March 2006

The third type of religious experience can be described as the *continuous communication or interaction* between a Christian and Jesus. Many of the interviewees claimed that their experiences of Jesus do not stop with the *initial* conversion experience; such experiences, for them, continue throughout their lifetime. Jesus continues to manifest himself in their lives. Bridget Oduma, a Roman Catholic, summarizes her experience of Jesus with these words: “Jesus is good to me; today, tomorrow, and all the time, Jesus is good to me”.<sup>55</sup> Favour Okafor, a member of Christ Holy Church, describes her experiences of Jesus in more detail:

I am living by his grace. I do everything by his grace. He is taking care of me even my family. I don't spend at the hospital. That name Jesus has been so wonderful to me and to my family.... If not Jesus, I cannot do anything.<sup>56</sup>

Some theologians ignore the impact of religious experience on the ways many Nigerian lay Christians understand and relate to Jesus Christ. But a contextual Christology that is designed for contemporary Nigerian Christianity cannot ignore the role of religious experience in the shaping of grassroots Christologies. Jesus' question, 'who do you say I am?' is phrased in the way that invites people to describe his person and work partly from their experience of him.<sup>57</sup> To put it differently, in most cases, the journey of discovering who Jesus really is begins when people encounter and 'experience him'. For example, the pre-Damascus Saul construed Jesus Christ and his followers initially as blasphemers.<sup>58</sup> But his dramatic experience of Jesus on the road to Damascus changed his understanding: the one whom Paul considered a blasphemer suddenly became his Lord.<sup>59</sup>

Frequently, one hears many Nigerian Christians say “when Jesus came into my life”, or “when I encountered Jesus”, or “when I invited Jesus to come into my life”, “my life became different” or “my life changed”. These expressions indicate some attempts of some Christians to explain the mystery of the union they believe to occur between them and Jesus Christ. It is unnecessary and unwarranted to see all religious ecstatic experiences as dysfunctional and false consciousness.<sup>60</sup> Although

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<sup>55</sup> Bridget Oduma, interview by researcher, tape recording, Aba, 20 June 2006.

<sup>56</sup> Favour Okafor, interview by researcher, tape recording, Aba, 25 June 2006.

<sup>57</sup> Mark 8: 29.

<sup>58</sup> Acts 9:1-3.

<sup>59</sup> Acts 9:4-31.

<sup>60</sup> Hurtado, *How on Earth Did Jesus Become a God?*, 187. We must note that it is difficult to tell the difference between a religious experience that is as a result of dysfunctional consciousness or psychological disorder from a religious experience that is as a result of the activity of the Holy Spirit.

some religious experiences may be described as hallucination, there are numerous of such experiences that seem to be genuinely rooted in the works of the Holy Spirit and Jesus himself.

The major theological problem with using a religious experience as a source of Christian Christology is that a religious experience belongs primarily to the realm of subjectivism. For instance, it is very difficult to know if a given story of a religious experience derives from Jesus Christ or from other sources that are not connected with God's activities. Some Christians are aware of this difficulty and as a result are sceptical of some stories of religious experiences. The Christians who use their religious experiences as a source of their Christologies have the burden to demonstrate that their experiences derive from God's activity. And when such experiences misrepresent the meaning and significance of the Christ-Event as articulated in the Scripture, they need to be criticized and rejected. In other words, whereas a religious experience may help an individual to accept and trust in the person and work of Jesus Christ, as articulated by some writers of the Bible, the Christ-Event itself should inform and shape the experience of the individual.

## **2. Contexts of Grassroots Christologies in Nigerian Christianity**

I will make a distinction between the sources and contexts of the grassroots Christologies of Nigerian Christianity. The Bible and religious experience – the two major sources of grassroots Christologies – differ from the *contexts* that foster the unprecedented phenomenon of Jesus-talk. In what follows, I will answer the question: what features are responsible for the ways Nigerian Christians perceive and experience Jesus Christ?

### **a. Quests to Achieve Wellbeing**

Studies on the indigenous religions and cultures of Africa have shown that African peoples see wellbeing as a holistic phenomenon that is intrinsically connected with a cordial relationship between the world of human beings and the world of the ancestors. James Cox made the following observation after studying the phenomenon of 'spirit possession' and the cult of ancestors in Zimbabwe:

Although illness and misfortune are considered evil and thus act against the general wellbeing of the community, ancestors can inflict suffering on

individuals and even on the community as a whole as a means of making contact with and gaining the attention of their families.<sup>61</sup>

Like some other Africans, many Nigerians have carried on the idea of wellbeing as construed in the indigenous religious and cultural thought into Christian religion. For these Christians, material prosperity (health, wealth, security, etc.) is a sign that a Christian enjoys a cordial fellowship with Jesus Christ. These Christians also construe the salvation Jesus Christ embodies to be holistic. An adequate healing, for instance, includes the human and spiritual dimensions, although sometimes the human dimension is often emphasized more than the spiritual dimension. As Anacletus Odemene observes, many Christians continue to think about “heaven as a secondary concern” because in their religio-social framework, heaven “is a consequence of a happy and well-lived earthly life”.<sup>62</sup> For example, Amadi, a Presbyterian, testifies that Jesus has always saved, provided and protected him.

I came from a humble family, economically. But I know that it is through Jesus, through knowing him that I got to this height. I got to Jesus in 1975 as a young man, and I was not expected to reach this height. [But] I know that it is God’s intervention that has lifted me up to this point.<sup>63</sup>

For Amadi, it is Jesus that has brought him into the new economic height he now enjoys as a medical doctor, and this radical shift in status, in his thinking, is by God’s intervention. His testimony reveals a holistic understanding of salvation. To him, his encounter with Jesus has transformed his economic status. What also merits noting in the testimony of Amadi is that most Christians do not make a conscious distinction between God and Jesus Christ. The majority of the informants quickly drifted from Jesus-talk to God-talk and vice versa. Therefore, we will misread and misrepresent them if we try to impose a strict ontological dichotomy between Jesus and God. Once we recognize the shift from God-talk to Jesus-talk among Nigerian lay Christians it will become easier to connect God and Jesus in Amadi’s testimony.

The majority of the interviewees at first described Jesus as ‘Saviour’, ‘Son of God’, ‘God in human flesh’, ‘Redeemer of the world’, but when pressed further, they immediately talked about how Jesus has blessed them with riches, good health, and

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<sup>61</sup> James L. Cox, “Spirit Mediums in Zimbabwe,” *Studies in World Christianity* 6, no. 2 (2000): 191.

<sup>62</sup> Anacletus N. Odemene, “The Church in Nigeria: Its Human Burden vis-à-vis Its Divine Mission,” in *Witnessing Christ in Contemporary Nigeria*, ed. A. N. Odemene (Port Harcourt: CIWA, 2005), 77-78.

<sup>63</sup> Amadi, interview by researcher, tape recording, Aba, 10 April 2006. Amadi used the word ‘humble’ figuratively to describe the state of *abject poverty* of his parents when he was born.

protection. The response of Veronica Okeke, a member of Christ Holy Church, to the question ‘Who is Jesus to you?’ underscores the readiness of most Christians to locate Jesus-talk in the context of total wellbeing.

Jesus is the living Son of God. What he does in my life is numerous. There are at times when it seems as if I may not live, if I call upon Jesus he does not waste time, he answers me immediately. Before I came into this Christ Holy Church, I was seriously sick. I was told that if I would abide in Christ and to believe in him that the sickness in my body would disappear before three months. I stayed [in the church] and before three months I walked into the church unaided and shouted ‘hallelujah’. And I said, ‘God is that how you are?’ When I call upon God, he answers me. God is with me; Jesus is beside me now I am talking to you.<sup>64</sup>

The words of Okeke highlight the solution-oriented mindset that underlies the majority of Nigerian Christians’ Christologies. She seems to define who Jesus is to her on the basis of the healing she believes has come from him. According to her, Jesus is the living Son of God who does numerous things in her life. And the most significant among them is the miraculous healing she experienced because she trusted in Jesus. The corollary of this physical healing is that she radically changes her attitudes towards Jesus Christ. Prior to this miraculous healing, she considered Jesus to be “far away” from her. After encountering Jesus in such a remarkable way, she began to see Jesus as always present to her.

The idea of Jesus as a Saviour is not simply metaphysical, but also holistic to many Christians. To say that Jesus is a Saviour has become a ‘creed’ in Nigerian Christianity. But this ‘creed’ is not devoid of an existential content. For many Christians, the work of Jesus as the bearer and dispenser of divine salvation includes both solving existential problems and restoring them to fellowship with God. Shedrach Okonkwo, a member of Christ Holy Church, again points out this holistic nature of the salvific work of Jesus.

In my own thinking, Jesus is the Son of God, the one through whom we get all things. In any good condition human beings find themselves today it is through the grace of Jesus Christ. He is also the saviour of my Soul.<sup>65</sup>

Also, Queen Mamoh, a Presbyterian, calls Jesus her “All in All’ because he is always there for her.

Sometimes when I am in a difficulty and my parents are not there, and my best friends are not there; he is always there to comfort and to encourage me.

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<sup>64</sup> Veronica Okeke, interview by researcher, tape recording, Aba, 25 June 2006.

<sup>65</sup> Shedrach Chukwuemeka Okonkwo, interview by researcher, tape recording, Aba, 25 June 2006.

Sometimes I may be discouraged about things in life, but he is “all in all” to me, he is ever there for me to make way where there seems to be no way.<sup>66</sup>

Apart from the indigenous holistic idea of prosperity, there are some other contemporary factors that inform and shape the desire of many Christians to achieve wellbeing. One of such factors is the *health and wealth gospel*. It is incorrect to assume that this kind of gospel exists only among charismatic churches. Different forms of *health and wealth gospel* exist in several church denominations in Nigeria. Of course, one does not even need to go to a church to hear this type of gospel. It is now readily available in most popular Christian choruses, songs, car stickers and movies. The variants of this type of gospel make it almost impossible to define exactly what this gospel looks like. However, what is central to this gospel is the idea that Jesus Christ is the owner of all good things and that he is always willing to bestow them upon his followers. The subtle aspect of this gospel is the idea that it is the ‘right’ of Christians to request and get things from Jesus. The consequence, which is often unnoticed, is a change from the language of request to the language of demand or warfare when speaking to Jesus about problems. One hears expressions, such as, ‘possess your possession’, or ‘if Jesus says ‘no’ to your request, you need to remind him that he ‘has not finished with you’ when some Christians talk to Jesus about their needs. A Presbyterian who simply wanted to be called ‘Mrs. Comfort’ said:

I see Jesus as my friend, my close friend, my all and all. And if I am praying, I talk to him personally as if I am seeing him. I will make it a mandate. I will say to him, ‘you are doing this [for me] and you are doing it; you don’t have any other choice than to do that particular thing that I want’. And actually it will happen that way.<sup>67</sup>

Without in any way suggesting that all Christians in Nigeria command Jesus to do things for them, it is evident that Comfort speaks for many. When critically assessed, *health and wealth gospel* forms a particular christological mindset which recognizes Jesus’ ability to bestow blessings on his followers but ignores how he can radically reshape and redefine the meaning of wellbeing. The result is that contemporary Nigerian Christianity is producing at an astonishing speed Christians who simply construct a Jesus who fits into their ‘christological box’: a Jesus who can provide what they need and when they need it, but will not critique and inform their understandings of prosperity and wealth. Some of the interviewees hinted that some

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<sup>66</sup> Queen Mamoh, interview by researcher, tape recording, Aba, 18 May 2006.

<sup>67</sup> Comfort, interview by researcher, tape recording, Aba, 18 June 2006.

Nigerians who profess Christianity do so because they see Jesus primarily as the one who can make them wealthy. But when they do not get the riches, they turn immediately to other sources, such as, witch doctors, occult priests, and goddesses.

The notion of affluence and recognition is another factor that propels Christians' desire for a total wellbeing. Anthony Anijielo provides a helpful context for understanding the quest for affluence and recognition in Nigeria. He writes,

The average contemporary Nigerian is wont to assess people by the amount of wealth they are able to display. For this reason, many of our people are not guided by pragmatic considerations but by the quest for recognition. This is the reason why many a Nigerian would build a three-floor flat in his home village even when his contacts with the village are limited to Christmas seasons and occasional ceremonies. He builds and sees his house as his own ego. He believes that people would assess him from their impressions taken from the grandeur of that structure.<sup>68</sup>

Whether or not 'the average Nigerian' thinks in this way depends on who takes the demographic statistics. What is, however, evident is that the desire to command respect and to become powerful, for many Nigerians, is intrinsically imbedded in wealth and affluence. Many families feel that they are under the threat of abuse and humiliation because they are poor. Therefore, for example, as Anijielo points out, many people (of course, including Christians) build houses they neither use nor need so as to protect themselves against potential traitors and to become respected in the society.

It is not unusual to hear Christians in Nigeria pray to Jesus to make them the 'head and not the tail' or to immensely bless them so that they can become a 'light' to their villages or churches. Driven by this mindset, these Christians continually go to 'tarry nights', fast, and attend miraculous meetings organized by prominent preachers of *health and wealth gospel* with the hope to 'unlock the gates of heaven where their riches are stored'. It is noteworthy that many lay Christians are sometimes the victims of some pastors that are driven by the spirit of affluence and who prey on their members' money and property. These pastors exploit vulnerable members, sometimes rendering them perpetually poor while they themselves continue to enjoy a life of affluence. The sermons of these pastors are usually about wealth and health, and they do so with the intent to stimulate their members to continuously donate money to the church or even to donate their cars, houses, and

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<sup>68</sup> Anthony Chukwuma Anijielo, "A Pastoral Perspective of the Socio-Cultural Challenges of Nigerian Priests and the Church in the Twenty-First Century," in *Witnessing Christ in Contemporary Nigeria*, 5-6.

land. Jude Nwachukwu, a Roman Catholic priest, gives a graphic description of this state of affairs:

If you go to many churches, you will hear the pastors prophesy: 'I have seen a Hummer Jeep parked in your house, a jeep parked in your house, claim it in Jesus name,' and you will say 'amen'; yet [in] the next ten years you are still riding *Okada*[motorcycles]; you have no bicycle and no good shoe. This is the kind of false prophecies people are giving us today.<sup>69</sup>

Nwachukwu, of course, exaggerates some of the outcome of the anticipation of some Christians who believe, or 'claim', to use a common parlance in Nigerian Christianity, the prosperity-oriented prophecies that are given to them by their pastors and ministers. Some of these Christians testify that Jesus indeed blesses them because of their faith in such prophecies. But Nwachukwu correctly articulates the kind of gospel of Jesus that is predominant in many charismatic and some non-charismatic churches. Sometimes the pastor of these churches (consciously or unconsciously) presents Jesus as a 'mean' Son of God who is ready to make one become very poor if the one refuses to give money to the 'work of God'. And usually, the 'work of God' to which these Christians are induced to give turns out to be the personal property of the pastors. Most times, and sadly so, it is for the pastors to buy very expensive cars and to build mansions.

Another ideology that drives the quests for wellbeing is a theology of poverty. Whilst most Christians continue to associate poverty with inadequate leadership and unfavourable local and international policies, the understanding of poverty as a 'divine curse' is gaining ground in their intellectual and religious mindsets. For many Christians, becoming a 'true' follower of Jesus entails crossing over the line of poverty, and anything that withholds one from achieving a total wellbeing. Inherent in this thinking is the belief that material prosperity is a consequence of spiritual prosperity, which occurs when a person encounters Jesus the Christ. Frequently, one hears among some Christians some expressions such as 'Jesus was made poor so that I might be rich,' and 'I have made a covenant with Jesus therefore I have kissed poverty goodbye'. In the religious, social, and intellectual mindsets of these Christians, it is not Christian to be poor. Clement Ogbonnaya, the coordinator of International Gospel Campaign and the pastor of Word of Faith International Church, in his book *I am too Big to be Poor*, speaks for many Christians who consider it inconceivable for a Christian to be poor. He writes:

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<sup>69</sup> Jude Nwachukwu, interview by researcher, tape recording, Aba, 22 June 2006.

You are involved in the kingdom of God's abundance. So, YOU ARE TOO BIG TO BE POOR! Your father (God) is the owner of the whole world and everything in it. And in the world, all you need are there. This means that God has or is in possession of all you need. Go to Him and get what belongs to you. God is in possession of your car! God is in possession of your house! God is in possession of your education, wisdom, knowledge and understanding! God is in possession of your children – you don't need to be barren! God is in possession of your food.... God is in possession of everybody and everything! He has all you need, and because you have Him, you have more than you need, So YOU ARE TOO BIG TO BE POOR!<sup>70</sup>

Whether or not the assumption that Christians are 'too big to be poor' is practically possible remains to be seen. There is no doubt that many Nigerian Christians cannot be classified as poor. But many people who are economically poor and vulnerable continue to constitute the greater part of the population of churches. Although poverty is not only a material issue but also a spiritual issue, the argument of Ogbonnaya points more in the direction of material poverty. Some religious and intellectual explanations why some Christians still cannot get their blessings from Jesus emerged from the fieldwork. I will explore these explanations under the second major factor that defines the contexts of grassroots Christologies of Nigerian Christianity, namely, *Christodicy*.

## **b. Christodicy**

'Christodicy' in this study refers to the 'defensive' reasons some Christians offer to explain why Jesus Christ sometimes fails or refuses to solve the problems of Christians. In a sense, the Christodicy of Nigerian Christians is similar to the broader issues that characterize *theodicy*, the defence of God in the face of evil. For many philosophers, as Ronald Nash argues, "the most serious challenge to theism was, is and will continue to be the problem of evil".<sup>71</sup> Some philosophers have argued that the belief in the God of theism and the existence of evil in the world violates the law of non-contradiction. The argument is that there seems to be an apparent contradiction in believing the existence of "evil, on the one hand", and at the same time and in the same relation in believing the "omnipotence and perfection of God".<sup>72</sup> The existence of both moral and natural evil in the world of a theistic God who is believed to be wholly good, all-knowing, and all-powerful is not only

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<sup>70</sup> Clement A. Ogbonnaya, *I am Too Big to be Poor* (Aba: Footprint Communications, 2004), 35. Emphasis is in the original.

<sup>71</sup> Nash, *Faith and Reason*, 177.

<sup>72</sup> H. J. L. McCloskey, "God and Evil," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 10 (1969): 97.

problematic to philosophers but also to theologians. I will not engage in a detailed discussion of the problem of evil for Christian theism here because it is not the main concern of this study.<sup>73</sup>

The problem of evil also poses great difficulties to Christology. The obvious difficulty is the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. The question can be phrased as follows: if God is omnibenevolent, omniscient, and omnipotent, why did he allow or even authorize the death of Jesus Christ? Interestingly, this christological problem does not bother many Nigerian lay Christians.<sup>74</sup> They are rather preoccupied with the problem of how Jesus, who is wholly good, loving, and all-powerful, sometimes refuses or fails to solve the problems of his followers. A helpful way to understand the grassroots christodicies is to articulate their 'christological assumptions'. The majority of the interviewees believe: (a) that there is no problem Jesus cannot solve; (b) that Jesus is willing to solve their problems; (c) that Jesus wants them to present their problems to him; and (d) that not all of their problems which they presented to Jesus are solved. The possibility of Jesus not solving all the problems of Christians excites serious christological problems vis-à-vis the person and work of Jesus. It is either that the Jesus who is willing and capable to solve their problems does not exist or that he truly exists, as many of them believe, but other complex circumstances are responsible for his refusal to solve some problems. In what follows, I will examine the key striking reason most of the interviewees presented to explain why Jesus sometimes refuses or fails to solve some problems of his followers.<sup>75</sup>

A key argument that emerged from the fieldwork was that sometimes Jesus would delay in solving a particular problem of a Christian for the reason of protecting both the Christian and the blessings and gifts he would provide. Shedrach Okonkwo, a member of Christ Holy Church, articulates this argument:

When Christians do not get what they are asking from Jesus, it does not mean that he is not able to solve their problems. Maybe God is trying to put some things in place; maybe there are enemies of progress, and he wants to take the enemies out before he can solve their problems.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> For a discussion on the arguments for and against the problem of evil, see Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 458-499; *God and Other Minds* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967).

<sup>74</sup> At least the problem did not emerge in my conversation with Christians during my fieldwork.

<sup>75</sup> Some of the interviewees talked about what can be described as a 'character-making Christodicy'. The argument is that in order for Jesus to produce virtuous followers, the people who follow him must be prepared to face some problems that will help to mould them into the kind of people Jesus wants them to be.

<sup>76</sup> Shedrach Okonkwo, interview by researcher, tape recording, Aba, 25 June 2006.

In Okonkwo's contention, the ability of Jesus to know the problems of Christians and the possible outcome if he solves the problems comes out vividly. I will refer to this view as 'providence christodicy'. For those who hold the providence christodicy, when Jesus blesses a Christian with children or riches, for example, he also wants to protect the children and the riches. The vital assumption of providence christodicy is the belief that the gift of Jesus lasts and is profitable, unlike the gifts of Satan and his agents.<sup>77</sup> For these Christians, it is safer to keep on trusting in Jesus Christ even when he seems not to solve problems than to seek for solutions from *babalawo* (native doctors) or from false prophets who have founded several prayer houses. Queen Mamoh, a Presbyterian, observes:

I have heard so many stories about some people serving the Lord, asking the Lord to give them a particular thing and after a long time...most especially in the area of finance, somebody seeking for money; and you find out that the friends of such person are getting wealthier everyday and the person is poorer. The person may want to know why his friends are getting richer and by so doing, may go to some native doctor houses to perform some rituals and sacrifices. But at the end of it, it is only a disaster because I don't think that they enjoy the money, like most of them we see in the home videos [or movies]. They don't end well and they regret it. This is because sometimes their occult societies will ask them to sacrifice their best child or their parents, you know, and even if they refuse, there is no going back because they have already stepped into it. So, it is dangerous for any Christian that puts his or her hand on the plough to look back.<sup>78</sup>

In this lengthy quote, Mamoh attempts to explain some of the bewildering stories she has heard about some Christians who desert the church to look for solutions in some occult societies. Anyone familiar with some of the movies and dramas produced in Nigeria will recognize immediately the phenomenon that Mamoh attempts to explain. In most of these movies, one discovers an incessant quest of some people to become wealthy, and their determination to do anything in order to become prosperous. The moral of the movies is evident in the short-lived and unhappy ending of the characters who sacrifice their mother, children, friend, or a part of their body in order to become wealthy.<sup>79</sup>

Interestingly, most Christians do not doubt the existence of such diabolic societies. Mamoh speaks for many Nigerians who believe that some people,

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<sup>77</sup> See chapter six for the discussions on some of the understandings of Satan and demons in Nigerian Christianity.

<sup>78</sup> Queen Mamoh, interview by researcher, tape recording, Aba, 18 May 2006.

<sup>79</sup> See for example, *Blood Money*.

including those who consider themselves Christians, are members of such occult societies. My concern here is not to prove or disprove the existence of such diabolic societies, but rather to show that some Christians' christodicy constitutes one of the principal factors that shape grassroots Christologies in contemporary Nigerian Christianity. Also, in the thinking of those who subscribe to providence christodicy, when Jesus provides or solves the problems of his followers, he protects whatever solution he has provided. In addition, some proponents of providence argument maintain that the solution Jesus gives contrasts with the solutions Christians can get from native doctors in that the former endures and brings joy whereas the latter lasts only for a short time and brings greater sorrow.

The ideologies and anticipations that shape some providence christodicies of Nigerian Christians are complex. For example, it is difficult to know whether or not the proponents of a providence christodicy are inspired by their belief in God's will and freedom to protect gifts that God has provided for them. Whereas the belief in God's wisdom, love and freedom to protect people cannot be ruled out completely as part of the reasons some Christians believe that Jesus can delay in providing things for his followers because of the security of his followers and the gifts he plans to provide for them, it is also clear that the mindset of self-accumulation is another factor informs some providence christodicies. What is noteworthy here is that the Christ-Event – the birth of Jesus Christ in a manger, the poverty of Jesus and his death on the cross, resurrection and ascension – demonstrates God's act of self-giving. Therefore, any christodicy, which is built merely on the desire for self-accumulation, is in contradiction with the meaning and significance of the Christ-Event. I will explore this argument in detail in chapter five.

### **c. Hope for a Secured Future**

The hope that Jesus has gone to prepare a place for his followers and that he will return to take them is another major factor that shapes some of the grassroots Christologies of many Christians. According to Favour Okafor, a member of Christ Holy Church, her prayer always is for "Jesus to redeem" her and to give her "the grace to make heaven".<sup>80</sup> This was her response to the question: 'If Jesus was to say to you, ask me for one thing and I would do it, what would you request from him?'

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<sup>80</sup> Favour Okafor, interview by researcher, tape recording, Aba, 25 June 2006.

Bridget Oduma, a Roman Catholic, gave the following response to the same question:

What I will request from Jesus is everlasting life. I want him to help me to be where he is, that is what is in my mind right now. Forgetting the wealth of this world, I ask Jesus, like the thief who was crucified on the Good Friday, to remember me in his paradise. I want to be with Jesus after I finish my [Christian] race in this world.<sup>81</sup>

Two things are noteworthy regarding the hope for a secured future in some grassroots Christologies of Nigerian Christianity.<sup>82</sup> First, the hope of Christ's return to take or rapture his followers is not peculiar to some Nigerian Christians. The history of this hope goes back to the missionary era, and undoubtedly Nigerian Christians draw on some of the Bible passages, which speak of Christ's return to take his followers to the mansions he has gone to prepare.<sup>83</sup> Second, the requirements to join the wagon of Jesus, when he returns to the earth to take his followers, differ from one denomination to another. Even within a given denomination, the requirements will also vary from one individual to another. Thus, one will misrepresent many Nigerian Christians if the one assumes that every individual Christian in a given denomination holds the same eschatology. For some Christians, the only requirement is to experience Jesus Christ and trust him as Lord and Saviour. For others, it is not just enough to place faith in Jesus Christ. The Christian must also continue to live righteously if he or she wants to experience rapture. Yet some others claim that only those who are righteous at the moment Jesus returns will be qualified for rapture. Despite these variant views on the requirements for future reunion with Jesus Christ, what is clear in the religious mindset of many Christians is the anticipation that Jesus will come back to take his followers away from this painful world.

It is surprising that many Nigerian theologians ignore the importance of a futuristic hope for a better place beyond the earth in the Christology of lay Christians. Even when some theologians attempt to engage with this future hope, they criticize it as a mere escapist worldview that makes some Christians evade dealing with the perennial problems of poverty, poor health, and insecurity in Nigeria. Bernard Ukwuegbu, a Roman Catholic priest, is a template of such theologians. In his *Confrontational Evangelization*, he writes,

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<sup>81</sup> Bridget Oduma, interview by researcher, tape recording, Aba, 20 June 2006.

<sup>82</sup> The *hope for a secured future* is a form of 'futuristic eschatology'.

<sup>83</sup> John 14: 1-4.

No matter what is happening in recent times [in Nigeria], it remains a fact that there is an escapist element in the mentality which promises the poor a reward hereafter if they would patiently endure injustice in this life.... With this mentality, a perfect dichotomy was drawn between the spiritual and the mundane. People who purport to be holy manifest a complete indifference to the worldly, often in good will.<sup>84</sup>

Ukwuegbu rejects this mentality and contends that it has introduced “a spirituality” that regards “attendance of mass” as a “Christian obligation”, but excludes “lifting a finger to help a brother in need”. There is no doubt, as Ukwuegbu points out, that the mentality of a better reward for the poor in afterlife shapes the attitudes of some Christians toward earthly things. But to say that this hope for a better life in heaven is a reason some Christians refuse to help the poor seems preposterous. It is one thing to say that some Christians who are rich do not help the poor. It is another matter to say that the hope for the future reward of poor people after their lives here on the earth is the reason some Christians in Nigeria refuse to help the poor. Of course, there could be exceptions, but such mindset is not widespread in Nigerian Christianity. Ukwuegbu fails to recognize the principal factor that drives the futuristic eschatology of Christians; namely, the hope that Jesus is coming back to reward his followers, especially those who obey his commands, and to punish those who reject him in hell.<sup>85</sup> Since helping the poor is part of the commands of Jesus, it follows that many Christians who are anticipating the return of Jesus Christ will on the contrary want to help the poor.

Another thing that informs and sustains the hope for a secured future among lay Christians is the belief that the sufferings of this world are incomparable to the blissful hope of reuniting with Christ and with the loved ones who have preceded them. An excellent example is Chinyere Oduma. In her bestseller song, *Agụ na eche mba*, ‘literally, the lion that guards a nation or city’, she describes Jesus as a lion who is able to keep whatever is placed in his mouth. It might as well be possible that the image of Jesus as the ‘lion of the tribe of Judah’ influenced her choice of this christological imagery. But the uniqueness of the song stems from the event that surrounds its composition. In the song, Oduma, a well-known Christian musician,

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<sup>84</sup> Bernard Ukwuegbu, *Confrontational Evangelization: Foundations, Features and Prospects* (Onitsha: E.K.P, 1995), 121.

<sup>85</sup> As Ukweni O. Ukweni, a member of the Presbyterian Church, has argued: “My salvation, which Jesus has given [to] me, has given me a place in heaven. The Bible says afterlife there is judgement.... I am very sure that after here I will make heaven. And through this salvation my eyes are opened to know that heaven is real and hell is real”. Ukweni, interview by researcher, tape recording, Aba, 18 June 2006.

describes the death of her son, Chukwuemeka. The incident occurred on her way home from a singing ministration. As the bus she was travelling on approached Awka, a city in southeast of Nigeria, armed bandits attempted to stop the bus. When the bandits realized that the bus driver was unwilling to stop the bus, they ripped the bus apart with bullets, killing many of the passengers including Chukwuemeka.

In the song, Oduma recollects her horrific experience. She describes how Chukwuemeka died in her arms in the pool of his blood. The following excerpt from the song illustrates her futurology or futuristic eschatology.

*Agụ na eche mba ewerela m onwe m tinye gi na aka* (The lion that guards the city, I have entrusted myself into your hand)

*Igwe na eche ndu mu, ewerela m onwe mu nye gi* (The king that protects my life, I have given myself to you);

*Ihe itinyere gi bu agụ na onu Ekwensu oga emetu ya aka?* ('The thing that is placed into your mouth, the lion, could Satan touch it?')<sup>86</sup>

*Ihe itinyere gi bu agụ na onu onye iro oga emetu ya aka?* ('The thing that is placed into your mouth, the lion, could an enemy touch it?')

With the foregoing rhetorical questions, Oduma lays the foundation on which she expresses her trust in Jesus Christ to protect her life and the life of her son. But has Jesus failed her? Is Jesus incapable of safeguarding the life of her son? The song suggests strongly that, for Oduma, Jesus has not failed her, even though he did not save the life of her son from the attacks of the armed robbers. Her confidence in the ability of Jesus to safeguard her dead son permeates the song. In her thinking, Chukwuemeka is safe in "the mouth of Jesus, the lion". This expresses her strong hope that she will see her son again someday. The majority of Christians, such as Oduma, continue to anticipate the return of Jesus and which for them will usher in a world that is free of sufferings and senseless evil like the brutal killing of Chukwuemeka. This hope for a secured future is largely shaping Jesus-talk in contemporary Nigerian Christianity.

Another thing that is noteworthy, as Oduma songs suggests, is that some Christians anticipate and pray for the return of Jesus Christ because they want to escape their problems. It is hard to tell where the unselfish desire to reunite with Christ fits into their quest for the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. Again, a solution-oriented mindset plays a significant role in shaping some of the Christologies and

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<sup>86</sup> A smoother translation is: 'would Satan touch (or snatch away) something that is placed into your mouth, the lion?'

eschatologies. I will now examine the concept of solution in some of the grassroots Christologies.

### **3. Jesus as a Solution among Other Solutions**

An unprecedented conversation on Jesus Christ is taking place among many lay Christians. Signs of this talk appear everywhere – on the signposts of churches, hospitals, companies, on stickers, on television screens, in business conversations, and in the lifestyles of many Christians. The key assumption that underpins this christological thinking is the belief that Jesus Christ is a Saviour or a solution to the spiritual and material problems of humanity. In the thinking of the majority of lay Christians, Jesus is one among many solutions, but he is believed to be the most reliable solution. This is exemplified in some of the names Christians give to him, such as, *otumokpo ndi nsọ*, ‘a powerful amulet for the holy people or Christians’.

The idea of Jesus as a Saviour or a solution to spiritual and material problems is central to the grassroots Christologies of many Christians. The majority of the interviewees answered the question ‘who is Jesus to you?’ by saying “he is my Saviour” or “he is the Saviour of the world”. But if ‘salvation’ is the work of God, as many of these Christians profess, it follows that when they describe Jesus as a ‘Saviour’ they ascribe to him a divine power and function. This raises a serious problem for the contextual theologian who wants to know the ontological connection between Jesus and God. Many Christians believe that God can execute his salvific functions through angels, human beings, and other ways he deems fit. But these Christians seem also to make a distinction between a case in which God delivers someone without using a human agent and a case in which God delivers someone through a human agent. For example, if God saves *Mr. A* from the attacks of some bandits through a police officer, when *Mr. A* testifies of his deliverance he will say that God has saved him by using the police officer as an instrument. Hardly will *Mr. A* say that the police officer is his saviour in the sense he understands Jesus Christ as a Saviour. When most Christians describe Jesus Christ as a Saviour they mean something much deeper than a mere salvific instrument of God. They speak of Jesus in the way that suggests he enjoys an unprecedented relationship with God. For these Christians, Jesus is “the Son of God” and even God himself. And as we have already seen, the majority of lay Christians do not engage seriously in the kind of christological debates of the fourth and fifth centuries that revolved around the

constitution of the person of Jesus. They are concerned primarily with the content of the salvific acts of Jesus and not on his exact ontological composition.

But what exactly do Nigerian Christians mean when they address Jesus as the Saviour? The majority construe Jesus as a divine figure who saves them from their sins and from ancestral traditions, which may hinder them from getting divine blessing or favour. For example, Ukwani O. Ukwani, a member of the Presbyterian Church, describes Jesus as the God incarnate who saved him from his “traditional ways of doing things”.<sup>87</sup> When I asked him to explain what those traditional ways were, he said:

We all have our old ways or traditional ways of doing things. Like where I come from, there is what they call *Abasi-isom*, the god of fire, and my people believe that some people come from this source. At some point Christ came to save a lot of people and I am one of the persons that Christ saved. Saved from what? – my ancestral belief.<sup>88</sup>

Iliya Habu, a member of ECWA, introduces another context for interpreting Christians’ perception of Jesus as a Saviour.

I have many things to tell you about how Jesus saved me. One, he saved me because he died for me.... When I read the Bible, I knew that somebody died for me and [that] he died for my sin. His death is a kind of punishment, which I was supposed to receive personally as a human being. But he said I should not die, and that he will now bear the punishment on my behalf. So Jesus Christ received the punishment that I was going to receive before the Almighty God who created me. Jesus Christ died for me because of Adam’s sin.<sup>89</sup>

Blessing Madu, a member of Christ Holy Church, makes a similar point when she says:

To me, Jesus Christ is my Lord and personal Saviour. He came to the earth and died for us. He suffered on the cross of Calvary for our sins to be washed away, for all have sinned and come short of the glory of God. But because of the blood he shed we are now free from sin.<sup>90</sup>

Habu and Madu highlight a theological concept that theologians refer to as the *Original Sin*.<sup>91</sup> By saying that Jesus Christ died for him “because of Adam’s sin”,

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<sup>87</sup> Ukwani, interview by researcher, tape recording, Aba, 18 June 2006.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Iliya Habu, interview by researcher, tape recording, Aba, 29 February 2006.

<sup>90</sup> Blessing Madu, interview by researcher, tape recording, Aba, 25 June 2006.

<sup>91</sup> Theologians differ on how exactly humanity is connected by the sin of Adam. Terrance Tiessen provides a helpful definition of concept of Original Sin. He writes, “The sinfulness is ‘original’ not just because it was the first human sin; that distinction would go to Eve’s disobedience. But Adam’s transgression is critical because it is the origin of all the human sin that followed the primal fall”. Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved? Reassessing Salvation in Christ and World Religions* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 73. See chapter seven for an extensive discussion on sin and humanity.

Habu attracts the questions: how is he under the punishment of God because Adam sinned? And how does the salvation Jesus gives to him relate to the sin of Adam? It is vital to note that many Christians, like Habu and Madu, believe that God holds them responsible for the sin of Adam. In the thinking of these Christians, the death of Jesus Christ redeems them from the guilt and punishment the sin of Adam brings. Interestingly, these Christians do not bother to exegete this belief which functions almost like a creed. For them, as Habu and Madu have indicated, this theological assumption is true because the Bible teaches it. I have already examined the existing views of the Bible in Nigerian Christianity in the early part of this chapter and I need not rehearse these views. What needs noting is that many Christians hold a high view of the Bible. Consequently, they accept almost everything that is contained in the Bible to be true and binding to them.

The ways the majority of Nigerian lay Christians construe the person and work of Jesus will change depending on if (and how fast) he solves their problems. These Christians primarily see Jesus Christ as a solution to the spiritual, economic, ethical, and political problems they experience. What is striking and deserves exploring is that, in the thinking of some of these Christians, Jesus is the ‘chief Solution’ among many solutions that are available in their societies. Interestingly, some of these Christians believe that the other solutions sometimes work faster than Jesus Christ. For example, Moses Attah, who is from Nassarawa State in northern Nigeria, claims that some Christians in Northern Nigeria will consult native doctors or other powers in some situations in which Jesus may appear to be too slow to answer their prayers.

In the North [that is, the northern part of Nigeria], you may have problems with somebody and if you call on Jesus the problems may not be solved immediately. Some people will do as we normally say: ‘Let me put off the shirt of Jesus Christ and put on the cultural shirt’. Then they will go to the shrine or any other place to look for help forgetting that Jesus will help them. And sometimes during war either tribal war or religious war between Christians and Muslims some Christians go to the herbalists to collect some charm in order to protect themselves forgetting that Jesus is there to protect them.<sup>92</sup>

The act of ‘temporarily’ deserting Jesus Christ in order to use other sources of solution is not a phenomenon that occurs only among Christians in Northern Nigeria. This phenomenon is happening among many Christians in all parts of the country. The majority of the interviewees, regardless of their church denominations and

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<sup>92</sup> Moses Attah, interview by researcher, tape recording, Aba, 29 February 2006.

ethnic backgrounds, said that many Christians are consulting native doctors or other indigenous agencies when Jesus delays to give them children, to heal them, to protect them from spiritual attacks, and to bless them with material things. Some of them said that many Christians no longer have to go outside of the ‘church’ to get their solutions because, for them, many native doctors are now founders of churches and prayer houses.

It is noteworthy that some Christians worry about this phenomenon. One of the ways they have approached this phenomenon is to create a dichotomy between real Christians/professing Christians, true believers/non-true believers, backsliding/true Christians, and born again Christians/church-goers. Ejim Okonkwo, a member of the Presbyterian Church, acknowledges that some Christians in Nigeria go outside of Jesus Christ to get solution to their problems, but she argues that such Christians are “people who do not know whom they are following”.<sup>93</sup> She insists that what such Christians need to do is to “continue to have faith in Jesus Christ” even if he appears not to answer their prayers immediately.<sup>94</sup> Faith Ukaegbu, a member of CPM, is even more radical:

Yes, it is happening in Nigeria. Many people go to native doctors to get solutions. Well, the problem is when we [call them]Christians. When we call them Christians we are getting it wrong, because if you are a Christian you cannot go to native doctors no matter the situation. So I don’t believe that if you are a Christian you can go to that extent, except you are a backsliding Christian.<sup>95</sup>

The key problem with the foregoing dichotomies is that it is difficult to know who is and who is not a Christian in the Nigerian context. This is because sometimes people define a Christian on the basis of church denominational prejudice. For example, many Pentecostals see some Evangelical Christians as ‘non-true Christians’ because they either do not emphasis speaking in tongues or do not practice it. Some Evangelicals equally accuse some Pentecostals and members of the AICs of belonging to and engaging in diabolical practices. Also, although some Christians argue that it is possible to know a ‘true Christian’ through his or her lifestyle, the difficulty with this assumption is that some Christians, as most of the interviewees claimed, consult native doctors, ancestors and other diabolic sources. And some of these Christians conceal their lifestyles in such a way that no one could suspect them

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<sup>93</sup> Ejim Okonkwo, interview by researcher, tape recording, Aba, 18 June 2006.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Faith Ukaegbu, interview by researcher, tape recording, Aba, 6 May 2006.

until some people uncover their secret lives. Thus, the philosophy of 'faith articulated in lifestyle' is a misleading yardstick to define who is a Christian in contemporary Nigerian societies.

In conclusion, I have explored in this chapter some of the grassroots Christologies. Like some of the constructive Christologies of Nigerian theologians that I examined in chapter two, the majority of the grassroots Christologies are driven partly by the search to discover and experience the meaning and significance of Jesus Christ. Among the things that distinguish the grassroots Christologies from the constructive Christologies, what appears to be the most significant is the radical difference in their objectives and concerns. Many theologians are preoccupied with the struggle to establish themselves as the legitimate individuals who have the 'right' to determine the indigenous cultural practices that Christians can incorporate into Christianity. Consequently, most of these theologians, as we have seen in chapter two, have devoted a large part of their works to a severe criticism of many Western missionaries' derogatory views of the indigenous worldview. On the contrary, the majority of lay Christians appear to have taken for granted the classical Westerners' derogatory estimation of African peoples. Their primary concern is to experience Jesus' liberating and providential power in their daily lives. They are poor and hungry; therefore, they want to experience Jesus who can feed them. They are in constant fear of death, spiritual attacks, assassination, and robbery; consequently, they are in need of Jesus who has the power to protect them.

I have argued that at the grassroots level many Christians, irrespective of their church denominations, perceive and relate to Jesus Christ merely as a problem-solver. They belong properly into the category of functional Christology. It is the manifestation of Jesus Christ in the lives and situations of many Nigerian lay Christians, and not their understandings of his ontology, that largely informs and shapes their interpretations of the Christ-Event. To state it differently, many Nigerian lay Christians take the ontology of Jesus Christ for granted, but seek to experience the manifestations of his love, provision, protection, healing, and his power to save in their daily lives. I will argue, however, that it is inadequate christologically to perceive and relate to Jesus Christ merely as a problem-solver.

It is crucially important to acknowledge that the cultural, religious, and existential issues that characterize the grassroots and constructive Christologies of Nigerian Christianity are both legitimate and misguided. They are legitimate because

they create some helpful contexts for undertaking a constructive interpretation and appropriation of the Christ-Event. They are misguided because many theologians and lay Christians have failed to articulate these social, religious, and cultural conditions in the ways that allows Jesus Christ to function both as a ‘question’ and a ‘solution’ to the needs of humanity. To put it differently, Nigerian Christians need to rediscover that Jesus does not come to us merely as the one who provides all our needs; he also shapes our understandings of our needs. The ideology of self-accumulation permeates the thinking of the majority of these Christians. The challenge that faces them is the task of interacting with the dialectics of God’s provision and God’s act of self-giving in and through Jesus Christ. In the remainder of this study, I will explore the implications of these dialectics for constructing a Revealer Christology model for the Nigerian context.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### A REVEALER CHRISTOLOGY FOR THE NIGERIAN CONTEXT

In chapters two and three, I examined and critiqued some of the major constructive and also the grassroots (oral) Christologies that exist in Nigerian Christianity. I contended that some theologians have been highly critical of what they consider to be the predominant representations of Jesus Christ in the teachings of some classical Western missionaries. For some of these theologians, most of the Western-informed images of Jesus Christ cannot fit properly into the cultural categories of Nigeria and as a result pose a serious christological dilemma for Nigerian Christianity. In order to deal with this christological dilemma, these theologians have developed some christological models that aimed to re-express and appropriate the Christ-Event in a relevant and meaningful way in and for the Nigerian context. At the grassroots level, as I argued in chapter three, many Christians who do not have formal theological training seek to experience and 'obtain' Jesus' power to combat their existential problems.

I argued that although most of the constructive and grassroots Christologies that exist in Nigerian Christianity reflect the attempts by some theologians and many lay Christians to contextualize the Christ-Event in their contexts, many of these Christologies are inadequate because they construe Jesus Christ primarily as a *solution*. The major christological problem with a Christology that is merely solution-oriented is that it fails (as evidenced in some of the Nigerian christological models I have examined) to account properly for the dialectic that underlies the person and work of Jesus. The crucial element that is missing in most of the christological models I examined in chapters two and three is the failure of the many theologians and lay Christians to construe Jesus simultaneously as a 'question and a solution'. When we construe Jesus as a question and at the same time as a solution, he will no longer function merely as solution to human needs or as a tool which human beings can employ and manipulate to get solution to their existential problems. On the contrary, Jesus Christ will critique, remould and inform the ways human beings construe their problems and the type of solution they anticipate. Therefore, the question that informs the christological model that I will be referring

to as a ‘Revealer Christology’ model in this study is: If we present Jesus Christ simultaneously as the *answer/solution* to the existential questions/problems of Nigerian Christians and also as the *questioner* who critiques and reshapes the Nigerian Christians’ perceptions of their existential problems and the solutions to such problems, what will he and Nigerian Christians look like?<sup>1</sup> As I have already indicated in the introduction, this question is set against the background of the *Taylorian christological presuppositions* that ask ‘if Jesus Christ were to appear as the answer to the questions that Africans are asking what would he look like?’<sup>2</sup> I argued that this latter question was appropriate when Taylor proposed it, but could no longer inspire an adequate Christology that would meet the needs of many present-day Christians.

This chapter will function as the backdrop to and foundation of chapters five, six and seven. It sets out the ‘christological context’ on which the Revealer Christology is built. Several consequences follow from this. First, I will reserve an extensive discussion on the christological contents of the Revealer Christology to chapters five, six and seven. Second, although I will interact with some christological models that exist outside of the Nigerian context, this interaction will not be extensive. Since the primary focus of this study is the Nigerian context, I will engage extensively with the works and the issues that concern Nigerian Christianity. And third, although the Revealer Christology that I will construct in this study will draw insights from the already existing grassroots and constructive Christologies in Nigerian Christianity, it will differ from them, providing a distinct christological outlook for interpreting and appropriating the Christ-Event in the context of Nigeria.

The key issues that I explore in this chapter are the idea of revelation in Nigerian theological and christological discourses, the meaning of ‘revealer’ as it is used in this study, and the theological and contextual parameters of the Revealer Christology as it is developed in this study.

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<sup>1</sup> I will explain the meaning of the expression ‘Revealer Christology’ later in this chapter.

<sup>2</sup> See the introduction.

## **A. Revealer Christology Paradigm and Revelation Discourse**

It is essential to explain the concept of ‘revealer’ and its usage in the Revealer Christology paradigm that is developed in this study. This is necessary because the word ‘revealer’ can conjure up several theological ideas when it is connected to Christology. One such idea is ‘revelation’, a concept that has become notoriously difficult to describe in the wake of the several meanings, criticisms, fierce debates and suspicions that are associated with it.<sup>3</sup> Since ‘revelation’ as a theological concept is an integral part of the theological and christological discourse in Nigeria, it is proper to briefly examine it and to define its relationship to the Revealer Christology model that I will develop in this study.

### **1. The Idea of Revelation in Nigerian Theological Discourse**

Some theological and christological discussions that exist in Nigerian Christianity have proceeded from the premise that God has revealed God’s self and God’s purpose for God’s creation (particularly for human beings) in creation and in some specific events such as the Christ-Event. These divine acts of self-revealing or self-disclosure are what many theologians have labelled ‘revelation’. Unsurprisingly, the meanings and scopes that these theologians assign to revelation vary and sometimes conflict. But for the purpose of this study, I will focus on their understandings of the correlation between a divine revelation and theological discourses. For the majority of Nigerian theologians, God has revealed God’s self and purposes in and through the creation.<sup>4</sup> Bolaji Idowu, one of the earliest Nigerian theologians, defines revelation broadly to include the possibility of a “divine self-disclosure” and the capacity of the human mind to understand it.<sup>5</sup> For Idowu, the

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<sup>3</sup> Bolaji E. Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (London: SCM Press, 1973), 51-69. Colin E. Gunton, *A Brief Theology of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1995); Ronald F. Thiemann, *Revelation and Theology: The Gospel as Narrated Promise* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985); H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York: Macmillan), 19-41; Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus – God and Man*, trans. Lewis L. Wilkins and Duane A. Priebe (London: SCM Press, 1968), 115-133.

<sup>4</sup> Uchenna A. Ezech, *Jesus Christ the Ancestor: An African Contextual Christology in the Light of the Major Dogmatic Christological Definitions of the Church from the Council of Nicea (325) to Chalcedon (451)* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2003), 50.

<sup>5</sup> Idowu, *African Traditional Religion*, 51.

possibility of a divine self-disclosure necessitates or requires a being that possesses a cognitive capacity. Therefore, he rejects the views of Rudolf Otto and Mircea Eliade on revelation precisely because, in his thinking, they tended to “refer to the sacred in terms which may be construed as impersonal”.<sup>6</sup> He insists that there is inherently a cognitive and teleological undertone to a divine revelation. In other words, the being ‘God’ is only capable of self-disclosure if God has the cognitive capacity to do so. He argues that God’s self-manifestation is always linked to some sort of purpose.

The question then is, can one speak strictly of ‘the numinous’ or the sacred *manifesting* or *revealing* itself unless one implies a living Being as the agent of manifestation? Manifestation or revelation presupposes an agent with a conscious will causing a situation by which the manifestation could be apprehended. Thus, it also implies purpose.<sup>7</sup>

For Idowu, revelation is the consequence of religion. The encounter of human beings with the being who is “Wholly Other”, to him, originates from the “Wholly Other who reveals himself”.<sup>8</sup> He argues that the “created order and man’s inner link with God” are the “two principal media of revelation”.<sup>9</sup> By a “created order” he means the entire creation, as recorded in Genesis narrative, which according to him bears “the seal of the Maker, the seal of God’s self-disclosures” in every aspect.<sup>10</sup> It is the Genesis idea of *Imago Dei* that Idowu refers to as “man’s link with God”. He defines the ‘image of God’ here as the source of human cognitive faculty.

This is to say that man is made a rational being, intelligent, equipped with will and a sense of purpose; there is something of the divine in him which makes him addressable and responsible... and, therefore, there exists in him the possibility of his spirit being in communion with the Divine Spirit.<sup>11</sup>

Idowu locates this understanding of the image of God in humans in the Nigerian indigenous anthropology. He continues,

This same fact is expressed in several African concepts of man. For example, the Yoruba believe that whereas an archdivinity may be commissioned to mould a

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 55.

man's physical parts, only the Deity has the eternal prerogative of putting the essence of being into man. In Igbo as well as in Yoruba, the designation of the essence of being, *ori* and *chi*, derive directly from the name of Deity: *ORISE* (*Ori-se*), *CHUKWU* (*Chi-ukwu*); and this by implication means that the essence of man's being derives directly from Deity.<sup>12</sup>

He argues that the revelatory manifestation of God is not limited to any given culture or race. The theological relevance of this assertion anchors on his rejection of the claim that God has revealed God's self ultimately in any single religion. He writes,

God is one, not many; and to one God belongs the earth and all its fullness. It is this God, therefore, who reveals Himself to every people on earth and whom they have apprehended according to the degree of their spiritual perception, expressing their knowledge of Him, if not as trained philosophers or educated theologians, certainly as those who have had some practical experience of Him. It would be looking at facts through the spectacles of cultural pride and affected superiority to deny this; it would be blasphemous to say that while the loving God cared for a particular section of His world, He had nothing in a clear, unmistakable way, to say, or to do with the rest.<sup>13</sup>

Consequently, he contends that it is theologically inadequate to categorize God's revelation in a dualistic way that makes a distinction between "God's climatic revelation in Jesus Christ" and the manifestation of God in a "man-made religion, i.e. other religions besides Christianity".<sup>14</sup>

Byang Kato, an Evangelical theologian, was one of the Nigerian theologians who rejected Idowu's understanding of revelation on the grounds that it moved in the direction of religious pluralism and undermined the definitive revelation of God in Jesus Christ. But he construed revelation in the intellectualist or propositional sense of Post-Enlightenment Protestantism, especially in its North American categories.<sup>15</sup> He agrees with Idowu on the revelatory manifestation of God in his creation and especially in human beings who are created in the image of God. However, he denies that the 'general revelation' and the image of God in human beings are sufficient to lead people to God's salvific knowledge.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Idowu, *Olódùmarè: God in Yoruba Belief* (London: Longmans, 1962), 31.

<sup>14</sup> Idowu, *African Traditional Religion*, 56.

<sup>15</sup> Many Protestant theologians have classified revelation into two categories, namely 'general revelation' and 'special revelation'. See Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, vol. 3, part 2. (Waco: Word Books, 1979).

Apart from the general revelation and the fact of the vestiges of *Imago Dei*, direct revelation of God to leaders of other religions is highly improbable”.<sup>16</sup>

After his study of the indigenous religion of the Jaba people of the northern Nigeria, Kato concludes that it is only in Jesus Christ that human beings can encounter God’s definitive and salvific revelation, which for him, is not existent in any other religions apart from Christianity.

With the coming of Christ, all other revelations come to an end. It is most unlikely that either Jaba or any other non-Christian people have received a direct revelation from God.<sup>17</sup>

Yusufu Turaki and Tokunboh Adeyemo, like Kato, adopt the categories of ‘special’ and ‘general’ to explain God’s self-disclosure in human history. Adeyemo argued that the “general revelation implies that God the Creator is self-revealed in His work”.<sup>18</sup> The implication of the ‘general revelation, for him, is that human beings “may enjoy the knowledge of God without the special revelation attested in Scripture”.<sup>19</sup> He insists, however, that this does not mean that the general revelation is “insufficient” for salvation, but rather that it is never intended to be “redemptive”.<sup>20</sup> He writes, “technically we can say that general revelation, by its very purpose, is limited in the sense of its non-redemptiveness”.<sup>21</sup> Adeyemo’s intention, like Kato, is to safeguard the uniqueness of the incarnation and the exclusivist claim that there is no salvation outside of Jesus Christ. Again he writes,

I uphold the biblical claim of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as to His essence, His incarnation, His vicarious death and resurrection, and the forgiveness of sin and salvation He offers every believing sinner. Unlike *Ela* [a lesser divine being in Yourbaland who is believed to be a saviour] or any other divinity of African Traditional Religion, He was not created nor was He a demigod. Rather, He is

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<sup>16</sup> Byang H. Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa* (Kisumu: Evangel, 1975), 44.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Tokunboh Adeyemo, *Salvation in African Tradition* (Nairobi: Evangel, 1979), 19.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Sam Oleka agrees: “We know that general revelation does not offer man knowledge of God’s love, peace and personal relationship with God as they are offered to man in Christ in the New Testament. Furthermore, it does not teach man about God’s saving ‘grace and truth’ through Jesus Christ (John 1:17)”. See Oleka, “The Authority of the Bible in the African Context,” in *Issues in African Theology*, ed. Samuel Ngewa, Mark Shaw and Tite Tienou (Nairobi: E.A.E.P, 1998), 80.

<sup>21</sup> Adeyemo, *Salvation in African Tradition*, 25.

God by whom all things are made, the second person of the Trinity, and the Redeemer of mankind.<sup>22</sup>

Turaki agrees with both Idowu and Kato on the idea of revelation as God's self-disclosure of God's self and on the imprints of God's revelatory manifestation in human beings as God's image bearers and in other parts of creation. He writes,

Revelation goes beyond our understanding of creation and the world as a given order. Human knowledge, understanding and wisdom of creation and the world and limited, unless guided by God Himself. Man who is created in the image of God has the knowledge, somewhat, of his Maker.<sup>23</sup>

Like Kato and Adeyemo, Turaki argues that God's 'general revelation' in creation is marred by and "subject to the corrupting influence of sin".<sup>24</sup> Therefore, Turaki contends that human beings are in need of a special revelation.<sup>25</sup> He argues that the Christ-Event is the ultimate and definitive act of God's revelation. The "special revelation of Jesus the Messiah crowns all of God's revelations to humanity".<sup>26</sup> And it is precisely on the basis of God's ultimate and definitive revelation in the Christ-Event that makes Jesus "the unique Saviour of the whole world".<sup>27</sup> Framed in an evangelistic tone, Turaki contends that there is only one possible correct way to have access to God's salvation; namely, Jesus Christ. In addition, he argues that to reject Jesus Christ is theologically and existentially suicidal.

We have to accept the fact of 'conflict of claims' because of the plural nature of human composition in the world. But among these claims of salvation, there can be only one that represents God truly. All that religions can do is to present the claims of their 'revelations' to the 'choice' of humanity. Their Creator will hold all human beings, in the final analysis, responsible for their choice. The one who

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>23</sup> Yusufu Turaki, *The Unique Christ for Salvation: The Challenge of the Non-Christian Religions and Culture* (Nairobi: International Bible Society Africa, 2001), 225.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> The majority of Nigerian Evangelical theologians construe Jesus Christ and the Bible as God's special revelations. Sam Oleka, an Evangelical, gives a helpful summary of these views of Jesus Christ and the Bible. "The heart of God's revelation is Jesus Christ, the eternal Word of God. As true man and true God 'He became flesh and lived for a while among us' (Jn 1:14)... The other form of God's special revelation is the Bible. It is a record of God's words to His creatures (2 Tim 3:16); Christ the Incarnate Word is known through the written Word, the Bible". See Oleka, "The Living God: Some Reflections on Acts 17 and Africa Traditional Religions," in *Issues in African Christian Theology*, 128.

<sup>26</sup> Turaki, *The Unique Christ for Salvation*, 226.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 227.

chooses damnation has only himself [or] herself to blame. God does not stop humanity and/or Satan from offering alternative 'paths' of salvation.<sup>28</sup>

The concept of a 'revealer' in the Revealer Christology that is developed in this study differs from the Post-Enlightenment Protestant understandings of revelation that informed the views of Turaki, Adeyemo and Kato. It also differs from Idowu's 'pluralistic' understanding of revelation. Although an exhaustive examination of their views of revelation falls outside the parameters of this chapter, it is important to highlight the theological and christological problems with their understandings of revelation.

First, the classification of revelation into 'general' and 'special' can be misleading and can betray the unity that underlies God's revelation. Kato, Adeyemo and Turaki, influenced by post-Enlightenment North American Protestantism, classify creation under God's general revelation and classify the Bible and the Christ-Event under God's special revelation.<sup>29</sup> According to Kato, the Bible is 'God's written revelation' and Jesus Christ is 'God's living revelation'.<sup>30</sup> Idowu, Adeyemo, Kato and Turaki have all confused God's activity such as creation with God's *revelation of God's self*. The creation of God (the universe, human beings and other existing beings and things in the universe), is not God's revelation of God's self. The creation affirms the "facticity and universal scope of the divine working but propose no specific location".<sup>31</sup> Therefore, the creation is only *revelatory* insofar as it points to the revelation of God in the Christ-Event. All other revelatory acts of God – before and after the Christ-Event – are only *pointers* to God's self-disclosure in and through the Christ-Event. They witness to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. These acts in most cases *tell us something* about God, but do not *reveal* God's self. It

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 228.

<sup>29</sup> What exactly constitute 'special revelation' has become highly debatable today amidst North American Evangelical, Reformed, and Protestant theologians. See Terrace L. Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved? Reassessing Salvation in Christ and World Religions* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 113-122; D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996).

<sup>30</sup> Byang H. Kato, *Biblical Christianity in Africa: A Collection of Papers and Addresses* (Achimota, African Christian Press, 1985), 21-22.

<sup>31</sup> Edward Farley, *Divine Empathy: A Theology of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 252.

is only Jesus Christ that reveals God's self.<sup>32</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff captures the difference between 'telling about something' and 'revealing something when he writes,

Revelation is not dispelling just any sort of ignorance. Telling you that I left the keys on the counter is not, in normal circumstances, *revealing* to you the location of the keys – even though it does dispel your ignorance. Dispelling ignorance becomes *revelation* when it has, to some degree and in some way, the character of unveiling the veiled, of uncovering the covered, of exposing the obscured view. The counterpart of the revealed is the hidden.<sup>33</sup>

It is vital to recognize that prior to the Christ-Event God unveiled his anger, love, compassion, and sovereignty in diverse ways.<sup>34</sup> In other words, people did not come to know and have a relationship with God only after the Christ-Event. Keeping this in mind is important because it provides a helpful theological context for understanding the difference between the pre-Christ-Event divine manifestations and God's revelation of God's self in the Christ-Event. Theophany and other revealing or revelatory manifestations of God in history *say* something about God and God's relationship to the world. Jeffrey Niehaus has noted that the God of the Old Testament (before the Christ-Event) revealed himself to the people of Israel and did not allow them to "guess" who he was.<sup>35</sup> According to Niehaus, "the God of the Old Testament could appear whenever and wherever he chose".<sup>36</sup> And God did appear to people beginning from the Garden of Eden (the Pre-Sinai theophanies) and continued to appear beyond the Sinai theophany.<sup>37</sup>

However, the Christ-Event is the only unique 'action' of God (in human history) that demonstrates God's act of relating to the world, particularly human

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<sup>32</sup> Karl Barth correctly notes that we have "not universal deity capable of being reached conceptually, but this concrete deity – real and recognisable in the decent grounded in that sequence and peculiar to the existence of Jesus Christ". Barth, *The Humanity of God* (London: Collins, 1961), 48.

<sup>33</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1995, 23-24.

<sup>34</sup> Hebrews 1.

<sup>35</sup> Jeffrey J. Niehaus, *God at Sinai: Covenant and Theophany in the Bible and Ancient Near East* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1995), 17.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 142, 181- 186.

beings as God-man. The uniqueness of the Christ-Event entails partly that all other manifestations or revelatory acts of God can attain their full potential meanings and significances only in and through Jesus' person and work. Jesus Christ construes the Christ-Event in this way. For example, he says to the woman of Samaria:

Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.<sup>38</sup>

God has, theologically speaking, revealed God's self definitively in history in the Christ-Event. Karl Barth underscored this idea of revelation when he argued:

revelation itself is connected with nothing different or higher or earlier than itself. Revelation as such is not relative. Revelation in fact does not differ from the Person of Jesus Christ, and again does not differ from the reconciliation that took place in him. To say revelation is to say, 'The Word became flesh'.<sup>39</sup>

For Barth then, as John McDowell argues, "Christian talk of God is only properly located in the event of the revelation in Jesus Christ".<sup>40</sup> The Apostle John communicated a similar idea in a provocative way: "No one has ever seen God, but God the one and only, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known".<sup>41</sup>

Unlike Kato, Adeyemo and Turaki, Idowu pays little attention to the uniqueness of the Christ-Event in his discussion on revelation. John Parratt has argued that by "paying little attention to the place of Jesus Christ in revelation", Idowu obscures both the uniqueness of Christianity and the "unique nature of the African concept of God, for which Idowu himself pleads".<sup>42</sup> I will examine the relationship between the God Jesus communicates and interprets and the Nigerian indigenous views of God in chapter five. It suffices to note here that some of the characteristics of God, which Jesus embodies, can upset the Nigerian indigenous understandings of God or the Supreme Being as the most powerful, untouchable and

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<sup>38</sup> John 4:13-14, *NIV*.

<sup>39</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of the Word of God*, vol. 1, pt. 1 trans. G. T. Thompson (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1936), 134.

<sup>40</sup> John C. McDowell, "Karl Barth, Emil Brunner and the Subjectivity of the Object of Christian Hope," *IJST* 8, no. 1(2006): 25-41.

<sup>41</sup> John 1:18, *NASB*.

<sup>42</sup> John Parratt, *Reinventing Christianity: African Theology Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 69.

who has withdrawn from a relationship with humanity due the human ‘sinful’ actions. On the contrary, Jesus Christ preaches, not only the God who is powerful, but also the God who is touchable, reachable, self-giving and vulnerable.<sup>43</sup>

Second, it is important to recognize that the Christ-Event does not guarantee that people will always accept God’s salvific blessings. Parratt has pointed out that Idowu blurs the difference between God’s existence and people’s knowledge of him which is based solely on his revelation of himself.<sup>44</sup> Idowu puts himself into a serious theological difficulty when he confuses God’s revelation with God’s creation and salvation in his attempt to secure the “universal availability of God” and to undo any form of “exclusivism conceived in racial or cultural terms”.<sup>45</sup> God’s manifestations in God’s act of creating (the world, human beings, etc.) do not guarantee that people will know him. And although God’s complete, radical and definitive self-disclosure in the Christ-Event provides the opportunity for people to know, experience, and to enjoy a unique relationship with God, it does not guarantee that people will always accept this opportunity. The Christ-Event provides a unique opportunity for human beings to experience God’s remoulding, critiquing, gracious love, forgiveness, acceptance, and blessings, but it is only God that can possibly convey God’s salvation to people.

## **2. The Concept of ‘Revealer’ in the Revealer Christology Model**

In what way can a systematic-contextual theologian interpret the Christ-Event to engage befittingly with the contemporary situation – cultural, spiritual, religious, and socioeconomic – of Nigeria? This is not entirely a new question. In some ways, the Nigerian theologians and Christian laity that I have examined in this study have wrestled with and attempted to answer this question. However, the Revealer Christology paradigm that is developed in this study aims to answer this question from a way that differs both in content and structure from the existing christological

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<sup>43</sup> See chapter five.

<sup>44</sup> Parratt, *Reinventing Christianity*, 67.

<sup>45</sup> Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and in Modern Africa* (Carlisle: Regnum, 1992), 282.

models in Nigeria by proposing that Jesus is a ‘revealer’ of divinity (God, lesser spirit beings, and the spirit world) and humanity (human beings and the human world). To say that Jesus is the revealer of divinity and humanity, in the context of this study, means that he communicates and interprets divinity and humanity for the purpose of enacting a relationship between God and humanity.

Four presuppositions inform this christological contention. First, the Christ-Event is God’s definitive and complete revelation of divinity and humanity. It is a mistake to construe Jesus the Christ as the revealer of God alone. Theologians are accustomed to speaking of Jesus Christ as the revelation of God but have overlooked that Jesus Christ is also a revelation of humanity. This study argues that the ideas of the “Word became flesh” and “God with us”, understood correctly, requires that the Christ-Event must be seen as a revelation of both divinity and humanity. It is a serious theological fault to concentrate only on the revelation of God or divinity in and through the Christ-Event and to overlook the significance of the Christ-Event for humanity.

Second, the uniqueness of the Christ-Event does not lie merely in the ontological composition of Jesus’ person, but also in Jesus’ meaning and significance for human beings and God, and the relationship existing between them. It would have been utterly useless if God had appeared in human history (in Jesus Christ) just for the sake of the adventure or simply to show that he has the power to become human. Therefore, the Revealer Christology model that is developed in this study explores and engages with the dialectics of and connections between the person and work of Jesus Christ and the meaning and significance of Jesus Christ for many Christians who are seeking and hoping for a divine liberation, healing, and providence.

Third, the Christ-Event is a divine *manifestational act* by which God makes God’s self accessible to human history in the person and work of Jesus Christ for the purpose of being in relationship with human beings.<sup>46</sup> This, of course, does not mean that human beings can exhaust or encapsulate the mysteries of divinity and humanity.

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<sup>46</sup> We are adopting Nicholas Wolterstorff’s differentiation between a “non-manifestational revelation” and a “manifestational revelation”. According to him, a “*non-manifestational* revelation is revealing that P by asserting that P, whereas a *manifestational* revelation is revealing that P by some means other than assertion”. See Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*, 27.

What it means, however, is that human beings can know the meaning and significance of humanity and divinity through the Christ-Event. It is a theological mistake to see Jesus Christ as the ‘revealer’ of the propositional truth of God and humanity. As a communicative or meditative act, the Christ-Event presents us with Jesus who embodies God’s relationality by entering into a relationship with humanity – God’s own creation. The Christ-Event also provides a unique way for human beings to experience and encounter God, other spiritual beings and their fellow human beings. The key motif underlying this unique encounter is *relationship*. The aim of the Christ-Event is not to provide human beings with a mere clear, comprehensive, intellectual, and exhaustive knowledge of God, other spiritual beings and human beings, but rather to provide a revealer through whom human beings can have a meaningful relationship with God, and to judge their preconceptions and understandings of other spiritual beings, human beings, and the human world.

Fourth, the Christ-Event is a *hermeneutical act*. This means that Jesus Christ interprets divinity and humanity, and critiques and reforms human beings’ preconceptions of God, other spirit beings and humanity. ‘Hermeneutic’ is not used here in its traditional rendering – the “reflection on the principles that undergird correct textual interpretation”.<sup>47</sup> In this study, a *hermeneutical act* refers to an ‘interpretative framework’ for imagining and experiencing the mysteries of the relationship between humanity and divinity. Understood in this way, the Christ-Event is the ‘forum’ in which human beings and God interact and enjoy an unprecedented relationship. Insofar as the Christ-Event also furnishes human beings with the opportunity to judge their knowledge of and relationship with God, other spiritual beings and their fellow human beings, it is an *interpretative act*. It is not sufficient to posit that Jesus Christ stands as the figure through whom Nigerian Christians can come to an adequate knowledge of the spiritual and human worlds. In order for Christians to understand the nature and goals of the Christ-Event, they must also perceive Jesus Christ hermeneutically; that is, they must construe Jesus as the revealer who questions, judges, critiques and reconstructs their previous relationship with God and with other human beings.

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<sup>47</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is there a Meaning in this Text? The Bible, the Reader and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Leicester: Apollos, 1998), 19.

Jesus construed the nature, purpose and significance of his mission in both *communicative* and *interpretative* ways. For example, when he declared that he had not come to destroy the Law or the Prophets but to fulfill them,<sup>48</sup> he presented himself not only as a good teacher whose aim was to make his followers understand the Hebrew Scripture correctly, but also as the one who embodied divine presence and through whom the Jewish people can have an unprecedented fellowship with God. The understanding of Jesus Christ as the revealer through whom people could know the will and purpose of God for humanity and divinity is also evident in the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman. Confused and bewildered at the words of Jesus, the Samaritan woman said to him, “I know that a Messiah ...is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.”<sup>49</sup> Before the Christ-Event, those who were associated with some forms of Judaism anticipated a Messiah who would function as the interpretative framework or a revealer of God’s purpose. Jesus’ response, which came in the form of the ‘I am’ sayings, sets the context for the uniqueness of his messianic work.<sup>50</sup> By saying to the woman “I am he”,<sup>51</sup> Jesus unequivocally declared himself as the anticipated Messiah. In addition, as the revealer of divinity and humanity, Jesus functions as a hermeneutical lens through which people can know themselves, evaluate and experience a unique relationship with God and other human beings.<sup>52</sup>

## **B. Revealer Christology and the Issues of Christological Approaches**

Should theologians worry about the beginning point of Christology? Or should they avoid the question about a point of departure and just get on with *christologizing*? Kevin Vanhoozer has noted the contemporary shift away from many

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<sup>48</sup> Matthew 5:19.

<sup>49</sup> John 4:25.

<sup>50</sup> Richard Bauckham, “Monotheism and Christology in the Gospel of John,” in *Contours of Christology in the New Testament*, ed., Richard N. Longenecker, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 160.

<sup>51</sup> John 4:26.

<sup>52</sup> Here the challenges that Jesus puts forward to the Samaritan woman are that she needs to judge her understanding of her self, her understanding of the relationship between the Jews and the Samaritans and her understanding of her relationship with God in the light of the Christ-Event.

modern theologians who “devoted considerable energy to prolegomena”.<sup>53</sup> Many contemporary theologians in the West are realizing the difficulty of trying to develop a theological method before starting to do theology. Vanhoozer himself embarked on the task of developing “a new possibility for doing theology beyond prolegomena”; that is, “a way of speaking of God that allows the theological matter to influence the theological method”.<sup>54</sup>

Many Nigerian theologians are still preoccupied with christological methods, assuming that the validity of any Christology lies in its well-defined methodology. The only options that seem to be available to them are ‘Christology from above’ and ‘Christology from below’.<sup>55</sup> A few examples will illustrate this observation. Ukachukwu Chris Manus situates his ‘King Christology’ model in the territory of a Christology from below. In the opening words of chapter six of *Christ, the African King: New Testament Christology*, he postulates:

The purpose of this chapter is based on the overall interest of this study; namely, the ‘Christology from below’. Since the human condition of Jesus in this world of ours is traceable according to the best ...historical and exegetical methods, it is therefore made the starting point of the following chapters. Scripture makes it clear that Christology takes off from the man, Jesus of Nazareth and reflects on his divine transcendence. ...<sup>56</sup>

Enyi Ben Udoh and Justin Ukpong also favour a Christology from below.<sup>57</sup> On the contrary, Turaki speaks for many Nigerian theologians who use a high Christology method when he contends that “Jesus the Messiah has no origin and He is not created. He is the Eternal One with God the Father”<sup>58</sup>. Again he writes,

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<sup>53</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scripture and Hermeneutics* (Dowers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 15. I am indebted to John McDowell for the awareness of this paradigmatic shift in theological methodology.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>55</sup> Theologians sometimes call ‘Christology from above’ a *high Christology*, and ‘Christology from below’ a *low Christology*.

<sup>56</sup> Ukachukwu Chris Manus, *Christ, The African King: New Testament Christology* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1993), 118.

<sup>57</sup> See E. B. Udoh, “Guest Christology: An Interpretative View of the Christological Problem in Africa,” (Ph. D. Dissertation, Princeton Theological Seminary, 1983), 263-264; Ukpong, “Christology and Inculturation,” 43.

<sup>58</sup> Turaki, *The Unique Christ for Salvation*, 136.

He is above the cyclical rhythm of nature as He is the Creator of nature. He transcends the powers of nature and cannot be subject to them. Furthermore, Jesus the Messiah is neither an ancestor nor 'one of them'. He did not originate from within human nature. He is its Creator.<sup>59</sup>

Some Western theologians also think of high Christology and low Christology as the only two available approaches from which a theologian can undertake a christological construction.<sup>60</sup> Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen is an example.

There are two options, in principle, for inquiry into the person and work of Christ. Conveniently, these have been labelled, 'from above' and 'from below'. Christology from above begins with the confession of faith in the deity of Christ expressed in the New Testament. Christology from below begins with an inquiry into the historical Jesus and the historical basis for belief in Christ.<sup>61</sup>

Since the Revealer Christology as developed in this study model falls outside of these two approaches, it will be necessary to explain the approach that it uses. Whilst a methodology can be helpful in undertaking the task of a constructive Christology, it should not be a prerequisite for christologizing, it should not obstruct the actual doing of Christology, and it should not introduce an unwarranted dichotomy between the divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ. It is, therefore, misleading to ask: should a Christology begin 'from above' or 'from below'? Beginning a christological inquiry from either of these two approaches will lead to a reductionistic or parochial understanding of the Christ-Event. Nicholas Lash has questioned the appropriateness and usefulness of the metaphors –below and above – for a constructive Christology.<sup>62</sup> He argues that these metaphors are “inappropriate to the task of systematic Christology” since a “systematic reflection” on the person and work of Jesus Christ arises normally out of the “Christian confession of the humanity and divinity of Jesus Christ”.<sup>63</sup> The major christological problem with constructing a Christology either 'from below' or 'from above' is that such Christology will run the risk of introducing

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>60</sup> Pannenberg, *Jesus – God and Man*, 33-36.

<sup>61</sup> Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Christology: A Global Introduction, An Ecumenical, International, and Contextual Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 12.

<sup>62</sup> Nicholas Lash, “Up and Down in Christology,” in *New Studies in Theology*, ed., Stephen Sykes and Derek Holmes (London: Duckworth, 1980), 35. In this essay, Lash rebuts the arguments of Wolfhart Pannenberg against 'Christology from above'.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

a destructive gulf and dichotomy between the divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ. The test of any reliable Christology, therefore, is inherent in its awareness of the impossibility of successfully interpreting the Christ-Event either from below or from above. The Brazilian theologian, Leonardo Boff, has noted the dialectical nature of a christological inquiry.

When we speak of Jesus we must always think of God and the human person, both at the same time and in conjunction.... The unity of God and human person in Jesus is so profound that it should be possible to discover his humanity in his divinity and his divinity in his humanity.<sup>64</sup>

It is inadequate to limit our christological methods to either Christology ‘from below’ or Christology ‘from above’. And since these methods, when taken in isolation, deepen the gulf between divinity and humanity, the very gulf that the Christ-Event bridges, I will undertake the task of developing an alternative approach that will engage with the dialectics of divinity and humanity from the perspective of the person and work of Jesus Christ. In this study, I will employ a ‘dialectic-holistic’ approach to develop a Revealer Christology model. This approach integrates the christological approaches ‘from below’ and ‘from above’ without taking either of these approaches as a point of departure. While points of references are helpful, it should be noted that they are not indissolubly connected with constructive Christology. In other words, we do not need to begin either ‘from below’ or ‘from above’ before we can successfully write a constructive Christology. The dialectic-holistic approach is grounded in the claim that in the Christ-Event we encounter a figure, Jesus the Christ, who embodies divinity and humanity. Joseph Weber rightly warns against the danger of introducing a dubious dichotomy between the humanity and divinity of Jesus Christ.

The humanity of Jesus cannot be considered apart from his divinity, because the divinity is constructive of this particular, specific man.<sup>65</sup>

When we construct a Christology that takes its starting point either from the historical Jesus or the Incarnate *Logos* we may succeed in destroying the divine-human union of the Christ-Event and mar that interrelationship of divinity and

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<sup>64</sup> Leonardo Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator*, trans. Patrick Hughes (London: SPCK, 1972), 181.

<sup>65</sup> Joseph C. Weber, *Karl Barth and the Historical Jesus*,” *Journal of Bible and Religion* 32, no. 4 (1964): 350.

humanity that Jesus embodies. Millard Erickson notes that a Christology from below moves in the direction of reason while a Christology from above moves in the direction of faith. This assumes a modern separation of faith and reason, an ideology that characterized the liberal scholarship's quest to rediscover the historical Jesus (*historie*) and to distinguish him from the Jesus of faith (*geschicthe*).<sup>66</sup> But Erickson contends, and rightly so, that a viable Christological method would adopt "neither faith alone nor historical reason alone, but together, in an intertwined, mutually dependent, simultaneously progressing fashion".<sup>67</sup>

In brief, an adequate christological method should be holistic and dialectical. Such a methodology will accommodate both the mystery and the invitation to probe the mystery embedded in Jesus' divinity and humanity. The fact that the majority of the followers of Jesus even in our time continue to see Jesus as a divine being or God requires that theologians must take seriously the claim that God has revealed God's self in Jesus Christ. Any Christology that is Christian must engage with the claim that Jesus of Nazareth embodied divinity and humanity. In what follows, I will examine the circumference of the Revealer Christology model that is developed in this study.

## **C. The Circumference of the Revealer Christology Paradigm**

### **1. Revealer Christology and Classical Christology**

The question 'how can Jesus Christ mediate and interpret divinity and humanity for the Nigerian people when he was a Jew and not a Nigerian?' is a serious question that a theologian should not ignore. In this study, I argue that the answer to this question cannot be divorced from the classical Christian christological construal of Jesus Christ as consubstantial with divinity and humanity. J.N.D. Kelly has noted that the "problem of Christology, in the narrow sense of the word, is to

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<sup>66</sup> See M. Käehler, *The So-called Historical Jesus and the Historic, Biblical Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964).

<sup>67</sup> Millard J. Erickson, "Christology from Above and Christology from Below: A Study of Contrasting Methodologies," in *Perspectives on Evangelical Theology: Papers from the Thirtieth Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Society* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 54.

define the relation of the divine and human in Christ”.<sup>68</sup> Whereas the council of Nicea focused primarily on the divinity of Jesus Christ, the council of Chalcedon explored and created a circumference for understanding the relationship between the divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ.<sup>69</sup> Uchenna Ezeh has engaged in a constructive development of the Christologies of the councils of Nicea and Chalcedon. In chapter two, we saw that he explored the cult of African ancestors and built his Ancestor Christology model on both an African indigenous worldview and the major christological formulations from Nicea (325) to Chalcedon (451). Ezeh notes that the Christology in the Nicene Creed was formulated within the context of the Trinity.<sup>70</sup> For him, the Nicene Council’s use of *homoousios* (of the same substance) to describe Jesus’ relationship with the Father implies that “in Jesus the transcendent and radically immanent God is in the world as God made man”.<sup>71</sup> He argues that Jesus Christ as the “radically immanent God-man can be well understood from the African sense of solidarity”.<sup>72</sup> ‘Solidarity’ here refers to the African indigenous understanding of the interrelationship between the spiritual world and the human world. Using the indigenous concept of the ancestor cult, Ezeh contends that the divine-human tension, which the Nicean and Chalcedon Councils introduced, is present in the African indigenous cosmologies.

In the African cosmology, there is this quest for unity between God and man. There exists the spiritual as well as the material world. Through the ancestors the divine and the human, the spiritual and the material worlds are held together. There is therefore this divine-human tension also in the African concept of the ancestor.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1958), 138.

<sup>69</sup> Aloys Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition: From the Council of Chalcedon (451) to Gregory the Great (590-604)*, trans. Pauline Allen and John Cawte (London: Mowbray, 1965), 3-5. See also James Anderson, *Paradox in Christian Theology: An Analysis of Its Presence, Character and Epistemic Status* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007), 63-76.

<sup>70</sup> Another way of putting it is that “The dogma of the Trinity developed as the Church’s response to a question about the identity of Jesus Christ”. See Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine – The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 226.

<sup>71</sup> Ezeh, *Jesus Christ the Ancestor*, 201.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 252.

Apart from Ezeh, no other Nigerian theologian has explored extensively the classical christological formulations of the church councils and interpreted them in the light of some indigenous concepts.<sup>74</sup> This is not to suggest that most theologians construct their Christologies in the ways that conflict with the classical christological formulation of the divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ, but rather that they have failed to articulate clearly the relation of this classical christological formulation to their Christologies.<sup>75</sup>

The Revealer Christology model that is developed in this study espouses and reinterprets the classical christological confession of Jesus Christ as both divine and human for the contemporary Nigerian context. This means that the model builds on the christological circumference (Jesus as divine-human) created by the classical Christian councils whilst at the same time explaining and interpreting the Christ-Event in a manner that interacts meaningfully with the context of life of the people of Nigeria. As developed in this study, the Revealer Christology model proposes that it is in and through the Christ-Event that Nigerian Christians can (a) come to a true knowledge of God, other spiritual beings, and human beings; (b) enjoy a relationship with God and with other human beings; (c) judge their notions of divine- human relationship or the relationship between the spiritual world and the human world.

Some Western theologians have pointed out that the christological controversy of the early period of Christian history leaned more towards the deity of Jesus and not his humanity. “In the classical periods of christological controversy”, John McIntyre writes, “the subject which commanded most attention was that of the deity of Christ”.<sup>76</sup> For him, the controversy revolved around the issue of the identity of Jesus and the identity of God. He notes that the subject-matter was concerned with

whether Jesus Christ was to be identified with God, whether he was ‘very God of very God’, *homoousios*, of one substance with the Father; or whether he was only of similar nature to God; or as the semi-Arians maintained, as regards all the essential attributes of deity he was dissimilar to the Father; or, as Arius himself is thought to believe, he did not coexist from all eternity with the Father,

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<sup>74</sup> See chapter two for a critique of Ezeh’s Ancestor Christology model.

<sup>75</sup> Some Nigerian theologians such as Enyi Ben Udoh and Bolaji Idowu have constructed Christologies and theologies that to some degree have denied the divinity of Jesus Christ. See chapter two.

<sup>76</sup> John McIntyre, *Theology after the Storm: Reflections on the Upheavals in Modern Theology and Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 61.

but originated in time by the Father's will, though as his first and most glorious creation.<sup>77</sup>

Of course, that the classical theologians devoted much of their energy to defend the deity of Jesus does not mean that they overlooked his humanity. In fact, it was the humanity of Jesus Christ that partly informed the defence and controversy of his divinity. Therefore, the christological controversy, and the councils and creeds that followed aimed to develop a two-nature Christology. Chalcedon, in particular, wanted to map out the christological parameters within which Christians can work out the christological equation of how the divine and human natures of Jesus relate.<sup>78</sup>

It is important to note that the Nicene Creed and Chalcedonian christological formulation have not resolved the christological problems that are associated with the identity of Jesus. Apart from the fact that these two important historic documents have emerged from some early Christians whose cultural, political, and religious contexts differ from the contemporary Nigerian context, and therefore require a reinterpretation, the documents cannot claim to have a final say on the Christ-Event. They were, of course, not intended to provide definitive and final christological formulations. Rather, they aimed to provide the christological parameters for measuring 'what is' and 'what is not' an adequate Christian interpretation of the person of Jesus Christ. In addition, it is important for the theologians to rediscover that the Christ-Event is a mystery and that no single theological explication can claim an exhaustive articulation of its meaning, purpose, and significance.

## **2. Revealer Christology and the Religious Quests of Nigerian People**

As I have already indicated, the Revealer Christology model as it is articulated in this study, aims to interpret the Christ-Event in the manner that engages concretely, relevantly and interactively with the experiences and the context of life of the people of Nigeria, particularly Christians. In order to achieve this enormous task, I will locate this model within the three major 'religious quests' that are deeply rooted in the religious thinking of most Nigerian people.

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Kärkkäinen, *Christology*, 72.

The first is the quest to understand the blurry and unclear interrelationship between the spiritual world and the world of human beings. Any serious researcher of the indigenous religions will notice that the people of Nigeria are constantly searching for a way to understand the spiritual world which they believe to have a direct bearing on their existence. Although some people who have not been informed by the indigenous religious worldview may simply discard this quest as mere superstition, what remains evident is that many people still think of their existence and subsistence on the earth in the categories of the spiritual-human interrelation. This is so because they construe the spiritual world and the human world, not as two divisible abodes, but rather as two indivisible aspects of one abode. As Emefie Ikenga Metuh observes:

The world of the human experience is seen as one fluid, coherent unit, in which spirits, men, animals, plants ... are engaged in continuous interaction. The invisible world of spirits and the visible world shade into and mutually influence each other.<sup>79</sup>

There is no aspect of life, for many Nigerians, which the quest to understand the spiritual world does not influence. Although one must be careful not to speak of African societies as a unit, many African theologians and historians of African religion agree that the “concept of reality and destiny are deeply rooted in the spirit world”.<sup>80</sup> The Kenyan theologian, John Mbiti, has reminded scholars of African religions to avoid the error of trying to treat the “spiritual universe” and “physical world” separately because they “intermingle...so much that it is not easy or even necessary... to separate them”.<sup>81</sup> The quest to understand the spiritual world and the belief in the impact of the activities of some spiritual beings on the human world have continued to shape the prayers, songs, beliefs and interpretations of Nigerians. For example, when there is a poor harvest, the majority of the people attribute it to a curse from either God, or other benevolent spirits, or malevolent spirits. This belief greatly informs many Christians’ understanding of God and Jesus Christ as it is

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<sup>79</sup> Emefie Ikenga Metuh, *African Religions in Western Conceptual Schemes: The Problem of Interpretation* (Ibadan: Claverianum Press, 1985), 3-4.

<sup>80</sup> Turaki, *The Unique Christ for Salvation*, 60.

<sup>81</sup> John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969), 75.

evident in the salvation testimony of Ben Fubra-Manuel. According to him, becoming a Christian and personally experiencing Jesus Christ is a

fulfilling experience because you don't know the emptiness you walk with everyday when you are not a Christian. When you come to Jesus... you feel complete. You don't feel superhuman. You don't feel that you are holy as you should be.... You become, in the words of the Apostle Paul, a new creation with a new sense of values, a new way of looking at the totality of reality. Now the practical effects are wonderful because if you are complete in Jesus then you are not afraid of the many things around that people fear – the witches, the wizards, the Ogbanje, the juju – because you find completeness in Jesus.<sup>82</sup>

Many Nigerians live in constant fear of evil spirits. Sometimes they see evil people as 'agents of the devil'. For the majority of Nigerian Christians, it is only Jesus who can effectively protect people, as Fubra-Manuel has indicated, from such malevolent spirits and people. But some other Christians who think that Jesus may delay in giving them spiritual protection when they need him sometimes use other means of protections such as amulets. Others use 'holy water' or stickers which their pastor or priests have blessed.<sup>83</sup>

The second quest consists in the attempts of many people to manoeuvre and manipulate the spiritual world to work in their favour in their struggles to achieve wellbeing. In the thinking of many Nigerians, it is possible to appease and manipulate gods, ancestors, and even evil spirits, to bring blessings on people.<sup>84</sup> This is because most people believe that some evil spirits "are subject to man if one knows how to manipulate them".<sup>85</sup> This quest underscores some of the understandings of the power and acts of Jesus in Nigeria. Amadi, a member of the Presbyterian Church, highlighted the impact of this quest on Nigerian Christians. In his response to the question "are there some Nigerian Christians that go outside of Jesus to find solution to their problems", he said:

Yes, many, in fact, the whole of Aba. There are so many people that are looking for ways to solve their problems. But I keep on telling them that Jesus is not a talisman. You don't use him as a talisman. He is not an ordinary person. So if

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<sup>82</sup> Ben Fubra-Manuel, interview by researcher, tape recording, Aba 12 March 2006.

<sup>83</sup> See chapter six for an extensive discussion on how the Revealer Christology model as developed in this study interacts with Nigerian Christians' understandings of the spirit world.

<sup>84</sup> Imasogie, *African Traditional Religion*, 38.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

you are telling<sup>86</sup> him to solve your problems he must make sure that you are in line with him.

Amadi generalizes this phenomenon. However, the most important point to note here is that the traditional belief in the ability of human beings to control spiritual beings has crept into the Christologies of many Christians.

The traditionalists consult some powerful native doctors to prepare charms for them to control some evil spirits. Christians who object to any attempt to obtain amulets from the native doctors consider their prayer as a powerful charm and tool that is available to them for a spiritual warfare.<sup>87</sup> The expression *ekpere bu ogwu mu gworo*, literally, 'prayer is the charm or amulet that I have prepared' is a familiar phrase among the Igbo Christian communities. On most occasions, this expression is used as a 'spiritual missile' against the evil spirits or wicked people. Partly, this expression indicates a total submission, dependence and loyalty to the power of Jesus Christ. But it can also indicate the confidence of many Christians on the power of prayer in combating spiritual forces that work against the wellbeing of human beings. The primary focus here is not on prayer as enjoying God's presence or even as petitions; it is rather on the quest of the majority of Nigerians to manoeuvre the spiritual world in order to attain a peaceful and blissful existence.

Beneath the two previous quests lies the third quest; namely, the search for a medium or person that can function as a lens through which they can understand the events that happen around them. This quest is widespread in many African societies. Diane Stinton observes.

When afflictions occur within a community, such as wrongdoing, illness, or witchcraft, African religions recognize various means to discover the reasons for the disharmony in the universe and to prescribe measures for rectifying the problem, thereby restoring the force of life. Intermediaries are those beings who function in these roles of discernment and mediating reconciliation.<sup>88</sup>

This quest is evident in Nigerians' use of intermediaries. For many Christians, Jesus Christ is the ultimate intermediary through whom people can

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<sup>86</sup> Amadi, interview by researcher, tape recording, Aba, April 10, 2006.

<sup>87</sup> See chapter six for an extensive discussion on Nigerian Christians' beliefs about Jesus and demonic forces.

<sup>88</sup> Diane B. Stinton, *Jesus of Africa: Voices of Contemporary African Christology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2004), 110.

approach God and seek his forgiveness and blessings. The traditionalists (and some Christians) may use intermediaries such as diviners. The Revealer Christology model that is proposed in this study presents Jesus Christ as the being who reshapes radically the content of these quests. I will examine the implications of these three quests in the remainder of this study.

### **3. Revealer Christology in Relation to Apotheosis and Quasi-Docetism**

There are two major potential christological problems that can arise from the portrayal of Jesus as a figure who embodies, mediates and interprets divinity and humanity in the Nigerian context. These are apotheosis and quasi-docetism. I will regard these christological problems as ‘potential’ because they have not penetrated into the *christological thought* of Nigerian Christianity.

#### **a. Apotheosis**

In the Nigerian indigenous worldview, some ancestors can metamorphose into the status of a deity. It is important to recognize that in the thinking of many African peoples not every dead person becomes an ancestor. Kwesi Dickson, a notable Ghanaian theologian, warns that “the cult of the dead is not to be equated with the cult of ancestors” because “to die is not to automatically become an ancestor”.<sup>89</sup> There are some prerequisites for becoming an ancestor, and interestingly, an individual must meet the criteria while he or she is alive in order for him or her to qualify as an ancestor. As Omosade Awolalu and Adelumo Dopamu have noted:

West African peoples believe that only those who lead a good life, live to a ripe old age, die a good death, and are accorded full burial rites can become ancestors.<sup>90</sup>

The Tanzanian theologian, Laurenti Magesa, has described the ancestors as “the pristine men and women who originated the lineage, clan or ethnic group” and also

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<sup>89</sup> Kwesi A. Dickson, *Theology in Africa* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1984), 69.

<sup>90</sup> Omosade J. Awolalu and Adelumo P. Dopamu, *West African Traditional Religion* (Ibadan: Onibonoje Press, 1979), 274.

the people who have provided their people with their names.<sup>91</sup> But the criteria for becoming an ancestor differ from one African society or ethnic group to another. However, there are some requirements that appear to permeate the structures of the majority of ancestral cults in Africa. These include being above reproach, respect for ancestral traditions, prosperous life, death that comes through old age and proper burial.<sup>92</sup>

The requirements to become a member of this highly exalted class of ancestors are not clear. In the cosmology of Yoruba, an ethnic group in Nigeria, only kings may be deified. One example of such kings is Sango, the Yoruba god of lightning and thunder.<sup>93</sup> Two major versions of the Sango legend have survived in Yoruba history; namely the orthodox and non-orthodox views.<sup>94</sup> A. L. Hethersett's *Iwe Kika Ekerin Li Ede Yoruba* helped to popularize the orthodox version of Sango legend.<sup>95</sup> According to the orthodox version, Sango was the fourth *Alaafin* (king) of Oyo. Although a powerful king, he ruled with cruelty. His cruelty and tyranny resulted in complaints from among his subjects and even among his wives. The complaints, especially from his wives, frustrated him and he decided to escape the unbearable complaints and quarrels by opting to reside in a dense forest. And it was

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<sup>91</sup> Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1997), 47. What is often omitted in some discussions on the requirements for becoming an ancestor is the issue of 'power'. As we shall see in the case of Sango, the Yoruba god of thunder and lightning, it is the power he exhibited as a king, and not his lifestyle, that qualified him as an apotheosized ancestor.

<sup>92</sup> See Edmund C. O. Ilogu, *Christian Ethics in an African Background: A Study of the Interaction of Christianity and Ibo Culture* (Leiden: Brill, 1974), 41; Emefie Ikenga-Metuh, "Ritual Death and Purification Rites among the Igbo," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 15, no. 1 (1985): 3-24; Geoffrey Parrinder, *West African Religion: A Study of the Beliefs and Practices of Akan, Ewe, Yoruba, Ibo, and Kindred Peoples* (London: Epworth Press, 1969), 116; James L. Cox, *Rational Ancestors: Scientific Rationality and African Indigenous Religions* (Cardiff: Cardiff Academic Press, 1998), 3555; Mercy A. Oduyoye, "Identity Shaped by the Ancestors: Examples from Folk Talk of the Akan in Ghana," in *The Bright Side of Life*, ed. Ellevan Wolde (London: SCM Press, 2000), 73.

<sup>93</sup> Mikelle Smith Omari, "Candomble: A Socio-Political Examination of African Religion and Art in Brazil," in *Religion in Africa*, ed. James Currey (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1994), 135-159.

<sup>94</sup> Bolaji Idowu uses the term 'orthodox' to describe a version of the legend which contends that Sango translated or ascended into heaven. I employ the expression 'non-orthodox' to describe another version of the legend from the orthodox version. See Bolaji E. Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* (London: Longmans, 1962), 90.

<sup>95</sup> A. L. Hethersett, *Iwe Kika Ekerin Li Ede Yoruba* (Lagos: C. M. S, 1911).

while he was residing in the forest that he ascended into heaven.<sup>96</sup> According to this view, Sango continues to rule with great power in the form of thunder and lightning from heaven. The non-orthodox version, on the contrary, claims that Sango committed suicide on realizing that one of his messengers who was fed up with his tyranny and cruelty conspired to kill him.<sup>97</sup> Adherents to the non-orthodox view maintain that the lightning and thunder that are associated with the wrath of Sango are the magical acts of some of his admirers who wanted to vindicate their respect for the controversial king.<sup>98</sup> For those who hold to the non-orthodox version, the admirers of Sango manipulate some diabolical powers in the forms of lightning and thunder to eliminate those who insist that Sango committed suicide, a type of death that is considered to be shameful in the Oyo's worldview.<sup>99</sup>

The origin of Sango worship has continued to elicit debate among some scholars of Yoruba indigenous religion. Akinwumi Isola, for example, argues that Hethersett's account of Sango's history is a total distortion.<sup>100</sup> He contends that Sango worship predates Babayemi Itiolu, the fourth Alaaḡin of Oyo, who Hethersett claimed became divinized as Sango.<sup>101</sup> According to Isola, Jegbe, a hunter and one of the children of Oodua established Oyo under the power of Sango. Therefore, Isola contends, "Since Sango was there at the foundation of Oyo" it is preposterous to argue that the fourth Alaaḡin was the king who became Sango.<sup>102</sup> It is important to note that Isola does not doubt that that people of Oyo deified their fourth Alaaḡin. For him, it is an important tradition in Oyo to deify each Alaaḡin. This is because Oyo

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<sup>96</sup> Idowu, *Olodumare*, 91.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>98</sup> Marc Schlitz, "Yoruba Thunder Deities and Sovereignty: Ara versus Sango," *Anthropos* 80, no. 1-3 (1985): 67-84.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 91; See also Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (London: SCM Press, 1973).

<sup>100</sup> Akinwumi Isola, "Religious Politics and the Myth of Sango," in *African Traditional Religions in Contemporary Society*, ed. Jacob K. Oluḡona (St. Paul: Paragon, 1991), 93-99.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

people believe that when an Alaafin is on the throne, “he incarnates Sango, and when dead, he is deified and becomes Sango”.<sup>103</sup>

The exact origins of Sango worship may have been lost in antiquity, but what remains clear is that many Yoruba people (and some people from other ethnic groups in Nigeria) continue to dread Sango, the god of thunder and lightning. And the majority of people continue to associate it with the fourth Alaafin of Oyo. My primary concern here is not to provide a historical explanation of Sango worship, but rather to articulate the potential christological problem that apotheosis poses to a Nigerian contextual Christology. It is not too difficult for many Nigerian people to accept that the historical figure, Jesus of Nazareth, is also God because already they do believe that God or gods can be incarnated in human bodies and that some powerful heroes or kings can become gods. The potential christological problem, then, is that many Nigerian people may construe Jesus as a deified hero or ancestor.

Here, William Horbury’s *Jewish Messianism and the Cult of Christ* helps to illuminate the potential perception of Jesus as a divinized hero.<sup>104</sup> Horbury argues in this work that the early Christian devotion to Jesus “bore a close resemblance to contemporary gentile cults of heroes, sovereign deities and divinities”.<sup>105</sup> After exploring some hymns and acclamations to Christ represented in the New Testament and in the writings of some Early Church Fathers, Horbury argues that the “praises and homage offered to Jesus ... seem to take place naturally in the series of Jewish royal and messianic praises....”<sup>106</sup> The main point of Horbury’s contention is that the worship of Jesus was not novel because the worship of heroes was already part of Jewish cultic culture. Larry Hurtado concedes that the “earliest Christian reverence for Jesus seems to have drawn upon pre-Christian Jewish tradition”, but insists that Horbury fails to note the differences between the Jewish people’s reverence for heroes, king, martyrs and Christians’ devotion to Jesus. He writes,

Horbury seems to me to blur unhelpfully the very real differences between ancient Jewish reverence for martyrs, messiahs, or other figures and the

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> William Horbury, *Jewish Messianism and the Cult of Christ* (London: SCM Press, 1998).

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 140.

distinctive pattern of devotion to Jesus in early Christian sources, and he fails in attempting to offer a historical explanation for the worship of Jesus. The fact is that we simply have no evidence that any figure, whether human or angelic, ever featured in the corporate and public devotional practice of Jewish circles in any way really comparable to the programmatic role of Jesus in early Christian circles.<sup>107</sup>

For Hurtado, the early Christian devotion to Jesus is rooted strongly in some religious or revelatory experiences.<sup>108</sup> He acknowledges that this devotion predicates on a “theological inference” but maintains that this theological conviction stems from the revelatory experiences of some individuals who have “encountered the risen and glorified Christ”.<sup>109</sup>

I will not examine in detail the conversation between Horbury and Hurtado in this work. Their main objective is historical and not a theological interpretation of the Christ-Event. The concern here is to articulate a potential christological *misunderstanding* of the person of Jesus Christ in Nigerian Christianity that might arise from a culture that divinizes heroes, kings, or ancestors. To construe Jesus as an apotheosized hero or ancestor, like Sango, is a misunderstanding of Jesus’ understanding of himself and his apostles’ perception of him as represented in the New Testament. Although there seems to be a similarity between the orthodox version of Sango ascension and the Christian understanding of the ascension of Jesus to heaven, there is a radical difference between the divinization of Sango and the Christian conception of Jesus’ divinity. Thomas Morris notes that the early followers of Jesus believed that “creaturely categories” were inadequate for conceptualizing him because of the extraordinary events surrounding his life and ministry.<sup>110</sup> For Jesus, as well as his early followers, the Christ-Event is a divine act of revealing or a radical reconstruction of how people previously perceived divinity and humanity.

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<sup>107</sup> Hurtado, *How on Earth Did Jesus Become a God? Historical Questions about Earliest Devotion to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 21-22.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> Thomas V. Morris, *Our Idea of God: An Introduction to Philosophical Theology* (Vancouver: Regent, 2002), 159.

## b. Quasi-Docetism

The name 'Docetism' derives from the Greek verb *dokeo*, meaning "to seem or appear".<sup>111</sup> Docetism is a form of high Christology that elevates Jesus so high that it is at the point of eclipsing his real humanity. Central to this Christology is an attempt to explain how a previously divine person can actually become a real human person.<sup>112</sup> This type of Christology existed in the second-century Gnosticism. "In the Gnostic Christology", as Pannenberg argues, "the divine Revealer was connected only temporarily with a human body and left it again before Jesus' death".<sup>113</sup> A Christology is docetic if it construes Jesus as a divine being who merely seemed or appeared to be a human being.<sup>114</sup> The key problem with Docetism is that it destroys the union of divinity and humanity in Jesus Christ. If the humanity of Jesus merely functioned as a garment housing a divine being, then it followed that the human experiences of Jesus, including his sufferings on a cross, were not real.<sup>115</sup>

The cult of masquerade in Nigeria teaches what can be described as quasi-docetic ideology: an ideology that is grounded in the assumption that a spiritual being can 'appear' in a seemingly human form when it visits the human world to bring messages from the ancestors or from the gods. The Igbo people of south-eastern Nigeria designate this spirit-human messenger as *mmawu* or *muo*, literally 'spirit' or conventionally 'the spirits of the ancestor' or the 'spirit of the dead'. The Yoruba people of western Nigeria have a similar understanding in the *Egungun* cult. They believe that *Egungun* are the spirits of the ancestors.<sup>116</sup> *Muo* and *Egungun* appear in the physical world concealed most times in scary costumes and masks.

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<sup>111</sup> Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 141.

<sup>112</sup> Colin Greene, *Christology in Cultural Perspective: Marking Out the Horizons* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2003), 17.

<sup>113</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus – God and Man*, trans. Lewis L. Wilkins and Duane A. Priebe (London: SCM Press, 1968), 125.

<sup>114</sup> Alister McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 356.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>116</sup> Wande Abimbola, "The Place of African Traditional Religion in Contemporary Africa: The Yoruba Example," in *African Traditional Religions in Contemporary Society*, ed. Jacob K. Olupona (St. Paul: Paragon, 1991), 51-58.

This is perhaps the reason many Nigerians generally refer to such spirit messengers as masquerades. Those who are initiated into the cult, however, know that the person inside the costume is an ordinary human being, although he may be highly skilled in magical practices. But some who are not initiated into the cult continue to dread masquerades, thinking that they are spirit beings that appear in seemingly human bodies. This is because the masquerades can speak human languages and eat human food. Undoubtedly, the cult of masquerade is disappearing from the cultures of Nigeria. But many people (both the initiated and uninitiated) continue to dread and honour masquerades to the extent that it is still considered to be an abomination to unmask them. In fact, it is also considered a taboo to reveal the identity or mention the name of the person in the costume. And in some societies it is an abomination for a woman to see a masquerade. If this happens, the head of the cult may require an enormous amount of money and livestock from anyone who reveals the identity of the person inside the costume in order to appease the spirit of the ancestor that is believed to have appeared in a human form.

In many Nigerian societies, masquerades appear during great festivals, such as the New Yam festivals, Christmas, New Year, Easter and so on.<sup>117</sup> Occasionally, they appear in times of great turmoil, during which they visit several homes and deliver messages they claim to have received either from the ancestors or from the gods. Sometimes they deliver messages of comfort and pronounce blessings upon the people they visit. Other times they warn the clan of an impending catastrophe. People in return show their reverence and appreciation to them by pouring libations or presenting them with beautiful gifts. Some people may ask the masquerades to take some messages back to their gods or their ancestors. Thus, masquerades function primarily as divine messengers. They also sometimes exhibit great magical powers to convince people that they are sent by the gods or ancestors.

As a revealer of divinity, Jesus functions as a bearer of a divine message. He reveals to humanity the love, wrath, blessing, comfort and the purpose of God for his creation. The life and ministry of Jesus Christ are intended to provide us with a sufficient knowledge of God and his redemptive purpose for the creation. A Nigerian traditionalist may, therefore, construe Jesus in the same way that he or she construes

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<sup>117</sup> The reasons masquerades appear during Christmas and Easter celebrations are primarily to collect gifts and money from admirers.

masquerades. This is because Jesus and masquerades at some levels seem to have similar functions: they are bearers of divine or spiritual messages. However, to construe Jesus as *muo* or a masquerade is a total misunderstanding of the person and function of Jesus. Two arguments can be presented to explicate this claim. Firstly, an *muo* is an ordinary human being who wears a mask and costume, who claims that the spirit of an ancestor has taken possession of him. Many Nigerian people today no longer see masquerades as the spirit beings or the spirits of ancestors who appear in seemingly human forms as traditionally construed, but rather as ordinary human beings in (sometimes scary) costumes. The appearance of a 'young people masquerade cult' in many Nigerian societies has contributed to the diminishing of the traditional understanding of some masquerades as spirit beings. As William Rea observes,

The most often stated view of egungun is that they are beings from heaven. There are differences in attitude to this. Clearly young men regard masquerades as metaphysically more powerful than others, but generally, even if there was full belief that there was no man in the mask, it no longer applies to young men's masquerading.<sup>118</sup>

Unlike the masquerades who are merely men but who purport to be spirit beings or the spirits of ancestors, Jesus embodies both divinity and humanity.

Secondly, there is a difference between the functions of Jesus and the functions of masquerades. One of the helpful ways of examining this difference is to explore the relationship between women and the masquerade cult. Apart from the fact that in many Igbo societies, women cannot be masquerades, it is also striking to note that women are not even allowed to see masquerades. The experience of Bess Read when she visited Nigeria to study *Mmanwu* festival in Enugu in 1993 highlights the gulf between women and the masquerade cult. As a researcher, Read anticipated that she would have a closer view of the masquerades. But her hope was crushed when Chief Maduakor, one of the organizers of the festival, told her that she could not see the masquerades because she was a woman. This is how she narrates her experience.

...when Chief Maduakor, one of the organizers arrived, he informed me that the *Mmanwu* Festival Committee would allow me to study the festival, even though

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<sup>118</sup> William R. Rea, "Rationalizing Culture: Youths, Elites, and Masquerade Politics," *Africa* 68, no. 1 (1998): 98-117.

I was a woman and should have nothing to do with masquerades, but there was a condition: the all-male committee has also decided that only my husband would be allowed on the stadium floor to take pictures of the maskers. Despite my status as a researcher, as a woman I would have to watch the festival from a cool distance in the stands – and no arguments on this point was permitted. Surprised and dismayed, I handed my cameras to Benjamin [her husband] and was escorted to a shaded seat in the VIP section.<sup>119</sup>

Some feminist theologians have pointed out the christological problems with some andocentric cultures and traditions of Nigeria.<sup>120</sup> Jesus the Christ stands opposed to the masquerades that do not associate with women. Through his actions and preaching, Jesus critiqued some Jewish derogatory attitudes toward women, even women who were considered to be terribly sinful.<sup>121</sup> Thus, unlike the masquerades that have no serious meeting point with women, Jesus breaks down the barrier that separates the ‘world of men’ and the ‘world of women.’

To conclude this chapter, the Revealer Christology model that is developed in this study should not be associated with quasi-docetism or apotheosis. Both represent some *potential problems* for a contextual Nigerian Christology because they can generate a total distortion of the meaning, identity and significance of Jesus Christ. Central to the concept of Jesus as a revealer of divinity and humanity is the claim that Jesus functions as a figure through whom the Nigerian Christians can have access to a true knowledge and relationship with God and their fellow human beings.

The purpose of this chapter, as already stated, is to construct a background on which to build the Revealer Christology model that will befit the contemporary Nigerian context. So far, I have explored the major issues that form the background. In the following chapter, I will proceed to examine the christological contents of the proposition that the Christ-Event interprets and mediates divinity and humanity for the purpose of enacting, sustaining, judging and rebuilding the relationship between God and humanity, and between human beings and the spirit being that many Nigerian Christians construe as malevolent.

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<sup>119</sup> Bess Read, “Playing with Prohibitions: Women, Agency, and Masquerades,” *African Arts* 31, no. 2 (1998): 71.

<sup>120</sup> See chapter two for the examination of some Nigerian Feminist Christologies.

<sup>121</sup> John 4.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### REVEALING DIVINITY: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF JESUS FOR GOD-TALK IN NIGERIAN CHRISTIANITY

Many contextual Christologies in Nigerian Christianity have remained largely a one-sided process. The theologians who construct these Christologies have continued to construe a contextual Christology as an undertaking that is geared towards an explication of the Christ-Event *in the light* of the worldviews and experiences of people. They see their task as primarily to present Jesus Christ in the ways that have direct bearing on the religious, cultural and socioeconomic experiences of the Nigerian people. The key question they are seeking to answer is: what would Jesus look like when he is explained in the categories that synchronize with the worldviews and experiences of the Nigerian people?<sup>1</sup> But the problem with doing contextual Christology in this one-sided way is that an adequate contextual Christology requires a double process that is strongly rooted in a mutual interaction between Jesus Christ and a given community. Therefore, a contextual Christology should not be a constructive process that seeks only to interpret the Christ-Event in the ways that synchronize with the worldviews and experiences of Nigerians. It should also be a constructive process of reinterpreting the worldviews and experiences of the people of Nigeria in the ways that synchronize with the meaning and purpose of the Christ-Event. In this sense, then, the contextual theologians need to recognize that it is inadequate and misleading to attempt to answer the question ‘what would Jesus look like when he is expressed in the categories that befit the worldviews and experiences of the people of Nigerian?’ in isolation from the question ‘what would the worldviews and experiences of the Nigerian people look like when they are examined in the light of the Christ-Event?’ The task of the theologian, therefore, includes both the explication of the Christ-Event in light of the worldviews and experiences of the people and also, more importantly, the examination of their worldviews and experiences in the light of the Christ-Event. The Revealer Christology model that is developed in this study explores and engages with these two integrally and indissolubly united aspects of contextual Christology.

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<sup>1</sup> See the introduction and chapter two.

The overarching thesis of this study is the contention that the meaning and significance of the identity and work of Jesus the Christ is embedded in his 'revealing' (that is, communicating, mediating and interpreting) of divinity and humanity or the spiritual world and the human world. In this chapter, I will examine the content of an aspect of this christological assertion; namely, the contention that Jesus is a revealer of divinity. The Revealer Christology model that I develop in this study does not operate from the assumption of a dichotomy between the spiritual world and the human world. Conversely, I build the model on the interrelatedness of the spiritual and the human worlds as they are construed in the Nigerian indigenous worldview.

I define the word 'divinity' in this study to include the spirit beings such as ancestors, angelic beings, Satan, evil forces or spirits, and God whom Nigerians variously refer to as the Supreme Being, *Allah*, *Olodumare* and *Chukwu*.<sup>2</sup> There are two principal reasons for this broad definition of divinity. Firstly, any Christology that limits the Christ-Event to Jesus' interaction with God and excludes his relationship with other spiritual beings is inadequate. Such Christology overlooks some important aspects of the life of Jesus Christ. He interacted, not only with God, but also with other spiritual beings. During his life on the earth, the ministry of Jesus extended to and was shaped by his views of God, angels, demons and Satan. Secondly, an adequate Christology needs to interpret the Christ-Event in the way that presents Jesus as the individual who can enable Christians to re-think their life's ultimate questions. These questions include: how does the spiritual world correlate to the human world? How can human beings enjoy a relationship with God? Thus, the Christology that is suitable to the contemporary Nigerian context should be broad enough to allow Jesus to communicate, interpret and critique the relationship between humanity and God and humanity and the spirit world. I will examine God-talk in contemporary Nigerian Christianity, focusing on the indigenous ideas of the Supreme Being and his relationship with the God of Jesus Christ. I will also

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<sup>2</sup> Nigeria is traditionally divided into three major ethnic groups; namely, *Igbo*, Hausa and Yoruba. The Igbo people sometimes refer to God as *Chukwu*, the Big Spirit or the Mighty Spiritual Being. *Olodumare* is the Yoruba name for God, and *Allah* is a general divine name that the Hausa people use for God or the Supreme Being.

explicate the claim that Jesus is a revealer of God, focusing on the ways the Christ-Event provides a window upon God's manifestations in human history.

### **A. Ideas of God in Nigerian Christianity and Indigenous Religions**

Where does one go to in order to gain access into the existing ideas of God in the indigenous worldview of Nigeria? One way to pursue this difficult task is to examine the names the Nigerian people ascribe to God. The reason for the use of this approach is primarily because 'naming' is a powerful tool many Nigerian people employ to describe the nature, character and actions of things, human beings and spiritual beings.<sup>3</sup> Nigerian theologians, of course, recognize the limitation of 'theological languages', and the limitations of such language in describing the Supreme Being or God. Culture and worldviews also complicate further the limitations of theological languages. For example, when a theologian speaks of God as 'he', and not as 'she', the theologian unveils immediately his or her cultural background, stylistic preference, and theological presuppositions and prejudices. In some Western theological circles, theological language has continued to pose great difficulties for theologians. Langdon Gilkey has observed that there are myriads of concepts and categories many Western Christian theologians employ when speaking about God. Broadly, these categories can be subsumed under personal – in the historical and ontic senses; and impersonal – in the ontological and metaphysical senses. Gilkey contends that there are compelling reasons to believe that these two categories have strong roots in Christian religion.<sup>4</sup> For many Nigerian theologians, human beings can only speak about God in an analogical sense. As the ultimate source of the world, human language cannot describe exhaustively the being and activities of God. All theological languages are human in nature, and not divine, and as such are subject to the limitation of human cognitive categories and capacities.

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<sup>3</sup> E. Bolaji Idowu, "God," in *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs*, ed. Kwesi A. Dickson and Paul Ellingworth (London: Lutterworth Press, 1969) 24.

<sup>4</sup> Langdon Gilkey, "God," in *Christian Theology: An Introduction to its Traditions and Tasks*, ed., Peter Hodgson and Robert King (London: SPCK, 1983), 76-77.

## 1. Naming 'God': Is the Christian God the Supreme Being of Nigerian Indigenous Religions?

In the late eighteenth century, Olaudah Equiano, a Nigerian who was sold to slave traders sometime around 1756,<sup>5</sup> wrote about the culture and religion of the Igbo people of eastern Nigeria.

As to religion, the natives believe that there is one Creator of all things, and that he lives in the sun, and is girded round with a belt, that he may never eat or drink; but, according to some, he smokes a pipe, which is our own favourite luxury.<sup>6</sup>

Although Equiano did not give an extensive description of the nature and character of this being the people of Igboland believe to be the "Creator of all things", he nevertheless provided a gateway into the indigenous theology of Igbo people. Today, many Nigerian theologians and historians of religions agree that the idea of a Supreme Being permeates the religious mindset of the people. In theological discourses, the problematic issue is not whether Nigerian people have a concept of God. The debate rather revolves around two concurrent issues. The first is the origins of this highly exalted Spiritual Being. Some scholars have argued that the idea of a Supreme Being is foreign to the indigenous religious thought of Nigeria. Others have rejected this assumption and have argued that the idea of the Supreme existed in Nigeria before the advent of Christianity and Islam. The second debate centres on the identity of the Supreme Being, and how this Being compares to the Christian God. While some argue that the Supreme Being is identical with the God of Jesus (the Christian God) others insist that the Christian God is different from the Supreme God of the indigenous religious thought. These dual issues are vital to a contextual Christology and merit a close examination.

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<sup>5</sup> James Walvin, *An African's Life: The Life and Times of Olaudah Equiano, 1745-1797* (London: Continuum, 1998), 3. Walvin has noted that Olaudah only adopted the "name 'Equiano' in the last decade of his life, when he had become a public and published figure". Before he adopted the name 'Equiano', Olaudah was known as Gustavus Vassa.

<sup>6</sup> Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*, ed., Vincent Carretta (New York: Penguin, 1995), 40.

## a. The Origins of the Supreme Being-Talk in the Nigerian Indigenous Worldview

According to J. Omosade Awolalu, the “existence of God is taken for granted” in Africa. This is so because the idea of God has been part of the indigenous worldviews of African peoples long before they came in contact with Islam or Christianity.<sup>7</sup> For him, it is “no exaggeration to say that atheism or agnosticism is foreign to an indigenous Africa”.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, he unleashed his frustration against and disagreement with

foreign researchers into African Religion who claimed that Africans did not know God before the advent of Islam or those who asserted that Africans could not comprehend God because they were not philosophical enough to be able to do so.<sup>9</sup>

But it is not only non-Africans that have argued in support of the foreignness of a Supreme Being as foreign to the indigenous African thought. In *The Supreme Being as Stranger in Igbo Religious Thought*, Donatus Ibe Nwoga, a Nigerian, argued that the Europeans introduced the concept of the Supreme Being to the Igbo people of eastern Nigeria.<sup>10</sup> For Nwoga, some scholars have come to accept, albeit wrongly so, “that the more civilized thing to have is the Supreme Being” in the religious and theological discourses of African indigenous worldviews.<sup>11</sup> He advances two major arguments to buttress his claim that the idea of a Supreme Being has not always been part of the Nigerian indigenous religious worldview.

Nowga’s first argument is that the idea of a Supreme Being arises from a monotheistic worldview, which for him, is strange to the indigenous worldviews of the Igbo people.<sup>12</sup> According to him, the concept of a Supreme Being emerges from the answer of the “Judeo-Christian-Islamic religious tradition” to the “question of

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<sup>7</sup> J. Omosade Awolalu, “God: The Contemporary Discussion,” in *God: The Contemporary Discussion*, ed., E. Ade Odumuyina (Ago-Iwoye: NASR, Olabisi Onabanjo University, 2005), xix.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Donatus I. Nwoga, *The Supreme Being as Stranger in Igbo Religious Thought* (Ahiazu Mbaise: Hawk Press, 1984).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 8.

order and meaning” of life.<sup>13</sup> He contends that the idea of a Supreme Being infiltrated into the religious thinking of Nigerians after they encountered the Western missionaries. Also, he argues that the idea of a Supreme Being has continued to exist in the worldview of Nigerians because of the works of some theologians who have shared the monotheistic view of God.<sup>14</sup> For him, the indigenous religious theology or understating of the spirit world is polytheistic and not monotheistic. This is evident, according to him, in the readiness of many Nigerian people to communicate with and worship many gods.

It is obvious however that the contemporary Igbo, while accepting the omnipotence and omnipresence, etc., of *Chukwu*, is still easily prone to seek other causes and other solutions for problems in his life. He is quite satisfied to give God his due at mass and service on Sunday and go home and give *Amadioha* his due. Is this to be explained as impatience and a return to trusted habits from the past, or as a continuation of a structure of pluralistic conceptualisation of causality, a validation under pressure of the tradition of polytheism in Igbo religious thought? In other words, does the present accreditation by scholars of Supremacy to Chukwu accord with the tradition of thought and practice among the Igbo?<sup>15</sup>

Nwoga’s response to his foregoing questions is that the Igbo people are prone to seek other gods because of the polytheistic nature of their indigenous religions.

The fact that many Nigerians are comfortable with multiple religious allegiances, or readily express their allegiances to the Supreme Being and to other gods is hardly a convincing argument against the claim that the idea of a Supreme Being has always been part of the structure of the indigenous religious worldview. Nwoga’s argument seems to operate with the following logic: the people whose indigenous religious worldview is monotheistic are not prone to seek other gods or sources of solution. Since the Igbo people are prone to seek other gods, it follows that their indigenous worldview is polytheistic and not monotheistic. This assumption is unwarranted. Even in the ‘monotheistic religions’, which Nwoga argues are responsible for the existence of the idea of a Supreme Being, some adherents of these religions sometimes consult other gods. For example, many Jews

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 8.

at different times abandoned Yahweh to worship other gods.<sup>16</sup> Whilst we can concede that some Nigerians' belief in the existence of many gods is a possible legitimate explanation for some people's multiple religious allegiances, it can be argued that the existence of such multiple allegiances does not necessarily warrant the claim that the idea of a Supreme Being is foreign to the indigenous religions.

It is also problematic to describe the indigenous religions of Nigeria as polytheistic. If by polytheism Nwoga means the belief in the existence of independent gods, it can hardly be an adequate description of the indigenous understandings of the Supreme Being and the lesser gods who are believed to be the creatures and the messengers of the Supreme. For example, Igbo people sometimes call *Anyanwu* (sun) the son of God or the Supreme Being.<sup>17</sup> Bolaji Idowu and Osadolor Imasogie have cautioned against ascribing polytheism to the indigenous religions on the basis that Nigerian people simultaneously believe in a Supreme Being and other lesser gods.<sup>18</sup> Idowu describes this religious condition as "diffused monotheism" and "implicit monotheism". He writes,

I modify this 'monotheism' by the adjective 'diffused', because here we have a monotheism in which there exist other powers which derive from Deity such being and authority that they can be treated, for practical purposes, almost as ends in themselves. The descriptive phrase 'implicit monotheism' will serve as well as 'diffused monotheism'.<sup>19</sup>

Imasogie explores the hierarchical structure of the traditional societies, arguing that it is precisely the idea of hierarchy that underlies the indigenous concept of the pantheon of divinities.<sup>20</sup> On the basis of this hierarchy, Imasogie describes the simultaneous beliefs in the Supreme Being and other gods as "bureaucratic monotheism".

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<sup>16</sup> Exodus 32.

<sup>17</sup> Stephen N. Ezeanya, "God, Spirits and the Spirit World, with Special Reference to the Igbo-Speaking People of Southern Nigeria," in *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs*, 37.

<sup>18</sup> Geoffrey Parrinder is among those who have described African beliefs in the Supreme Being and other lesser divinities as polytheistic. See G. Parrinder, "Theistic Beliefs of the Yoruba and the Ewe Peoples of West Africa," in *African Ideas of God: A Symposium*, ed. Edwin W. Smith (London: Edinburgh House Press, 1950), 236-237.

<sup>19</sup> E. Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (London: SCM Press, 1973), 135-136.

<sup>20</sup> Imasogie, *African Traditional Religion*, 23.

In order to retain monotheism and yet preserve its peculiar expression in the Nigerian traditional religion, this writer would suggest the phrase 'bureaucratic monotheism'. This has the advantage of pointing to the socio-political conditions which greatly influence the Nigerian religious expression of intrinsic monotheism which undergirds its religious experience.<sup>21</sup>

Whether or not polytheism and a modified version of monotheism describe adequately Nigerians' belief in the existence of gods remains problematic. But what is clear is that the indigenous religions provide for a concurrent belief in a Supreme Being and other gods. These gods, according to the indigenous worldview, own their existence to the Supreme Being.

When the people of Nigeria encountered Christian and Islamic religions that propagated the idea of an Almighty and Supreme Being who is the Creator of the world, they undoubtedly learned and borrowed some ideas from these religions.<sup>22</sup> However, the influence of Christianity and Islam on the indigenous idea of the Supreme Being should not be assumed, as Nwoga has done, to be an indication that Nigerian people did not have the idea of a Supreme God as part of their indigenous religious mindset. The majority of Nigerian theologians and historians of religion have continued to argue, and rightly so, that the idea of the Supreme Being has always been an integral part of the indigenous religions. As Francis Anyika contends:

It was not the Christian missionaries that brought the knowledge of the Supreme God to the Igbo of Nigeria. It was not the Europeans who engaged in secular business that brought it either.... The knowledge of the Supreme Being has from time immemorial been an integral part of Igbo traditional religious belief systems.<sup>23</sup>

The second argument that Nwoga advances in support of his claim that the idea of a Supreme Being is foreign to the indigenous worldview of Nigeria revolves around his view of *chi* which Nwoga claims *is* the Igbo god. He argues,

it is my thesis that the Igbo person's experience and consciousness of transcendent power operating in his personal affairs gave rise to and is subsumed in the concept of *chi*. Around this concept of *chi* he consolidated his expectations of life and fortune. It is this *chi* that is the god of the Igbo person. Each person has his god though it requires a certain level of maturity before a

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>22</sup> See Malcolm J. McVeigh, *God in Africa: Conceptions of God in African Traditional Religion and Christianity* (Cape Cod, Mass: Claude Stark, 1974), 16-24, 36-47.

<sup>23</sup> Francis Anyika, "The Supreme God in Igbo Traditional Religious Thought and Worship," *Communio Viatorum* 32, no. 1-2 (1989): 5-20.

person can set up a shrine to the god. In special circumstances, however, the shrine may be set up earlier. It is to this god that each head of the family is a priest, taking care of himself and his family by appeals to his *chi* and by sacrifices to the same *chi* when the need arises. It is at the altar of this *chi* that each person reinvigorates his existence and life and fortune.<sup>24</sup>

For Nwoga, then, if there is any idea of a god in the indigenous Igbo worldview, it is the personalized *chi*. He argues that the expression “*Chukwu* (Big God)” is a combination of *chi* (god) and *ukwu* (big). According to him, this was the big God of the people of Aro of eastern Nigeria.

When, however, the Aro went into the rest of Igboland to trade in slaves, they took with them, both for protection and as an additional business, the reputation of their *Chi-Ukwu* (Big Chi) thereby elevating *Ibini Ukpabi* to the status of the last arbiter, the god beyond whom there could be no surer answer to problems.<sup>25</sup>

Nwoga fails to properly account for the complexity of the word *chi* in Igbo religious and cultural thought. *Chi* has several meanings including “daylight”, “day”, “god”, “spirit”, “guardian spirit”, and the “essence of a divine being”.<sup>26</sup> *Chi* also could be a shortened form of *Chukwu* (Big God) and *Chineke* (God the Creator). Bartholomew Abanuka argues that the scholars who associate *chi* with the Supreme Being “confuse reality or being (being as such) with the innermost nature or essence of particular things”.<sup>27</sup> For him, *chi* technically means ‘real’ in the sense that “every particular thing can be said to be real”.<sup>28</sup>

*Chi* is that which can be predicated of all individual or particular things without exception. It is a general characteristic of all particular things. In this regard, *chi* has the same meaning as reality or being (being as such).<sup>29</sup>

Abanuka seems to overstretch the word *chi* beyond the level an ordinary Igbo can possibly recognize it. The problem with the philosophical meaning he ascribes to *chi* is that it can hardly fit into the normal usage of the word, and it is doubtful if this philosophical conception is part of the original idea of *chi* in the indigenous Igbo worldview. The overarching idea of *chi*, as an existent being, and when it is not a

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<sup>24</sup> Nwoga, *The Supreme God as Stranger in Igbo Religious Thought*, 33.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>26</sup> B. Abanuka, *Philosophy and the Igbo World* (Onitsha: Spiritan, 2004), 2.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

shortened form of *Chukwu* or *Chineke*, refers to a personal god or more appropriately a 'personal guardian spirit'. However, for the Igbo, as Emefie Ikenga Metuh has rightly noted, it is *Chukwu* (the Supreme, Big or High God) that gives *chi* to every person.

At the moment of his conception, God assigns to each person a 'Chi', an emanation of himself, which thereafter acts as a guardian angel of the person to whom it is assigned.<sup>30</sup>

Like *Chukwu*, *Olodumare*, created the universe, human beings and spirit beings. As Idowu observes,

Someone who has made a careful study of all the material which our sources afford will have no hesitation in asserting that *Olódùmarè* is the origin and ground of all that is. That is the fact which impresses itself upon us with the force of something incontrovertible. From all the evidence which we gather from the traditions, the Yoruba have never, strictly speaking, really thought further back than *Olódùmarè*.<sup>31</sup>

Byang Kato, although a critic of natural revelation, nonetheless concedes that the idea of a Supreme Being exists in the indigenous religion of the people of Jaba of northern Nigeria.<sup>32</sup> It is a mistake to see the Supreme Being as a foreign concept which Christianity and/or Islam introduced to the indigenous religions. The Supreme Being has always been part of the religious beliefs in the indigenous worldview.

The other theological tension concerns the relationship between the Supreme God of the indigenous religions and the Christian idea of God. It is to this theological debate that I will now turn.

## **b. The Supreme Being of Nigerian Indigenous Religions and the Christian God**

The debate on whether or not the God of Christianity is the same God of some other world religions is not only restricted to Nigerian theological discourses. In some Western societies too, such discussions have exerted heavy influence on the debate on Christian relation to other religions. For example, John Hick likens a rediscovering of the centrality of God in the religious pluralism debate to the

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<sup>30</sup> Emefie Ikenga Metuh, *African Religions in Western Conceptual Scheme: The Problem of Interpretation* (Ibadan: Claverianum Press, 1985), 27.

<sup>31</sup> E. Bolaji Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* (London: Longmans, 1969), 18.

<sup>32</sup> Byang Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa* (Kisumu: Evangel, 1975), 38.

Copernican revolution.<sup>33</sup> I will, however, concentrate on the impact of this debate on Nigerian Christology. The question, 'is the God of Christianity the same as the Supreme Being of the Nigerian indigenous religion?' is unduly broad and can be misleading. This is partly because the nature and the content of the comparison can vary from one theologian to another. What does the word 'same' mean in this context? Does it mean 'exact correspondence'? Or does it mean a 'seeming correspondence'? In the latter sense, the task of the theologian will be to find some similarities between the Nigerian indigenous idea of God (Supreme Being) and the Christian views of God. Some theologians have engaged in this task.<sup>34</sup> In the former sense, the theologian has the burden to demonstrate whether or not the indigenous idea of the Supreme Being in Nigerian thought adequately represents what Christianity teaches about God. But the problem with this task is that many Christian communities (including Nigeria) hardly agree on the same set of propositions or beliefs about God. And even when they have such common propositions or beliefs they have interpreted them differently and sometimes contradictorily.<sup>35</sup>

The idea of God, so long as God stands as the creator of the world and as its providential ruler, exists in Christianity and the indigenous religions. Therefore, we are compelled to grant that the God of Christianity is the God of the indigenous religions, however wrongly and inadequately the traditionalists have construed him. Undoubtedly, Christianity and Islam have in some ways influenced the indigenous idea of God. But a close examination reveals that the indigenous religions share some of the Christian views of God. According to the indigenous religions, the world is a direct consequence of God's creative act. The world is believed to be open-ended, allowing the lesser beings of the spiritual world and the Supreme Being to interfere and inform the lives of humans, animals, and all other things that exist in

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<sup>33</sup> John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths: Essays in the Philosophy of Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1973).

<sup>34</sup> See A. Olalekan Dairo, "God and Inculturation Theology in Africa," in *God: The Contemporary Discussion*, 227-236; J. Enuwosa, "Exploring the Nature of God in the New Testament for Meaningful Development in Nigeria," in *God: The Contemporary Discussion*, 212-226.

<sup>35</sup> A good summary of some different understandings of God is Veli-Matti Karkkainen, *The Doctrine of God: A Global Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004).

the human world. In some ways, as we will see later in this chapter, Christianity also teaches divine providence.

But the relationship between the Christian God and the Supreme God of the indigenous religions of Nigeria or other religions cannot be restricted to the notions of correspondence or sameness. This is because limiting the discourses of God (in the context of religious pluralism) only to an ontological resemblance or sameness can lead to an abstract metaphysical construction that obstructs the theologian from exploring the unique understandings that the Christ-Event provides to the identity, acts, and character of God. The indigenous views of God and Nigerian Christians' views of God must be subjected to a re-evaluation in the light of the Christ-Event.

Viewed from a christological perspective, the Christ-Event provides the framework for engaging with the mystery of God. This mystery interestingly permeates the thinking of Christians and adherents of the indigenous religions. For them, God is a mysterious being whose origin and identity partly escape human beings. As Abanuka comments:

One of the enduring difficulties in the discussions about God is that he is not to be conceived like other particular things, let us say a tree or a mountain, which stands out there. It is normal for one to say that he has seen or touched a certain tree or mountain. One could also say that he has seen God or touched a certain man. However, when one says that he has seen God or touched him, his hearers will, of course, raise their eyebrows – a sign that they will not understand the statement, 'I have touched God', in the sense in which one usually understands the statement, 'I have touched a tree'. Our concepts of material or sensible things differ from our ideas of immaterial or non-sensible beings, particularly God.<sup>36</sup>

He attempts to unpack the complexity that informs the images of God in the indigenous religions. This complexity equally shrouds the Nigerian Christians' understandings of God. As I have argued throughout this study, the indigenous worldview of Nigeria has a great influence on Christians' understandings of God more than Jesus' view of God. This is understandable since the indigenous cultures, religions, and tradition are part of the matrix from which many Christians develop their worldview. In chapter three, we saw that the majority of Christians desert Jesus Christ to find solutions to their problems when he is too slow, at least in their thinking, to solve their problems. I examined some of the causes of this desertion.

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<sup>36</sup> Abanuka, *Philosophy and the Igbo World*, 1.

Here it is important to highlight one of the possible causes of this phenomenon that arises from an indigenous religious thought. Nwoga correctly argues that the relationship between the majority of Igbo people and their gods is contractual.<sup>37</sup> The consequence of this type of relationship is that the majority of the Igbo people are willing to serve their gods on the condition that such gods function and act when the people want them to do so. Many people abandon the gods that fail to respond to their needs, and immediately replace them with other gods. This understanding of the human-divine relationship undoubtedly has permeated the knowledge of God in Nigerian Christianity.

God-talk is notoriously difficult. The Christ-Event does not provide us with an easy escape out of this theological dilemma. In fact, if a theologian approaches the Christ-Event with the intent to exhaustively grasp God, the Christology of the theologian is doomed to failure. This is because it is doubtful if the intent of Jesus Christ is to provide people with an exhaustive knowledge of God. But if such is not the intent of Jesus, what exactly is the purpose of the Christ-Event?

## **B. The Christ-Event and God-talk: Understanding the Relationship between Jesus Christ and God**

Every christological construction that seeks to understand the person and work of Jesus Christ ought to answer the question: what is the meaning and purpose of the Christ-Event? This is because we can only know and appropriate in our conditions the person and work of Jesus Christ by reconstructing and articulating the meaning and significance of the Christ-Event. Jesus Christ frequently spoke about his person and activities in the light of his mission or what the Father has sent him to do.<sup>38</sup>

A crucial question here is what is the task of Christology? In chapters two and three, I explored some of the major Christologies that exist in Nigeria. We saw that the Neo-missionary Christology construes the task of contextual Christology as delineating the superiority of Jesus Christ over some of the theological worldviews of some Western missionaries and over Nigerian indigenous religions and cultures.

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<sup>37</sup> Nwoga, *The Supreme God as Stranger in Igbo Religious Thought*, 30.

<sup>38</sup> John 17:3-5.

The culture-oriented theologians see the task of Christology as rediscovering the values of the indigenous religions and cultures and using them as christological resources for interpreting the Christ-Event. The liberation-oriented theologians and some of the grassroots Christologies emerging from the Nigerian Christian laity tend to move away from an abstract construction of the personhood of Jesus Christ. Many Christians seek for the practical implication of what Jesus Christ has done, and the responsibility of the Christian communities to participate in and to extend his work in the world. This understanding of the task of Christology is gaining prominence among some Western contextual theologians. To cite one example, Graham Ward contends that Christology should be driven by the question “where is the Christ?” and not by the question “who is the Christ?” or “what is the Christ?” For him,

The Christological enquiry... does not begin with the identity of the Christ, what in dogmatics is the nature as distinct from the work of Christ; it begins with an analysis of the operations whereby Christ is made known to us. And in being made known we participate in him.<sup>39</sup>

The task of Christology should be intrinsically connected to the meaning and purpose of the Christ-Event. As Daniel Migliore observes:

While the traditional distinction of person and work is used in Christology for convenience, it can be seriously misleading. We cannot speak meaningfully of anyone’s identity, and certainly not of Jesus’ identity, apart from that person’s life act.<sup>40</sup>

The interpretation and explication of the meaning and purpose of the Christ-Event is precisely the task of Christology. The person and work of Jesus Christ provide a window upon the meaning and significance of the Christ-Event for humanity and divinity. Since we do not have a direct access into the mind of Jesus Christ, we are left with the option of an indirect access through a careful interpretation of his words and actions. The task of Christology, therefore, is to discover the meanings and significances of the actions, words, and the entire lifestyle of Jesus Christ both for our contexts and beyond our contexts. The failure to approach the meaning and the purpose of the Christ-Event from a holistic perspective is the principal reason many of the existing Christologies in contemporary Nigerian Christianity have created a

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<sup>39</sup> Graham Ward, *Christ and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 1.

<sup>40</sup> Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 2d ed., (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 168.

problematic ‘ditch’ between the work and person of Jesus Christ. Some theologians have attempted to build a bridge over this ‘ditch’ by constructing christological models that primarily reflect what they think of Jesus Christ and what they want him to do for their communities, but failing to create enough space for the Christ-Event itself to inform and critique their Christologies.<sup>41</sup> In what follows, I will examine the ‘christological content’ of the claim that Jesus Christ is a revealer of God.

What then should be the task of a Nigerian contextual Christology? I argue that the task of Nigerian contextual Christology involves two related activities. First, the task of Nigerian Christology should be to explicate the nature and purpose of the Christ-Event in the manner that allows Jesus Christ to interact with the history and experience of the people of Nigeria, and in the manner that allows him to function as the medium through which they can experience a *unique* knowledge of and relationship with God, other spiritual beings and their fellow human beings.<sup>42</sup> Second, the task of a Nigerian Christology should also be to inquire into and examine the ways the indigenous worldviews and contemporary experiences of Nigerian people provide a window upon the task of interpreting and appropriating the Christ-Event in the twenty-first century. Understood in this way, rather than becoming an obstruction, an adequate Nigerian Christology must be able to interpret the Christ-Event in the manner that allows Jesus to effectively engage with and judge the changing spiritual, religious, socio-economic, and cultural exigencies of Nigerian people. It must also examine how Nigerians can embody the context of Jesus’ liberating presence.

Until now, I have only made a broad christological assertion – that Jesus reveals divinity – but have not articulated the content of this christological statement. What does it mean, in the Revealer Christology model as developed in this study, to say that Jesus Christ reveals divinity? Or since this chapter concentrates primarily on God, what does it mean to say that Jesus is a revealer of God? The remainder of this chapter will be an explication of this christological query. Suffice to state here that in the Revealer Christology model I am proposing, the contention that Jesus reveals

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<sup>41</sup> See chapter two.

<sup>42</sup> As the God Incarnate, Jesus Christ in an unprecedented way mediates between God and humanity.

God means that the Christ-Event communicates and interprets in an unprecedented way the identity (characteristics, purpose, activities) of God and *judges* and *reinterprets* human beings' previous knowledge of the identity of God. This understanding of Jesus Christ arises from the contention that the Christ-Event is the decisive act of God in history that reveals God's self. This revelation of God's self is complete and remains the parameters and the standard for judging any other manifestations of God in history.

### **1. Jesus the Revealer of God's Mysteriousness and Relationality**

Who is the God who has revealed God's self in the Christ-Event? If this question is to become relevant to the Nigerian context, we must approach it both from the christological parameter which the councils of Nicea and Chalcedon have created, and the context of life of Nigerians.<sup>43</sup> Uchenna Ezeh is the Nigerian theologian who has located his ancestor Christology within the parameters of the christological formulations of the early Christian church councils.<sup>44</sup> When we approach the question 'who is the God Jesus reveals?' from the perspective of the Christ-Event, we are compelled to contend that God has a 'divine face' and a 'human face'. Or to put it in another way, God is both divine and human. The paradox of the God-man suggests that Jesus the Christ possesses consubstantiality with human beings and consubstantiality with God: Jesus the Christ is true God and true man.<sup>45</sup> This christological tension is what underlies the Nicene and Chalcedonian christological formulations and confessions. A Nigerian Christology that is 'Christian' ought to engage with the classical confession of Jesus Christ as truly human and truly God. Whist a theologian needs not employ the highly sophisticated language of Chalcedon or Nicea, he or she will need to interact with the classical christological claim that Jesus is both consubstantial with humanity and divinity.

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<sup>43</sup> See chapter four.

<sup>44</sup> Uchenna A, Ezeh, *Jesus Christ the Ancestor: An African Contextual Christology in the Light of the Major Dogmatic Christological Definitions of the Church from the Council of Nicea (325) to Chalcedon (451)* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2003). For a critical examination and critique of Ezeh's ancestor Christology, see chapter two.

<sup>45</sup> Aloys Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition: From the Council of Chalcedon (451) to Gregory the Great (590-604)*, pt 1, vol. 2, trans. Pauline Allen and John Cawte (London: Mowbray, 1987), 4.

Ezeh recognizes this when he argues that his ancestor christological model seeks to “maintain that the incarnate state of the Son of God, as ‘true God and true man’” demonstrates that Jesus is ancestor par excellence.<sup>46</sup>

The mystery of the divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ denotes that God has not shied away from revealing God’s self to and initiating a relationship with human beings. God acts and speaks; he is self-revealing. Since God is really *other* and *outside* human preconceptions,<sup>47</sup> the possibility of undoing his otherness (so that human beings can know and experience him) solely depends on God’s self-disclosure. To put this in a common theological expression: it is impossible to know God without God unveiling God’s self. As Rowan Williams contends,

In spite of everything, we go on saying ‘God’. And since God is not the name of any particular thing available for inspection, it seems that we must as believers assume that we talk about God on the basis of ‘revelation’ – of what has been shown to us by God’s will and action.<sup>48</sup>

God controls and chooses “how to communicate with his creation and creatures” and to ensure that the process of such communication is in “accordance with the good pleasure of his will”.<sup>49</sup> In Christian thought, Jesus-talk is related to God-talk, and precisely to God’s self-disclosure. In this sense, Jesus Christ is the revelation of God in human history or is the human face of God. It is precisely on this ground that he is the revealer of God. It is in and through Jesus Christ that human beings can encounter God’s embodied presence, relationality and mysteriousness. And it is in and through Jesus Christ that we can examine and judge our previously held ideas of God’s mysteriousness and relationship with the spiritual and human beings.

At this point it is necessary to highlight once again what appears to be a ‘christological wishful thinking’ – an assumption that is devoid of any substantial content when it is closely examined. This is the assumption that Jesus Christ, as the one in whom God has manifested God’s self, is the easy route to escape the

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<sup>46</sup> Ezech, *Jesus Christ the Ancestor*, 252.

<sup>47</sup> C. Stephen Evans, *The Historical Jesus and the Jesus of Faith: The Incarnational Narratives as History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 180.

<sup>48</sup> Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 131.

<sup>49</sup> Yusufu Turaki, *The Unique Christ for Salvation: The Challenge of the Non-Christian Religions and Cultures* (Nairobi: International Bible Society Africa, 2001), 218.

difficulties and mystery of God-talk. 'God', for the people who think in this way, is too abstract and totally escapes the finite human mind as opposed to Jesus who had human properties. This is one of the reasons many Christians perhaps switch to God-talk when they discuss Jesus and vice versa.<sup>50</sup> This 'switching' is also not totally unconnected with the indigenous understanding of the complexity and transcendence of the Supreme Being and the need to approach him through the lesser divinities and the ancestors.

Two major problems with this assumption are noteworthy. First, the Christ-Event does not aim to bring a clearer picture or to explain exhaustively the mystery of God. As Rowan Williams has reminded us:

The potential strain upon our normal framework of talk about God, the degree of possible ambiguity and conflict, is unique. Jesus is God's 'revelation' in a decisive sense not because he makes a dimly apprehended God clear to us, but because he challenges and queries an unusually clear sense of God...; not because he makes things plainer – on the 'veil-lifting' model of revelation – but because he makes things darker.<sup>51</sup>

It follows that the Christ-Event aims to communicate and interpret for human beings God's initiative to involve God's self in a radical relationship with human beings, and also to judge their preconceived knowledge (whether or not they think of such knowledge as dim or clear, sufficient or insufficient) of God. Second, using Christology as an easy escape route from the complexity of God-talk is problematic because it may lead to an underestimation of the mystery of the Christ-Event. Those who assume that the Christ-Event is an easy way out of the mystery of God have forgotten too quickly that insofar as the Christ-Event is the revelation of God's self, it still remains an event that is largely beyond human comprehension. In fact, depending on how one approaches it, Jesus-talk can be more difficult than God-talk. For example, it may be more difficult to articulate how God has localized God's being and presence in Jesus Christ than to construe God simply as the Being who has not localized his presence in a single event, but rather in various events, cultures, and communities.<sup>52</sup> In addition, we can speak of the Christ-Event as consisting in a 'dual

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<sup>50</sup> In some cases, this switching arises from a trinitarian view of God.

<sup>51</sup> Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 138.

<sup>52</sup> See Idowu, *Olodumare*, 31.

mystery'. Since God is a mystery and humanity (as I will argue in chapter seven) is equally a mystery, it follows that the mystery of the Christ-Event sometimes can be more difficult to express than the mystery of God, for the mystery of Jesus Christ embodies, coalesces, communicates and interprets the mystery of divinity and humanity. The Christ-Event, for the Apostle Paul, remains a mystery that will continue to perturb all inquirers into the "unreachable riches of Christ".<sup>53</sup>

Some Nigerian theologians have attempted to explain the mystery of God in diverse ways. Idowu appeals to the universal revelatory actions of God. For him, these actions include God's manifestation of God's self in the act of creating or bringing into existence the world and its inhabitants.<sup>54</sup> The major theological difficulty with the appeal to God's manifestations of God's self in the act of creating is that it may provide some indications of the handiwork of God but will lack the capacity to lead human beings to a relationship with God. Kato appeals to the Scripture as the ultimate source from which people can know God.<sup>55</sup> The problem with restricting the knowledge of God to the Bible, as Kato and others have done, is that it leads people to conceive the Bible as *God's revelation* rather than as a witness or expression of God's revelation. But some others (theologians and the laity) have continued to seek for a true knowledge of God in the "saving presence of the God-man, Jesus Christ".<sup>56</sup> This latter approach is central to the Revealer Christology model that I develop in this study.

How do we understand the claim that Jesus reveals God? This question attracts another question that is more difficult to answer; namely, how is it that Jesus is a revealer of God? Specifically from a Christian position, the answer to this latter question is rooted strongly in 'faith'. In this context, 'faith' means "a commitment to and conversion to what the event of Jesus concretely enacts", to use the language of

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<sup>53</sup> Ephesians 3:8.

<sup>54</sup> Idowu, "God," 17-29.

<sup>55</sup> See Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*.

<sup>56</sup> Imasogie, *Guidelines for Christian Theology in Africa*, 15.

Rowan Williams.<sup>57</sup> Daniel Migliore also emphasizes the importance of ‘faith’ in Christological discourses. He writes,

*Knowledge of Jesus Christ is not simply ‘academic’ or historical knowledge; it is faith knowledge. Faith in Christ is not just knowing about him but trusting in him and being ready to follow him as the way, the truth and life.*<sup>58</sup>

‘Faith’ here does not mean believing what is not true or believing something that lacks warrant. It refers to an activity that is rooted in human cognitive faculty, involving the will, and propelled by the Holy Spirit.<sup>59</sup> To say then that confessing Jesus as ‘a revealer of God’ or that he is ‘true God’ is a statement of faith means that although such confessions are not rid of serious intellectual content, they arise primarily from a deep conviction in people propelled by God. When understood in this way, ‘faith’ should not obstruct serious exploration of what it means to confess Jesus as true God or the revealer of God. On the contrary, it would function as the backdrop of and inspire further inquiry into the God-human relation through the perspective of the Christ-Event.<sup>60</sup>

At the heart of the Christian faith is the claim that Jesus is the central and the ultimate point of mediation through which human beings can know, relate to and encounter God. And as Roger Haight points out, this claim is so rudimentary that “when asked about the nature and reality of God, the Christian can respond God is like Jesus”.<sup>61</sup> This claim, of course, does not mean that a “Christian’s knowledge and encounter with God come exclusively through Jesus Christ, but that he “supplies the central symbol and norm for understanding God”.<sup>62</sup> Although it is fundamentally a statement of faith, the claim that Jesus is a revealer of God, however, is not based on arbitrary assumptions. It is based on a substantial historical event of Jesus Christ.

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<sup>57</sup> Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 170.

<sup>58</sup> Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 167. Italics are in the original.

<sup>59</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 246-248.

<sup>60</sup> The phrase *‘fides quaerens intellectum’* (‘faith seeks understanding’) should inform serious inquiry into the significance of Jesus Christ for God-talk.

<sup>61</sup> Roger Haight, *Jesus Symbol of God* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2001), 88.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

Therefore, it is helpful to answer the question ‘how is it that Jesus Christ is a revealer of God?’ not in isolation from the question ‘how does Jesus Christ reveal God?’

Many Christians, like other Nigerians who are informed by the indigenous religious thought, seek to understand God’s being and ways and how God relates to the human world. Although in most cases, they prefer to talk about Jesus, ancestors, or the lesser gods at the time of crises: it is the quest to know the identity and work of God that largely underpins their religious thought. In this study, a ‘revealer’ is defined to include both *communicative* and *interpretative acts*.<sup>63</sup> As both the *communicative and interpretative acts*, the Christ-Event provides us with the opportunity to encounter God in and through Jesus Christ. The entirety of the life, words and actions of Jesus Christ reveal (and corresponds with the purpose and actions of) God. The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews makes this point:

In the past, God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representations of his being....<sup>64</sup>

In addition, the communicative and interpretative acts that are embedded in the Christ-Event provide the framework for understanding the significance of the person and work of Jesus Christ. In other words, by revealing God and other spiritual beings, Jesus Christ reveals also his own identity and work.<sup>65</sup>

Returning to the issue of how Jesus reveals God’s mystery and relationality, it is helpful to examine how Jesus expresses his relationship with God (the Father). This is important because in the indigenous worldview of Nigeria, God is somewhat a remote Supreme Being who relates to his created world indirectly through gods that he has created. Some theologians and historians of religion have reacted against the claim that the Supreme Being is not worshipped, insisting that he remains the object of worship even when some worshipers do not mention God explicitly when they pour libations and offer sacrifices. According to Stephen Ezeanya, during sacrifices

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<sup>63</sup> See chapter four.

<sup>64</sup> Hebrews 1:1-3, *NIV*.

<sup>65</sup> I will return to this contention later to examine its theological and christological implications.

God may be mentioned and his help invoked explicitly. Sometimes he is not mentioned at all; but whether he is mentioned or not, he is generally believed to be the 'ultimate recipient of offerings to lesser gods, who may be explicitly referred to as intermediaries'.<sup>66</sup>

When this understanding of the Supreme Being is examined in the light of the Christ-Event, at least one point of difference and conflict emerges. Whereas the people of Nigeria can have a *direct* experience of and relationship with God in and through Jesus Christ, they can only have an *indirect* relationship with God (as he is construed in the indigenous religion) for he remains too far away to reach directly. But in Jesus Christ God has come close to humans even to the point of becoming one of them. Consequently, they can relate to God directly through Jesus Christ.

Jesus presents a 'complex' picture of God. There are numerous biblical passages that give us clues as to how Jesus' construes his relationship with God. Here, I will examine some of his sayings that John has recorded in his Gospel. In John 14:7-9, John recorded a saying of Jesus that appeared to be theologically outrageous, at least in the ears of his immediate hearers. Jesus said to Thomas, one of his disciples, "If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on you do know him and have seen him". Amazed at these words, Philip, another disciple of Jesus, asked him to show them the Father. In response Jesus said: "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father". Undoubtedly, Jesus is here referring to God as his Father. But what exactly did Jesus mean by such seemingly outrageous statements? Certainly, he did not mean to express the non-corporeal ontological nature of God. If Jesus taught that "God is Spirit"<sup>67</sup> it followed that he did not intend the statement "anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" to mean that God the Father was corporeal.<sup>68</sup> Since Jesus was truly human, he was corporeal. And if he wanted the statement to mean the ontological being of God the Father who is 'Spirit' he would have expected his disciples to think of the Father as a corporeal being. But certainly that did not seem to be the case. In fact, if the Christ-Event tells us anything at all that is unique, it is that we are doomed to failure if we want to know what "God

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<sup>66</sup> Ezeanya, "God, Spirits and the Spirit World," 37.

<sup>67</sup> John 4:24.

<sup>68</sup> Note that the issue here is not whether or not God could become corporeal. But rather whether God (the Father) is corporeal in the sense we can speak of Jesus' corporeality.

is in himself” for all that we have access to “is the narrative of God with us”.<sup>69</sup> But this does not mean that our knowledge of ‘God with us’ (in and through Jesus Christ) is insufficient or unable to bring us to a close relationship and experience of God.

Since God the Father is not corporeal and Jesus is corporeal, yet Jesus claims that to encounter him is to encounter God the Father, we are faced with a most serious theological and christological problem. From the perspective of Jesus, then, the expression ‘God’ undergoes a radical change in meaning: God is an expression that refers to at least more than one being. ‘God’ as a ‘name’ or an ‘expression’ becomes even more complex when we also take into account the fact that Jesus speaks of his entire life and ministry as connected intrinsically with another being he describes as the ‘Spirit of God’ or ‘Holy Spirit’. For example, in one occasion he said to his accusers: “But if I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of has come upon you”.<sup>70</sup> It seems, then, that Jesus unveils that God relates to humanity as the Father, the Son of the Father (Jesus himself) and the Spirit of the Father.

The idea of ‘Trinity’, like any other theological language, must be approached with caution. For example, when theologians speak of the Trinity they enter into a complex discussion on the ‘essence of God’. But it is important to note that when theologians discuss the essence of God and describe God with the language of Trinity they are speaking particularly of “how they have come to know God”.<sup>71</sup> The theological implication of this subjective knowledge of God is that it may not completely capture the essence of God even though it is grounded in God’s self-revelation. Whilst God’s self-revelation ensures that human beings can encounter, experience and know God, it does not guarantee that human beings will always explain God’s being and activities correctly, exhaustively, and in an intellectually reasonable way.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 159.

<sup>70</sup> Matthew 12:28, *NIV*.

<sup>71</sup> Colin E. Gunton, *Becoming and Being: The Doctrine of God in Charles Hartshorne and Karl Barth* (London: SCM Press, 1978), 146.

<sup>72</sup> The earliest heresies (for example, the subordinationist view of Jesus Christ) show that some Christian theologians have explained the Trinity in different ways.

Some Nigerian theologians have not shied away completely from a serious engagement with the doctrine of Trinity. However, although they use the terminology ‘Trinity’ and speak of God in the trinitarian categories, they have not engaged in an in-depth discussion of the doctrine. In spite of the absence of an exhaustive discussion on Trinity in the writings of many Nigerian theologians, the concept of the Triune God continues to undergird most of the Nigerian contextual theologies and Christologies. For example, Imasogie has argued:

Christian theology cannot be universal...until every cultural group has brought its peculiar perception of God through Christ. It is only when the Word becomes flesh in every cultural human situation that the ‘unsearchable riches’ of God in Christ can be approximated, as much as it is humanly possible under the mediation of the Holy Spirit.<sup>73</sup>

I will not undertake an exhaustive discussion on the Trinity since it is not the primary concern of this study. It is, however, inadequate to discuss the God of the Christ-Event without approaching it from a trinitarian perspective. This is primarily because the trinitarian category introduces us to the mystery and relationality of God.

Kevin Vanhoozer has summarized the idea of Trinity in the history of Christian thought as consisting in “economic Trinity”, that is, the activity of “One God who relates to the world through Spirit and Son”, and “ontological Trinity”, that is, “the belief in the eternity of the triune God”.<sup>74</sup> In *The Trinity*, Karl Rahner warns against the danger of separating the Christian teachings on the ‘One God’ and the ‘Triune God’ or privileging the one over the three persons that form the Godhead.<sup>75</sup> He argues that for too long Western theologians, following St. Augustine, have leaned unduly towards the idea of ‘One God’ and have paid very little attention to the idea of the ‘Triune God’ or the three persons of the Godhead. Drayton Benner has argued recently that Rahner’s explication of his axiomatic unity between ‘economic Trinity’ and ‘immanent Trinity’ led him into some difficulties that he could have avoided if he had “adhered to Augustine’s view of a close but differentiated

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<sup>73</sup> Imasogie, *Guidelines for Christian Theology in Africa*, 86.

<sup>74</sup> Vanhoozer, *First Theology*, 54.

<sup>75</sup> Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel (London: Burns & Oates, 1970), 15-21.

relationship between immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity”.<sup>76</sup> Rahner may have accused St. Augustine of some of the ‘theological crime’ that he did not commit, as Drayton has argued. But we must acknowledge that Rahner has brought into light a theological truth that has been undermined and ignored; namely, the relationality that undergirds the persons of the Godhead.

The ‘ontology of substance’ or the metaphysical idea of the Trinity, which goes back to Tertullian who first constructed Trinitarian terminology,<sup>77</sup> “conveys more the sense of God as an independent, stand-alone being”, according to Carl Raschke,” than the sense of the “One who is genuinely triune”.<sup>78</sup> Raschke goes on to indict “Western Trinitarian doctrine” with the error of

giving lip service to the orthodox portrait of God as truly and paradoxically three-in-one [but] tended to give subtle preference to the ‘aseity’ or ‘in-himselfness’ of God, leaving critics of early Christianity to wonder whether the church really meant what it is said.<sup>79</sup>

Rahner’s *The Trinity* has been largely responsible for the desire of contemporary theologians to move away from an abstract construction of the ontological category of the Trinity and to focus on the development of relationality in the Godhead. The emphasis of this understanding of the Trinity has been on *persons* rather than on the *substance* of the Trinity.<sup>80</sup> Jesus emphasized and intended his hearers to know about the relationship that existed among the Father, the Holy Spirit, and himself which is geared towards a common goal: to provide humans beings with the opportunity to enjoy a relationship with God. As Clark Pinnock notes:

By the power of the Spirit, Jesus announced of a God who wills human wholeness. Therefore he went not to the righteous but to the sick and the outcast, to gather them under God’s wings. By the Spirit he set people free from

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<sup>76</sup> Drayton C. Benner, “Augustine and Karl Rahner on the Relationship between the Immanent Trinity and the Economic Trinity,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 9, no. 1 (2007): 25-38.

<sup>77</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 3rd ed (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 321.

<sup>78</sup> Carl Raschke, *The Next Reformation: Why Evangelicals Must Embrace Postmodernity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 152.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> See Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: HaperCollins, 1991); Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 192

entrapment. He brought them hope and liberated their relationships. Demonic powers were driven out, and creaturely life was restored. All these happened because the energies of the life-giving Spirit were at work in Jesus.<sup>81</sup>

The key difficulty for theologians who explicate the doctrine of the Trinity is how to bring together the ideas of substance and relationality (*perichoresis*) that are characteristic of the Godhead. Perhaps the nature of the mystery of the Trinity should force them to hold the two characteristics together. They must be willing to recognize that the oneness of the Trinity entails both the shared consubstantiality and relationality of the three divine persons – the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit.

Returning to Christology, which is the primary focus of this study, it is important to note that although Jesus claims to enjoy an unprecedented relationship with God the Father (even in the sense of possessing all the qualities of ‘God’), his primary task was not to prove to his contemporaries and disciples that he was God. It was rather to express the unique relationship that exists between them and the significance of that relationship for human beings.<sup>82</sup> In addition, his intention is to help his followers and contemporaries to know and acknowledge that he was the one who embodied the true knowledge, identity and character of God. Therefore, the sayings of Jesus that indicate his unique relationship with God such as “No one knows who the Son is except the Father, and no one knows who the Father is except the Son...”<sup>83</sup> and “I am in the Father and the Father is in me”<sup>84</sup> suggest he intends to communicate that his identity and work equally reveal the identity and work of God, the Father.

By revealing the identity, character and mission of God the Father, Jesus also reveals his own identity, character and mission. But we are to understand this ‘dual revealing’ to have arisen from a shared sense of origin and objective and relationship. Jesus Christ represented himself as the one whose mission and identity were consistent with the identity and work of the Father and the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>81</sup> Clark H. Pinnock, *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 88-89.

<sup>82</sup> See John 7:3; 9:4 and Luke 4:43.

<sup>83</sup> Luke 10:22, *NIV*.

<sup>84</sup> John 14:11, *NIV*.

Therefore, to encounter the identity and work of Jesus Christ is to encounter the identity and common purpose of the three beings that make up the Godhead as construed in some classical Christian doctrines.

In Christian theology, the mystery of God is also expressed by stating that God is partly knowable and partly unknowable. The meaning that Christian theologians ascribe to this grand theological statement varies from one theologian to another. Even outside of the Christian worldview, for instance, some adherents of the indigenous religions will normally concede the ‘ways of God or the gods are sometimes unknown’ to human beings. It is noteworthy that when some lay Christians or adherents to the indigenous religions admit that the ‘ways of God or the gods are sometimes unknown’ they do so from a practical vantage point and not from mere abstract academic perspective. In other words, the issue of God’s mystery arises normally from the context of real life issues or experiences and not from an abstract construction. It is usually during the time of great loss of life, or job, an unanswered prayer, and in great times of difficulties that most Nigerians, who seek for the help of God or the gods, will acknowledge in desperation that the ways of God are sometimes too complex for human beings to fathom. It is noteworthy that Jesus also discussed the mystery of God in practical contexts and not in abstract academic contexts. In the majority of occasions in which Jesus engaged in discussion about God, it was a practical concern that was aimed at the transformation of life that drove the conversation.<sup>85</sup>

By revealing the mystery of God’s nature, character, and purpose, Jesus Christ also reveals the mystery of God’s own being, character and purpose. Interestingly, the mystery of the identity of Jesus has been subsumed under the debate of the relationship between his human and divine natures. When some of the proponents of the earliest christological heresies attempted to articulate the relationship between the human and divine natures of Jesus Christ in precise terms, the result was a distortion of the balance that held together the unity and uniqueness of each of the natures.<sup>86</sup> The Chalcedonian council (in agreement with the Nicene

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<sup>85</sup> Mark 2:23-28; 10:24-27; John 4:4-26; 14:5-14.

<sup>86</sup> Arianism was the view that denied the full divinity of Jesus Christ. Docetism, on the contrary, was the view that denied the full humanity of Jesus Christ. The Nestorians denied the doctrine of *theotokos* and effectively introduced a dangerous dichotomy between the two natures of

Creed) responded to this imbalance by proposing that Jesus is truly God and truly man.<sup>87</sup> The New Testament writers also did not seem to bother themselves with the issue of explaining in precise ways how human and divine natures of Jesus related to each other. The major danger of trying to discover and explain in precise terms the relationship between the humanity and divinity of Jesus Christ is that such project will encounter stalemate and can lead to some avoidable confusions and heresies. In addition, such endeavour fails to acknowledge the purpose of the Christ-Event. In the person and work of Jesus Christ, God has in an unprecedented way undone his otherness for the purpose of uniting with and relating to human beings. The divine undoing of divine otherness is also a divine invitation to human beings to enjoy and learn from God who has created them. This invitation equally entails a rethinking on the part of human beings on their understanding of themselves, their world and the spiritual world. The consequences of this re-thinking will become evident as I explore God's acts of self-giving and self-dispossessing that are demonstrated in the Christ-Event.

## **2. Jesus the Revealer of God's Life of Self-giving**

The Christ-Event shows that God has *given* God's self as a gift to humanity. This is a christological assertion that upsets the notion of a powerful, self-gaining and self-promoting God that is prevalent in Nigerian Christianity. It also upsets the Nigerian indigenous notion of a remote and unforgiving Supreme Being who has withdrawn himself from direct communication with human beings because they violated his law.<sup>88</sup> The apostle Paul expressed God's self-giving and self-

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Jesus Christ. Eutychianism and monophysitism unduly subsumed the two natures of Jesus Christ and construed him as neither God nor human but a *tertium quid* (or a third thing). Adoptionism taught that Jesus, as human, was the Son of God by adoption. Theopaschitism is the view that teaches that it is impossible for Jesus to suffer because of the union of the divine and human natures of Jesus. For a good summary of the these heresies see Stanley Hauerwas, ed., *Heresies and How to Avoid Them: Why it Matters what Christians Believe* (London: SPCK, 2007)

<sup>87</sup> Although the Chalcedonian council did not explain the way in which the hypostatic union (of the two natures – human and divine – of Jesus) originate and relate to each other, it drew parameters on which to measure how the union cannot be expressed.

<sup>88</sup> Adeyemo has argued that African “Christians need to transmit the message that Africa’s broken rope between heaven and earth has been once and for all re-established in Christ. Africa’s God, who, as they say, withdrew from men to the heavens, has now come down to man [in the person of Jesus Christ] so as to bring man back to God”. See Adeyemo, *Salvation in African Tradition*, 96.

dispossessing in Philippians 2:6-11. In this passage, Paul incorporated into his letter a classical Christian christological ode.<sup>89</sup> This hymn, however, introduces a christological tension when it uses the Greek verb *kenoo* (to empty) to describe Jesus' act of self-giving.

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!<sup>90</sup>

According to Kato, this

moving hymn on the humiliation and exaltation of Jesus Christ the Lord...should motivate us to make the Gospel relevant in every situation everywhere, without comprising it.<sup>91</sup>

The need to contextualize the Christ-Event in Africa underlies Kato's contention. However, he does not go on to explicate how this christological hymn can function as a motivation for contextual theology or Christology.

Philippians 2:6-11 provides a window upon the earliest Christians' devotion to Jesus Christ.<sup>92</sup> More importantly, it provides the context for explicating the self-giving of God's self to humanity. Biblical scholars, philosophical and systematic theologians (particularly in the West) have wrestled with the theological and christological problem that this hymn has created. Systematic and philosophical theologians have concentrated primarily on the theological and christological import of *kenoo*. The concentration on the meaning of this Greek verb has resulted sometimes in abstract christological constructions that hardly have any bearing on the context of Philippians 2. Some of these christological constructions are exemplified in some 'kenotic theories'.<sup>93</sup> For Francis Hall, a 'kenotic theory' teaches that the

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<sup>89</sup> Gerald Hawthorne, *Philippians, World Biblical Commentary*, vol. 43, rev. ed. (Nashville: Nelson Reference and Electronic, 2004), 100.

<sup>90</sup> Philippians 2:6-8, *NIV*.

<sup>91</sup> Byang H. Kato, *Biblical Christianity in Africa: A Collection of Papers and Addresses* (Achimota: African Christian Press, 1985), 24.

<sup>92</sup> Larry Hurtado, *How on Earth Did Jesus Become a God? Historical Questions about the Earliest Devotion to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 84.

<sup>93</sup> This theory developed in the seventeenth century and revolved around the controversy between "Lutheran theologians based at the universities of Giessen and Tübingen". McGrath has

Divine Logos, in order to take up our nature upon Him and submit in reality to its earthly conditions and limitations, abandoned what was His before He became incarnate. In particular, it is alleged most commonly, that He abandoned what kenoticists call His relative or His metaphysical attributes, of omnipotence, omnipresence and omniscience, so as to be dependent upon the aid of the Spirit, wholly circumscribed by space, and deprived of knowledge.<sup>94</sup>

The question ‘of what did Jesus empty himself’ is what has informed the kenotic theory that Hall is describing. But there is something that is wrong with this line of questioning.<sup>95</sup> It presumes that the Second Person of the Trinity needed to empty himself of ‘something’ before he could become a true human being. In other words, the incarnation necessarily required the Son of God to empty himself of his divine attributes such as omniscience. Consequently, the question assumes that self-emptying entails self-limiting.<sup>96</sup> But is this understanding inherent in the christological ode of Philippians 2?<sup>97</sup>

The expression *heauton ekenōsen* (‘emptied himself’) in verse 7 should not be understood in isolation from other important expressions in the text such as *en morphē theou* (‘in the form of God’) in verse 6, *ouch hegēsato* (‘did not regard’) in verse 6, *etapeinōsen heauton* (‘humbled himself’) in verse 8, and *morphēn doulou*

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summarized the key issues of the controversy as follows: “The gospel makes no reference to Christ making use of all his divine attributes (such as omniscience) during his period on earth. How is this to be explained? Two options seemed to present themselves to these Lutheran writers as appropriately orthodox solutions: either Christ used his divine powers in secret, or he abstained from using them altogether. The first option, which came to be known as *krypsis*, was vigorously defended by Tübingen; the second, which came to be known as *kenosis*, was defended with equal vigour by Giessen”. See Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 377.

<sup>94</sup> Francis J. Hall, *Kenotic Theory: Considered with Particular Reference to Its Anglican Forms and Arguments* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co: 1898), 1.

<sup>95</sup> It is both exegetically and theological flawed and misleading. For a helpful survey and critique of the predominant views on the meanings and the ethical, christological and theological import of *kenoo* and *en morphē theou* among biblical scholars, see M. Sydney Park, *Submission within the Godhead and the Church in the Epistles to the Philippians: An Exegetical and Theological Examination of the Concept of Salvation in Philippians 2 and 3* (London: T & T Clark, 2007), 17-31; Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 111-114; Hurtado, *How on Earth Did Jesus Become a God?*, 97-104.

<sup>96</sup> According to Charles Gore, Jesus’ “supernatural knowledge” is rooted in “supernatural illumination” which is “analogous to that vouchsafed to prophets and apostles”. For Gore, Jesus’ knowledge is “not necessarily Divine consciousness”. Therefore, Jesus, in Gore’s thinking, lived in “apparent limitations of knowledge”. See Charles Gore, *The Incarnation of the Son of God* (London: John Murray, 1909), 147. This book was Gore’s Bampton Lectures at Oxford University in 1891.

<sup>97</sup> Theologically, if Jesus at any point in time (and in all possible worlds) emptied or relinquished himself of his divine properties he ceased at that point to be truly divine.

*labōn* (‘taking the form of a slave’) in verse 7.<sup>98</sup> When we locate the expression ‘emptied himself’ within the broader context of the passage, it is clear that Paul does not intend the expression ‘emptied himself’ to be understood in a literal sense, but rather in a metaphorical or poetic sense. In other words, the expression ‘emptied himself’ does not entail a literal ‘emptying or relinquishing of something’. Gerald Hawthorne has argued that *heauton ekenōsen*

is a poetic hymnlike way of saying that Christ poured out himself, putting himself totally at the disposal of people (cf. 1 John 3:16), that Christ became poor that he might make many rich (2 Cor. 8:9; cf. also Eph. 1:23; 4:10).<sup>99</sup>

According to Larry Hurtado, ‘emptied himself’ in the context of Philippians 2 involves “taking a slave-form and being born in human likeness – that is, as a human”.<sup>100</sup> The force of the ‘emptying’ in the passage of Philippians 2 does not lie in *what is relinquished*, but rather on *what is taken on*. “Here the humble initiative of the Son is to the fore: in the incarnation he ‘took on the form of a slave’ and would end his life on the cross”.<sup>101</sup> Therefore, *self-emptying* does not mean in this context self-limitation.<sup>102</sup> On the contrary, it is clear from the context of Philippians 2 that self-dispossession, self-sacrificing, self-humbling, self-denying, and self-giving are the underlying force of the incarnation and the cross-event.<sup>103</sup>

Some contemporary theologians, such as Paul Knitter, have moved away from the understanding of self-emptying of Jesus Christ as self-limitation to the concept of ‘self-opening’. Knitter writes:

Self-emptying, we are realizing, is self-opening to, self-relating to others. Without others, without those who are different (as different as creatures are from the Creator), kenosis is meaningless and, ultimately, impossible.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Hurtado, *How on Earth Did Jesus Become a God?*, 95.

<sup>99</sup> Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 117.

<sup>100</sup> Hurtado, *How on Earth Did Jesus Become a God?*, 96.

<sup>101</sup> Gerald O’Collins, *Incarnation: New Century Theology* (London: Continuum, 2002), 2.

<sup>102</sup> I will return to the christological implication of this claim later in this chapter when I examine the incarnation.

<sup>103</sup> Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 104, 106.

<sup>104</sup> Paul F. Knitter, “What about Them? Christians and Non-Christians,” in *Essentials of Christian Theology*, ed. William C. Placher (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 311-312.

Knitter's concern here is not Christology. It is rather the relationship of Christianity to other religions and how the relationship impacts the attitudes of Christians toward people of other religions. According to him, "*kenosis* calls all Christians to a greater openness" to truly respect "the otherness of the other".<sup>105</sup> Since my interest here is Christology, and not theology of religions, I will focus on the implication of 'self-emptying' for Jesus-talk and God-talk.

The incarnation demonstrates God's willingness to give God's self as a gift to humanity. By becoming human, by refusing to exploit for his own advantage his equality with God, by becoming willing to die on the cross, and by deciding to humble himself to become a human being, the Second Person of the Trinity reveals the depth of the Triune God's willingness to give God's self to humanity in order to be in fellowship with human beings.<sup>106</sup> In the incarnation, then, God made God's *unapproachable mystery* an *approachable mystery*. Whilst the Christ-Event remains a mystery, it nonetheless provides humanity with the opportunity to experience God's act of self-giving. The opposite consequence of this self-giving is self-gaining and self-accumulating. The God that Jesus reveals is the God of self-giving. This God is not the God who is preoccupied with power, wealth and who is invulnerable.

The prevalent idea of God in Nigerian Christianity is that of a Being who solves problems. As I argued in chapters two and three, most of the culture-oriented and the liberation-oriented Christologies existing in Nigeria assume that Jesus is the chief problem-solver who saves and liberates African peoples from the bondage of Western imperialism, colonization, theological and cultural hegemony. At the grassroots level, most Christians see Jesus Christ primarily as the one who liberates the oppressed from their oppressors and from their destitute condition, and who enriches and empowers people to fight against their oppressors (both spiritual beings and human beings). Whilst some of them emphasize the redemptive power of God to restore sinful human beings, the concerns of others are to experience 'divine breakthroughs' in business, health, studies, and wealth. The neo-missionary and the missionary Christologies present normally Jesus as the 'Saviour'. But we are to be

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 312.

<sup>106</sup> Philippians 2:6-11; Galatians 4:4-5.

suspicious of the expression ‘Saviour’ as it is used in some of these Christologies because they present Jesus (and consequently God) as the most powerful, the invulnerable, unchangeable, the untouchable, and as the one who reserves the power to send people to hell and to save people from hell, the most powerful being who blesses and ensures that people who believe in him enjoy a total wellbeing.<sup>107</sup>

The key issue here that needs exploring is the assumption that God is as powerful as he can possibly be and that he has empowered Christians to overcome their physical, spiritual, emotional and socio-economic problems. Chinedu Akunne in his *Having Power with God* contends:

Power is an essential virtue in our Christian life because without it, we cannot ...overcome all the vile of the devil in our life and in the world. It is required for us to be a witness for Christ, move in his strength, might and glory to his name. It aids us in overcoming our weaknesses, identifying ourselves as God’s sons’ and daughters (John 1:12). Power enables us to have access to God in knowing and possessing all that God has given us as a birthright. Power enthrones us to prince-ship, to be powerful and to prevail as God’s own.<sup>108</sup>

Adeboye essentially makes this same point when he writes:

If you have lost the power that God has given you, there must be a reason. You must retrace your steps. How did it happen? One thing we must not forget is that God never changes. Therefore, if there is any [change], it comes from us. The Bible tells us that the gifts and calling of God are without repentance. This means that once God gives you a particular gift or He gives you a share of His power, He has given it to you forever. He has no intention of taking it away from you, but you can throw it away.<sup>109</sup>

The contentions of Adeboye and Akunne are representative of how the majority of Christians connect God and power. Many Christian theologians as well as the laity assume that God is the most powerful. He is so powerful that he can ‘make an impossibility to be possible’.<sup>110</sup> Since God is very powerful, he is untouchable and has also made those who believe in him to become ‘untouchables’ to the evil people

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<sup>107</sup> See Adeyemo, *Salvation in African Tradition*.

<sup>108</sup> Paul Chinedu Akunne, *Having Power with God* (Lagos: Ikechbenjamin, 2004), 11-12.

<sup>109</sup> Enoch A. Adeboye, *God the Holy Spirit: Be a Conductor of His Power* (Largo: Springfield, 2002), 27. Adeboye is perhaps the most influential leaders of the Pentecostal movement in contemporary Nigeria.

<sup>110</sup> There is a popular song about Jesus and God in Nigeria which says: ‘Jehovah *Jireh*, *O mere* impossibility possible, *O mere* impossibility possible’. A literal translation of the song is ‘Jehovah the provider; he has made an impossibility to be possible; He has made an impossibility to be possible’.

and evil spirits. What Nigerian Christians need to recognize is that it is misleading for them to construe Jesus merely as the “the powerful wonder-worker who manifested God,” and to assume, as the Corinthians Christians did, that they are “simply continuing the power of Jesus in their own lives through pneumatic gifts and miraculous feats”.<sup>111</sup> The concepts of powerful Christians and a powerful God are indicative of the unwillingness of many Christians to become self-dispossessing and self-giving.<sup>112</sup>

The God who has reveals God’ self in the Christ-Event does not always come as the most powerful and untouchable, but sometimes as the most vulnerable and powerless because God has chosen the path of self-giving and self-dispossessing. In *Christ on Trial*, Rowan Williams reminds us of the unusual threat Jesus posed to the judges who presided over his case – a threat that is submersed in powerlessness. He writes,

It is not surprising, therefore that in all the Gospel narratives of the trial, Jesus’ declaration of the gulf between his world and that of his judges provokes insult and abuse. He is beaten, flogged and crowned with thorns precisely because he is powerless, because he does not compete for the same space that his judges and captors are defending, he is a deeper rival than any direct rival.<sup>113</sup>

Viewed from the Christ-Event, the God that Christianity should proclaim is the God who is self-giving; self-sacrificing, self-dispossessing, and not the God who is self-promoting, self-accumulating and self-gaining.

The incarnation, God’s self-manifestation and self-expressiveness in Jesus Christ, is God’s unprecedented self-manifestation in human history. In the indigenous religions, as we have seen, God is remote and people can encounter him indirectly through the ancestors. Conversely, the Christian God in and through Christ-Event has undone *God’s otherness* and is therefore reachable and approachable directly through Jesus Christ who shares consubstantiality with God. The Christian God has brought himself to ‘human level’ in the Christ-Event. Of

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<sup>111</sup> William C. Placher, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God: Christ, Theology and Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 11.

<sup>112</sup> See John C. McDowell, *The Gospel According to Star Wars: Faith, Hope, and the Force* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 23.

<sup>113</sup> Rowan Williams, *Christ on Trial: How the Gospel Unsettles Our Judgement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 69.

course, this does not mean that the God of Christianity is now only human; the God classical Christianity professes is a mystery, but this God has revealed himself in the human person – Jesus Christ. As Kato observes:

The incarnation itself is a form of contextualization. The Son of God condescended to pitch His tent among us to make it possible for us to be redeemed (John 1:14). The unapproachable Yahweh, whom no man has seen and lived, has become the Object of sight and touch through the incarnation (John 14:9; 1 John 1:1).<sup>114</sup>

The Christian God has come to the levels of humanity, by becoming human, in order to have a relationship with human beings. This is a theological consequence of God's self-revelation in Jesus of Nazareth. Paul's imagery of the 'unapproachable light' in 1 Timothy 6:16 to which Fubra-Manuel alludes attests to the dialectics of the complexity and revelation of God. As John McDowell argues:

1 Timothy describes God as dwelling 'in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see' (1 Timothy 6:16). Yet this Light itself nonetheless illuminates all things. All creation, all being, is therefore properly known in the light of God's self-revelation, and this act continually purifies and makes holy our sight and hearing (cf. 1 John 1:7).<sup>115</sup>

In Jesus Christ, we encounter the very presence of God. As Adeyemo argues:

[The Christian God] is the God who became flesh and dwelt 'among us' (John 1:14). This is the crown of God's revelation to man; God revealed not through His works and attributes, but in His in very essence.<sup>116</sup>

The Christ-Event reveals not only God's being, but also God's affection, vulnerability, love, and powerlessness of God and self-giving. This brings us to the issue of incarnation: "The Word became flesh and lived among us".<sup>117</sup> As long as Christians continue to confess God's self-revelation, the incarnation will remain a doctrine that is at the heart of Christianity. This doctrine is one of the key teachings that distinguish Christianity from other religions. It is a doctrine that provokes people to think of Christianity as exclusivist, scandalous and oppressive. In a sense, these indictments are legitimate for what Christians mean when they confess with some New Testament writers the incarnation, to use the words of Sallie McFague, God is

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<sup>114</sup> Kato, *Biblical Christianity in Africa*, 24.

<sup>115</sup> McDowell, *The Gospel According to Star Wars*, 35.

<sup>116</sup> Adeyemo, *Salvation in African Tradition*, 28.

<sup>117</sup> John 1:14.

“embodied in one place and one place only: in the man Jesus of Nazareth. He and he alone is ‘the image of the invisible God’ (Col. 1:15)”.<sup>118</sup> It is not surprising, then, that the doctrine of the incarnation has attracted several fierce criticisms.<sup>119</sup> In chapter four, we saw that the Nigerian indigenous religious worldview provides for the possibility of spiritual beings to become human and to appear in human forms. This is perhaps one of the reasons many Christians do not find it too difficult to believe that God has manifested God’s self in Jesus Christ, or that in the Christ-Event we encounter a union of divinity and humanity. Therefore, it is not necessary to devote much time to interact with some Western writers who have continued to deny the claim that Jesus Christ is fully human and God. However, suffice to say that this classical conception of the identity of Jesus Christ has remained crucially important in understanding God-human and God-world relations in Christianity.

It is important to note that Jesus and the writers of the New Testament have not provided, and perhaps did not aim to furnish us, with detailed information and the tools to test the process God employed in embodying God’s presence in Jesus Christ. Even the story of the virgin birth of Jesus Christ does not (and does not intend to) tell us exactly how God has become human in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>120</sup> The only thing Matthew and Luke tell us is that the Holy Spirit was involved in the whole process.<sup>121</sup> How then can we comprehend this divine activity? Should we seek to get beyond the New Testament testimonies to find out exactly how this divine activity has occurred? Nigerian theologians have not showed any interest in engaging in such enormous task. Cornelius Olowola, one of the contemporary leading theologians in Evangelical Church of West Africa, focuses on the importance of the

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<sup>118</sup> Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1993), 159.

<sup>119</sup> See for example John Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate* (London: SCM Press, 1993).

<sup>120</sup> Matthew 1:18-25; Luke 1:26-38. The story of the Virgin Birth does not suggest that the Second Person of Trinity became a Son of the Father during or after the Birth. It only informs us about God’s action of becoming a human being. Wolfhart Pannenberg is therefore misleading to argue that “the legend of Jesus’ virgin birth stands in an irreconcilable contradiction to the Christology of the incarnation of the pre-existent Son of God in Paul and John”. See *Jesus – God and Man*, 143.

<sup>121</sup> It is important to note that the involvement of the Holy Spirit in the process of the Christ-Event did not end with the conception of Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit was actively involved throughout the life and ministry of Jesus here on the earth.

virgin birth for Jesus Christ, and not on the process of the virgin birth. According to him, the virgin birth “affirms the genuine humanity of Christ”, “underscores the fact that Christ did not inherit a sin nature”, and “underscores [Jesus’] unique person and points powerfully to the messianic redemption” which he came “to accomplish by the same supernatural power of God”.<sup>122</sup> It is vital to state that any attempt to discover and explain exhaustively the process of the virgin birth, like the quest to separate the ‘Jesus of history’ from the ‘Jesus of faith’ is doomed to failure. This is because, like God-talk, an exhaustive knowledge of the process of the incarnation escapes human comprehension.

However, we need to be careful in speaking of the importance of the virgin birth for the humanity and ministry of Jesus Christ in the ways that Olowola has done. We need to avoid the temptation of elevating the humanity of Jesus to the point where he could no longer be recognizable as truly human. The incarnation, properly understood, requires that Jesus is truly human: the eternal Son of God took on the resources and prerogative of humanity while at the same time retaining his divine resources and prerogative.<sup>123</sup> Jesus Christ was truly human because he had all the properties that define and characterize humanity. Jesus had human body and human mind. He went through human developmental stages; he was a historical figure, a true human being. “Jesus grew in wisdom and stature and in favour with God and men”.<sup>124</sup> But the other side of the story, to use the words of John Milbank, is that the New Testament writers compel us to see Jesus not as an ordinary man, but as the “foreordained figure: the ‘Messiah’, ‘the Son of Man’, ‘the Son of God, or the *Logos* who has appeared in the world at the right time to accomplish human salvation”.<sup>125</sup> A

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<sup>122</sup> Cornelius Olowola, “The Person and Work of Christ,” in *Issues in African Christian Theology*, ed. Samuel Ngewa, Mark Shaw and Tite Tienou (Nairobi: E.A.E.P, 1998), 160.

<sup>123</sup> Thomas V. Morris, *Our Idea of God, An Introduction to Philosophical Theology* (Vancouver: Regent, 1991), 169.

<sup>124</sup> Luke 2:52, *NIV*.

<sup>125</sup> John Milbank, *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 146.

theological way to put this puzzling narrative (of the union of divinity and humanity in Jesus) is that Jesus Christ is *ontologically* a human being and a divine being.<sup>126</sup>

The exact ways in which the humanity and divinity indissolubly united, interacted and related in Jesus Christ will remain a mystery and a daunting puzzle for theologians. Human beings do not yet have the properties that can enable them to comprehend the entirety of divine activities; and it is doubtful if such capacity is designed by God to be part of the characteristic of true humanity. If we chose to stay within the boundaries that the New Testament has drawn, our task should be to discover the meaning and significance of the Christ-Event, and not to discover the exact content and procedures God employed in becoming a human being. We can also add that it is a fallacy to assume that the authenticity of a Christology depends on its ability to explain exhaustively the details of God's embodiment in Jesus of Christ. Rather than speculate about the procedures of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ, our primal task is to examine rigorously and articulate what God intends to say by revealing God's self in the way that human beings can recognize – Jesus Christ.

What comes out vividly from God's self-revelation in the Christ-Event, as I have argued persistently in this chapter, is God's act of self-giving. The Triune God has given God's self in order to unite humanity to God's relational life. Writing on the divine relationship that humanity experiences through Jesus Christ, Kathryn Tanner argues:

The Spirit radiates the humanity of Jesus with the Father's own gifts of light, life and love; and shines through him, not simply back to the Father, but through his humanity to us, thereby communicating to us the gifts received by Jesus from the Father. In this way, the gifts of the Father indwell us in and through the gift of the Spirit itself shining through the glorified humanity of the Son.<sup>127</sup>

By becoming human, God gave God's self, through the eternal Son, to humanity. This means that God revealed God's self as self-giving, self-surrendering, and as the

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<sup>126</sup> The *functional* understanding of the divinity of Jesus Christ states that "Jesus was God in the sense of being the locus of divine action". In other words, ontologically, Jesus was not God, but was an extraordinary human being because his "life became the 'place' where could act decisively to redeem the human race". See C. Stephen Evans, *The Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith: The Incarnational Narrative as History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 118.

<sup>127</sup> Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001), 53.

God who willing condescends very low to become a human being in order to have a relationship with his human creatures. By incarnating in Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, God makes God's self available for human beings to distort, insult and profane. The incarnation is the ground on which God-human relation reaches its full potential. Some African theologians such as Ezeh, Bediako, and Nyamiti have argued that although the incarnation is a particular event, it has a universal soteriological consequence.<sup>128</sup> Their contention, however, is set within the broad context of the compatibility of Christianity and African indigenous religions, particularly from the perspective of the ancestral cult.<sup>129</sup> Although we are to become suspicious of the ancestor christological model, as I have already argued, these theologians correctly note that the incarnation is the ground on which God relates to the whole humanity. It *costs* (in the sense of self-giving) God, not a prophet, but rather God's self, to enact a unique relationship in which humanity can enjoy divine love, friendship and fellowship. Whilst the ancestor christological paradigm can strike a familiar chord in the ears of some African peoples who are aware of the indigenous understanding of the 'mediatory function' of the ancestors, this model is christologically weak because it fails to adequately account for the self-giving of God's self in the incarnation of Jesus Christ.<sup>130</sup>

To conclude this chapter, it is important to emphasize that the Christ-Event provides some radical and unique interpretations of God. The Christ-Event portrays God in the ways that can make Christians and the devotees of the indigenous religions to become uncomfortable, for it does not present, communicate and interpret God as the untouchable, the most powerful, the self-accumulating, and utterly transcendent. The Christ-Event contradicts any Christology that is merely solution-oriented. Conversely, the Christ-Event interprets and communicates God as the self-dispossessing, self-giving, self-sacrificing, vulnerable and immanent. Jesus

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<sup>128</sup> See chapter seven for an extensive discussion on the salvific consequences of the Christ-Event.

<sup>129</sup> Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa*, 24-33; Ezeh, *Jesus Christ the Ancestor*, 198-203, 248-266; Nyamiti, *Christ as Our Ancestor*, 35-52.

<sup>130</sup> See chapter two for a critical examination of the ancestor christological model.

Christ has made God reachable, touchable, and recognizable. As S. Oyin Abogunrin notes,

The Christian understanding of history is that of a God who reveals Himself and acts in history. The God about whom Jesus spoke is the God who stoops down to seek out and to save man.... Biblical concept of God is that of a God who not only seeks and saves, but expresses Himself in the incarnation by coming to dwell among men in some tangible way. Otherwise, God will remain unknowable.<sup>131</sup>

Although we may not fathom the details of the incarnation, it introduces a radical and a paradoxical picture of God – God is not only transcendent but ontologically immanent; God is not only sovereign and powerful, God is also powerless and vulnerable; and God is not only the ‘other’ and unique in God’s self, God is also self-giving. These understandings of God are grounded in the Christ-Event. These representations upset any construal of Jesus and God merely in the categories of the powerful and remote, as in the indigenous religions. Through the Christ-Event, God has made God’s self available to humanity by giving God’s self in and through Jesus Christ. Consequently, to know Jesus Christ is to know God. This knowing is not merely in a cognitive sense, but involves “real, personal encounter with the risen Christ”.<sup>132</sup> Unlike in the indigenous religions where God only relates to the world through the lesser divinities, classical Christianity has continued to teach with the Apostles Paul and John, and some other writers of the New Testament that Jesus Christ is essentially God and that he is the human face of God.<sup>133</sup> It is equally important to note here that the incarnation is not the process of *human beings becoming God* (apotheosis), but rather *God becoming human*. This means that the incarnation cannot be equated with the indigenous concepts of the ancestor cult and apotheosis.<sup>134</sup> The relationship between Jesus Christ and some lesser spirit beings as construed in the indigenous religions and Christianity is a crucially important issue that a Nigerian Christology cannot overlook. This is the issue that I examine in the next chapter.

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<sup>131</sup> S. Oyin Abogunrin, *In Search for the Original Jesus: An Inaugural Lecture delivered at the University of Ibadan, on Thursday, July 16, 1998* (Ibadan: University of Ibadan, 2003), 33.

<sup>132</sup> Thompson, “Arianism,” 23.

<sup>133</sup> John 1:1, 14; Philippians 2:6-11.

<sup>134</sup> See chapter four for a detailed discussion on apotheosis.

## CHAPTER SIX

### THE MALEVOLENT SPIRITS IN THE CHRISTOLOGIES OF NIGERIAN CHRISTIANITY

In contemporary Nigerian Christianity, the belief in demons, evil spirits and Satan, particularly at the grassroots level, shapes the ways many Christians relate to and perceive the person and work of Jesus Christ. Any serious researcher of Nigerian Christianity will notice that many Christians talk about the power of Jesus Christ to defeat and destroy the works of the evil spirits, demons and Satan in their prayers, preaching, songs, and books. In this chapter, I will refer to these beings as the ‘malevolent or malign spirits’ because many Christians construe them most times as the messengers and sources of misfortunes and evil.<sup>1</sup> Given that many Christians locate some of their discussions on the person of Jesus Christ and the manifestation of his power in their lives within the context of the spirit beings they consider to be evil and wicked, any christological model that seeks to be relevant to them needs to engage with the Christians’ beliefs in the existence and activities of the malevolent spirit beings. The Christology should also engage constructively with Jesus’ attitudes toward Satan and demons and the import of his attitudes and conversation with these spirit beings for interacting with and critiquing the Nigerian Christians’ perceptions of such spirit beings.

Many theologians, as we see will later in this chapter, have continued to highlight the malevolent spirit beings in their works. What is lacking, however, is a constructive Christology that questions and seeks to discover and interact with the cultural, religious, and theological presuppositions that underlie the Nigerian Christians’ beliefs and attitudes toward the malevolent spirit beings.<sup>2</sup> The key

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<sup>1</sup> See chapter five for discussion on the complex relationship between benevolent and malevolent spirits as construed in some Nigerian indigenous cosmologies.

<sup>2</sup> Allan Anderson has argued that many African theologians “have downplayed the importance of the spirit word” and consequently have failed to deal constructively with the persistent physical and spiritual needs of the African peoples. See Allan Anderson, “African Initiated Churches of the Spirit and Pneumatology,” *Word & World* 23, no. 2 (2003): 178-186). In this chapter, I will probe some of the factors that inform spirit-talk and the views of the activities of the malevolent spirits in Nigerian Christianity. For example, why do many Christians shout the name of Jesus Christ and begin to pray to him for deliverance during a turbulent flight, when they are sick, and when their businesses are not progressing? And why do some Christians sometimes claim to have a ‘spiritual attack’ or an attack from an evil spirit when they are sick? How is it that they think in such categories? These are some of the questions that will shape my discussions in this chapter.

questions that I explore in this chapter are: how can the Christ-Event provide a christological context for interacting with the Nigerian Christians' perceptions of the influence of the malevolent spirit beings on the human world? And in what ways can the Christians' understandings of Satan and demons contribute to the task of contextualizing the meaning and significance of Jesus Christ? I will examine some Christians' perceptions of the identity of the malevolent spirits and the implications of their understandings of such spirits for a Nigerian contextual Christology.

The arguments that I examine in this chapter are: (a) the key factors that underlie most Christians' perceptions of Jesus Christ and how he relates to them and to the spirit beings they construe as malevolent are a solution-driven mindset and the indigenous view of the interrelatedness of the spirit and human worlds; (b) the Christians' preoccupation with the activities of the malevolent spirits is partly responsible for their failure to explore the contributions of humanity to the continuous existence of 'demonic' activities that have become part of the structures of many social and ecclesiastical systems in Nigeria; and (c) Jesus' conversations with demons and evil spirits provide a background for examining Nigerian Christians' understandings of the identity and functions of the malevolent spirits and for stimulating in them the desire and courage to become actively involved in the dismantling of all 'demonic' systems, cultures, and worldviews that promote injustice, oppression, poverty, subjugation and dehumanization.

This chapter is divided into two major sections. In the first section, I examine and critique some of the understandings of the identities of the malevolent spirits in Nigerian Christianity and Nigerian indigenous cosmologies. In the second section, I probe some of the ways many Christians respond to what they believe to be the activities of the malevolent spirits in their lives and their communities.

### **A. The Christ-Event and the Identity of the Malevolent Spirits**

I suggested in chapter five that one of the helpful ways to understand the highly populated pantheon of the spiritual world in the indigenous cosmologies is to categorize them into benevolent and malevolent. In spite of the deficiency of this classification (for example, some spirits which are generally believed to be benevolent can sometimes bring misfortunes in the form of punishments as in the

case of the ancestors), it remains one of the effective ways of examining the impact of the belief in the activities of evil spirits on the Nigerian Christians' perceptions of the identity and work of Jesus Christ.

The indigenous religions of Nigeria generally regard the Supreme Being as benevolent and somewhat remote. Consequently, many traditionalists (those who adhere to the indigenous religions) do not offer sacrifice regularly to him. Instead, they offer sacrifices regularly to several gods and ancestors because they believe that these beings are ontologically and relationally closer to human beings. This does not mean that the indigenous worldview teaches that the Supreme Being has abandoned human affairs.<sup>3</sup> Mircea Eliade's notion of a 'sky God' who is *too good* and *distant* to need any direct worship is problematic and does not represent the complexity that shrouds the Nigerian indigenous understandings of the relationship between the Supreme Being and the human world.<sup>4</sup> Some African scholars have criticized Eliade's concept of a remote sky God, describing it as a distortion of the predominant African indigenous views of the transcendence and immanence of the Supreme Being. For example, Bolaji Idowu argues that the reason many African peoples do not sacrifice regularly to the Supreme Being must be explained in the context of the indigenous cultural etiquette of approaching a king through an intermediary. The Supreme Being is the almighty king and cannot be approached directly. He can only be approached through intermediaries – some lesser spirit beings – created for the mediatory purposes.<sup>5</sup> Justin Ukpong accepts the mediatorial explanation of the irregularity of sacrifice to the Supreme Being but adds that this explanation needs to be located within the indigenous African "social etiquette" which teaches that a "king should not be approached or seen often" and not just to be approached indirectly through an intermediary.<sup>6</sup> Many Nigerian Christians, however, do not think

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<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Isichei, "Ibo and Christian Beliefs: Some Aspects of a Theological Encounter," *African Affairs* 68, no. 271 (1969): 121-134. See chapter five for an extensive discussion on the idea of the Supreme Being in Nigeria and some other African societies.

<sup>4</sup> See Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1958).

<sup>5</sup> E. Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (London: SCM Press, 1973), 65.

<sup>6</sup> Justin S. Ukpong, "The Problem of God and Sacrifice in African Traditional Religion," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 14 (1983): 201.

of the malevolent spirit beings primarily as God's messengers. They do not construe the malign spirits as the messengers who can bring God's good news for his people. On the contrary, many Christians see the malevolent spirits as the enemies of God and his people. Consequently, some of the Christians consider themselves to be at 'war' with the evil spirits and Satan.

The Christology designed for the Nigerian (and most African) Christians that hopes to be relevant to the people should not overlook and underestimate the malevolent spirits. The Kenyan theologian, John Mbiti, has cautioned scholars who undertake the task of interpreting and appropriating Jesus Christ in Africa to be aware that the

greatest need among African peoples, is to see, to know, and to experience Jesus Christ as the victor over the powers and forces from which Africa knows no means of deliverance. It is for this reason that they show special interest in the Temptation of Jesus and his victory over the devil through the power of the Holy Spirit. They know that the devil is not just an academic problem but a reality, manifesting his power through ways such as unwanted spirit possessions, sickness, madness, fights, murders, and so on.<sup>7</sup>

Mbiti's caution is appropriate because many African peoples have continued to believe in and to wage spiritual war against the malevolent spirits. To cite one example, on 6 June 2003, the officials of Ghana Airways invited a London-based Ghanaian preacher to Accra to "lead a healing and deliverance service aimed at exorcizing evil spirits from the affairs of the airline and releasing it from its predicaments".<sup>8</sup> The action of the officials of Ghana Airways will not strike most Nigerian and African Christians as 'strange' and 'weird'. This is because they believe that malign spirits haunt human beings and the human world, and that exorcism and the prayers aimed at liberating humanity from the snares of such spirits are appropriate and effective.

This belief is rooted partly in the indigenous cosmology which assumes that the spiritual and human worlds interpenetrate and also that the spirit beings can

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<sup>7</sup> John S. Mbiti, "Some African Concepts of Christology," in *Christ and the Younger Churches: Theological Contributions from Asia, Africa, and Latin America* (London: SPCK, 1972), 55.

<sup>8</sup> J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, "'Christ is the Answer: What is the Question?' A Ghana Airways Prayer Vigil and Its Implications for Religion, Evil and Public Space", *Journal of African Religion* 35, no.1 (2005): 93-117.

influence the lives and experiences of human beings.<sup>9</sup> It is also rooted in the assumption that Jesus Christ is a solution to the needs of human beings. But as I have consistently argued in this study, it is a distortion to perceive Jesus primarily as solution, especially when he is construed in the ways that are suggestive that he is merely a tool for human beings to use to solve their problems.<sup>10</sup>

Some theologians have attempted to convince some Western scholars that the Africans' belief in the impact of the malevolent spirit beings on the lives of people cannot be dismissed as mere superstition.<sup>11</sup> According to Oyin Abogunrin, an African worldview is similar to the biblical worldview, particularly the first-century Palestine in which Jesus lived and ministered. He argues that many Africans still live in the world of the New Testament – a world in which people believed in demons and a host of unseen supernatural powers.<sup>12</sup> The primary concern of Abogunrin is to show that no adequate African Christology can afford to ignore Jesus' interaction with some spiritual forces during his earthly ministry and the significance of such encounter for Africans. He maintains that when we present in the categories that underestimate his supernatural activities, he will “be meaningless and irrelevant in the African context”.<sup>13</sup>

It should be noted that Rudolf Bultmann's notion of demythologization is partly responsible for the decline in the discussions on demons and Satan among some biblical scholars.<sup>14</sup> Walter Wink has described the marginalized status of angelology and demonology in the West.

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<sup>9</sup> Anderson, “African Initiated Churches of the Spirit and Pneumatology,” 179. See also B. Abanuka, *Philosophy and the Igbo World* (Onitsha: Spiritan, 2004), 63-82; O. Imasogie, *African Traditional Religion* (Ibadan: University Press, 1985), 67-78.

<sup>10</sup> I will return to this issue later in this chapter.

<sup>11</sup> Some Asian scholars have also criticised some Westerners for their dismissal of demonic possession as superstitious and as a characteristic of non-civilization. See Israel Selwanayagam, “When Demons Speak the Truth! An Asian Reading of a New Testament Story of Exorcism,” *Epworth Review* 27, no. 3 (2000): 33-40.

<sup>12</sup> S. Oyin Abogunrin, *In Search for the Original Jesus: An Inaugural Lecture delivered at the University of Ibadan, on Thursday, July 16, 1998* (Ibadan: University of Ibadan, 2003), 39.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 43.

<sup>14</sup> Bultmann wrote: “No-one can use the electric light and the radio or the discoveries of modern medicine and at the same time believe in the New Testament world of spirits and miracles”. See R. Bultmann, *Kerygma and Myth*, ed. H. W. Bartsch (London: SPCK, 1953), 5.

Angels, spirits, principalities, powers, gods, Satan – these, along with all other spiritual realities, are the unmentionables of [the Western] culture. The dominant materialistic worldview has absolutely no place for them. These archaic relics of superstitions pass as unspeakable because modern secularism simply has no categories, no vocabulary, no presuppositions by which to discern what it was in the actual experiences of people that brought these words to speech.<sup>15</sup>

Since my primary focus in this study is the Nigerian context and the Nigerian Christians' demonology, and not the western contexts, I will not attempt to interact with the complex discussions on demonology in the writings of some Western theologians. However, it is important to point out that Wink raises a serious challenge for any Western scholar who dismisses without a critical reflection on 'demonic' systems that promote injustice and oppression in the world.<sup>16</sup>

Returning to the Nigerian context, I have argued that the majority of Christians continue to take Satan and evil spirits seriously in their exposition of the Christian gospel message and in their daily lives. And even beyond Nigeria, as Afe Adogame has noted, some Nigerian Christians living in Europe have continued to believe in the existence and influence of demonic and evil forces on their lives.<sup>17</sup> But what are the factors that propel these Christians to think in this category? We are to recognize that there are complex factors that are responsible for this state of affairs. In this study, I argue that a major factor is the indigenous understanding of the interrelatedness of the spiritual and human worlds.

It is difficult to ascertain the extent to which the biblical teachings on demons and evils spirits have shaped Christians' the understandings of the existence, identity and activities of malign spirits. This difficulty stems from the fact that many Christians have borrowed some ideas from the indigenous worldview as well as from the biblical teachings on Satan, demons and evil spirits. Therefore, it can be argued that the understandings of the existence of bad or evil spirits among Christians derive

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<sup>15</sup> Walter Wink, *Unmasking the Powers: The Invisible Forces that Determine Human Existence* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986); Graham Dow, "The Case for the Existence of Demons," *Churchman* 94, no. 3 (1980): 199-209.

<sup>16</sup> I have mentioned Wink here to highlight the difference in the ways people in the West and African peoples react to demon-talk.

<sup>17</sup> Afe Adogame, "African Instituted Churches in Europe: Continuity and Transformation," in *African Identities and World Christianity in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Klaus Koschorke (Harrassowitz Verlag: Wiesbaden, 2005), 235-236.

from the amalgamation of the indigenous religions and the biblical teaching on such spirit beings. It is necessary, then, to examine both the indigenous views and the biblical ideas of the malevolent spirit beings.

Many Christians see Satan as the head of the ‘satanic forces’ that include demons or evil spirits, and people who belong to occult groups.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, it will be helpful to examine the identity of Satan first before examining demons and other members of the ‘satanic family’ as construed by most Nigerian Christians.

## **1. Naming the Diabolic: Satan and Evil Spirits as construed in Nigerian Christianity**

### **a. Is Satan God’s *Eternal* Rival?**

Most Christians perceive and treat Satan as a powerful opponent of God whose mission is to compete with God. Some treat Satan in the ways that suggest that this spirit being is an eternal enemy of God who has the capacity to destroy permanently the good works of God when he is not constantly checked and bound. On the contrary, I will argue that this understanding of Satan can lead to a dangerous dualism that is strange to Jesus’ understanding of God’s activities in the world in which evil exists. I will contend that although Satan is a powerful spirit being who has the capacity to distort God’s sovereign rule over the world, he is not an eternal rival of God.

How exactly should we speak of and describe Satan?<sup>19</sup> Theologians disagree on whether or not Satan should be described in a personal or an impersonal way. In the *Fair Face of Evil*, Nigel Wright is wary of speaking of Satan as a personal being for fear of exalting him to the detriment of God.<sup>20</sup> According to Wink, speaking of Satan as a “literal ‘person’... who materializes in human form as a seducer and fiend” is a “Christian fantasy”.<sup>21</sup> On the contrary he argues:

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<sup>18</sup> In this study, ‘Satan’ is used as a proper name for the spirit being that Jesus construes as a distorter of God’s rule. I will also use the name ‘Satan’ interchangeably with the ‘Devil’ (*ho diabolos*).

<sup>19</sup> For an examination of the historical development of Satan-talk from the Old Testament time to contemporary era, see Kelly, *Satan: A Biography*.

<sup>20</sup> N. G. Wright, *The Fair Face of Evil: Putting the Power of Darkness in Its Place* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1989).

<sup>21</sup> Wink, *Unmasking the Powers*, 25.

Satan of the Bible is more akin to an archetypal reality, a visionary or imaginal presence or even experienced within. But it is more than inner, because the social sedimentation of human choices for evil has formed a veritable layer of sludge that spans the world. Satan is both an outer and an inner reality.<sup>22</sup>

For Wink, it is unnecessary to assume that Satan will often “reveal himself ...in individual cases,” for Satan has the capacity to infiltrate the structures and ideologies of all human societies.<sup>23</sup> Wink raises an important issue which I will explore later in this chapter. It suffices to note here that many Christians seem to concentrate on the spiritual attacks and spiritual forces but ignore the demonic indigenous traditions and other oppressive systems that are dehumanizing. For example, whereas many Christians are ready and willing to pray to bind demons and evil spirits, many of them fail to work to dismantle the indigenous views that promote oppression. What Nigerian Christians need to recognize is that Satan and demonic forces are subtler than possessing and tormenting a few individuals. Also they need to learn from Jesus and work to dismantle and criticize all forms of demonic systems that promote subjugation and oppression of human beings.

Many Christians in Nigeria construe Satan as a fallen angel and therefore address him as a personal spirit being. This understanding of Satan, as we will see later, derives from their interpretations of some Old Testament passages. In addition, their understanding of Satan as a personal being stems from some indigenous views of the malevolent spirits. The New Testament perceptions of Satan are not entirely strange to the indigenous worldview of Nigeria. The words *Ekwensu* (Igbo) and *Esu* (Yoruba) are used for Satan in the Igbo and Yoruba Bible. In the indigenous thought of Igbo and Yoruba, *Ekwensu* and *Esu* are believed to be evil spirits.<sup>24</sup> According to Idowu, *Esu* is “capable of promoting good and evil with what appears to be unrestrained licence”.<sup>25</sup> For him, *Esu* is “certainly not the Devil of the New

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>24</sup> Stephen N. Ezeanya, “God, Spirits and the Spirit World: With Special Reference to the Igbo-Speaking People of Southern Nigeria,” in *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs*, ed. Kwesi A. Dickson and Paul Ellingworth (London: Lutterworth Press, 1969), 30.

<sup>25</sup> E. Bolaji Idowu, *Olódùmarè: God in Yoruba Belief* (London: Longmans, 1962), 50.

Testament acquaintance, who is the opposition to the plan of God's salvation to man".<sup>26</sup> He, however, equates *Esu* with Satan, the tempter of Job, who in his thinking, is one of the "ministers of God and has the office of trying men's sincerity and putting their religion to proof".<sup>27</sup> Idowu concludes that *Esu*, is a minister of *Olódùmarè* (the Supreme God).

What we gather from our sources is that *Esu* is primarily a 'special relations officer' between heaven and earth, the inspector-general who reports regularly to *Olódùmarè* on the deeds of the divinities and men, and checks and makes report on the correctness of worship in general and sacrifices in particular.<sup>28</sup>

Again he writes,

There is an unmistakable element of evil in *Esu* and for that reason he has been predominantly associated with things [that are] evil. There are those who say that the primary function of *Esu* in this world is to spoil things. But even so, we cannot call him the Devil – not in the New Testament sense of that name. What element of 'evil' there is in *Esu* can be found also to some degree in most of the other divinities. The most that we can gather from the evidence of our oral traditions is that he takes mischief-making as his 'hobby' just as any person corrupted by power which seems uncontrolled may find sadistic relish in throwing his weight about in unsympathetic, callous ways.<sup>29</sup>

Idowu sees the indigenous religious worldviews of Africa as God-given and, as the Ghanaian theologian, Kwame Bediako notes, he consequently argues that there is continuity in the concept of God "from the African pre-Christian past into the present Christian experience".<sup>30</sup> This understanding of God's activities in the indigenous religions influenced Idowu's interpretations and application of the Christian teachings and Scripture to the African context. That he equates *Esu* with Satan in Job's narrative is indicative of his intention to demonstrate the similarity and compatibility of the Old Testament world and the Nigerian indigenous world.

In order for *Esu* to be the "inspector-general" of *Olódùmarè*, it is required that the Yoruba people view *Olódùmarè* as a king operating in a celestial court in

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>30</sup> Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and in Modern Africa* (Carlisle: Regnum, 1992), 281.

which *Esu* has an established role.<sup>31</sup> In the indigenous Yoruba worldview, as Imasogie notes, “*Olodumare* appoints the divinities, each to a particular department of nature over which he is the ruler and governor”.<sup>32</sup> According to Idowu, *Olódùmarè* is the “King with unique and incomparable majesty”.<sup>33</sup> In both Yoruba and Igbo cosmologies, these mysterious beings are military figures. This explains why Idowu describes him as the “inspector-general” of *Olódùmarè*. In some societies in Igboland, for example, in Asaba, the festival of *Ekwensu* is connected with the display of wealth and military prowess.<sup>34</sup> He is never considered to be the opponent of the Supreme Being. But whether or not *Esu* is the Satan who tried Job and destroyed his health and material possession is of very little significance. What is important to note, however, is that in the Yoruba worldview, *Esu* like *Ekwensu* in the Igbo worldview, is a mysterious and dreaded spirit. Also, the majority of Igbo and Yoruba Christians perceive *Ekwensu* and *Esu* as the biblical Satan.

However, it should be noted that (largely because of the translation of Satan as *Ekwensu* and *Esu* in Igbo and Yoruba Bibles) many Nigerian Christians have adopted the rendering of *Esu* and *Ekwensu* as Satan or devil, who they regard as the chief destroyer of human happiness and the antagonist of God. According to Precious Uzobike, a member of Christian Pentecostal Mission, Satan is the devil that causes Christians to “be spiritually sick”. For her, this is a dangerous state for a Christian to be because Satan exploits it and “attacks the Christian” and can afflict the Christian with “physical sickness such as barrenness, incurable diseases, stroke [and] epilepsy”.<sup>35</sup> Most Christians construe Satan as the enemy of God, and consequently

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<sup>31</sup> Kirsten Nielson has argued against the view that the kinship or royal council was the underlying imagery of Job’s prologue. Arguing for the image of a ‘father’, she asserts: “In contrast to earlier research, I believe that the author [of Job] does not depict an image of the heavenly council but the image of a father and his sons. But if these scene is not official meeting between the king and his functionaries but a meeting within the family; it is indeed not unreasonable that one of the sons should yield to his jealousy towards this absent – but in spirit always present – favourite son and attempt to discredit him, so as to be able later to supersede him in his positions”. See Nielson, *Satan – The Prodigal Son?*, 87.

<sup>32</sup> Imasogie, *African Traditional Religion*, 24.

<sup>33</sup> Idowu, *Olódùmarè*, 40.

<sup>34</sup> Isichei, “Ibo and Christian Belief,” 124-125.

<sup>35</sup> Precious Uzobike, interview by researcher, tape recording, Aba 24 May 2006.

the enemy of Christians. As a result, they see themselves to be at war with Satan and his cohorts. But for some, it is God, not Satan or human beings, who has initiated this war. Chinedu Ihesiaba represents the Christians who view the relationship between God and Satan in this way. He writes,

God had earlier than now; long ago, declared...war against Satan – the Devil and his co-workers. Seeing that Satan had seduced and destroyed man...God therefore declared war between man and Satan – the archenemy of God and man. ‘I will put enmity between you and the woman, between her offspring and your offspring. Her offspring will crush your head and you will bit his heel’ (Gen. 3:15).<sup>36</sup>

Since Satan is the “archenemy of God”, for Ihesiaba, he is undoubtedly the one that is responsible for the existence and multiplicity of sins in the world:

Satan introduced many tricks and wiles of which most of them [belong to the category] of possession of human body and soul.... He enslaves man and forces man to be under his authority and demonic operation whereby he inflicts sickness and other ailments of his victim.

Through all these wiles and tricks, he compels man to do...evil things which God forbids [such] as gay, lesbianism, worship of false strife, division, heresy, etc.<sup>37</sup>

A deceitful tactic of Satan, according to Jude Nwachukwu, a Roman Catholic priest, is to solve some problems for people (including Christians) who seek his help. This is a misplaced desire. The solution-driven mindset (which I have criticized in this study) is partly responsible for this understanding of Satan. Also this mindset has propelled some Christians to seek for Jesus’ power over Satan and demonic forces. Nwachukwu goes on to contend that Satan solves the problems of people with the intention to deceive and compel them to mistrust God’s providence. In an interview he said:

[In order] to get one hundred people, the Devil can save one life, or claim to save the life of one person. The person will become the agent [of the Devil] getting more people for him. So this is the problem we face here in Nigeria. We don’t have patience with Christ and we don’t believe. If we have faith and run to Christ with our problem Christ will solve it.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Ihesiaba Fidelis Chinedu, *Exorcism and Healing Prayer: Key to Victor – Healing Techniques, Deliverance, Curse Breaking, Liberation and Acts of Piety* (Aba: CARITAS, 2005), 63.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 65

<sup>38</sup> Jude Nwachukwu, interview by researcher, tape recording, Aba 22 June, 2006.

Here Nwachukwu is responding to the question ‘do some Nigerian Christians go outside of Jesus Christ to find solution when he seems not to solve them?’<sup>39</sup> He is certainly not a lone voice. Many Christians in Nigeria see Satan as a deceiver precisely because, in their thinking, he solves problems for people and hopes to compel them to believe that he has the power to solve problems more quickly than Jesus. An ECWA member, Benedict Ufomadu observes:

We have seen that in the native doctors’ place, Satan answers people quickly and immediately. When someone comes to him, he saves and does for the one what the person wants so that the person can believe in him.<sup>40</sup>

Joshua Balogun agrees but contends that the gifts of Satan bring more sorrow than joy. Balogun has written that prior to his conversion to Christianity, he was a member of “14 secret cults”, was once a leader of six of the secret cults, a dedicated Muslim, a wizard and a native doctor. After his conversion to Christianity in 1988, he soon became a very popular evangelist partly because while he preached he told the stories of his experience in occultism and how Jesus Christ delivered him. In his *Redeemed from the Clutches of Satan*, based on his experience as one who was formerly a native doctor, Balogun wrote:

You see, I want to point out to my readers how trickish Satan is. He will eat so deep into the hearts of men that they will never be satisfied. They will forget who they are, their parents, homes, and above all, their religion.... Many wealthy business tycoons...would be so debased and bewitched by Satan that they will come down to a little village of about six houses to a witchdoctor ...prostrate before his idols to seek for more power. Oh what a calamity! This dirty trickster of a doctor would prepare concussions from dead human flesh and bones, give them to eat and will charge them heavily for this evil power they had gotten. Sorry to say, most of these [people who get such powers] always die mysterious death. As their wealth came, so it would also go away. Satan is merciless.<sup>41</sup>

In the thinking of Balogun, native doctors are agents of Satan. They help to perpetuate Satan’s malicious activities by temporarily providing people with wealth, protection and power. Ihesiaba has warned that Satan is warring ferociously because

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<sup>39</sup> See chapter three for the discussion on Nigerian Christians’ attitude towards seeking solution outside of Jesus Christ.

<sup>40</sup> Benedict Ufomadu, interview by researcher, tape recording, Aba, 28 May 2006.

<sup>41</sup> Joshua Olajide Balogun, *Redeemed from the Clutches of Satan* (Lagos: Noade, n.d.), 12.

he knows that “he will soon be chained in hell”.<sup>42</sup> He also argued that Christians are to be on the watch for Satan is “roaming around the earth ...seeking someone he may mislead, one whom he may devour”.<sup>43</sup> Enoch Adeboye has warned Christians against the subtlety of Satan. “The devil can never speak the truth”, writes Adeboye, “but you have to be very careful because the devil knows the Bible and can quote it”.<sup>44</sup> The point that Adeboye is trying to make is that Christians need to be vigilant because Satan has the ability to deceive and to compel them to think that “God...is speaking” to them.<sup>45</sup>

Many Nigerian and African theologians see Satan as a personal malevolent spirit being. John Mbiti, a Kenyan theologian, speaks of Satan as a personal spirit being who is an arch-enemy of Jesus Christ. He writes,

From the temptations to the cross, Jesus is fighting against [the] powers of evil, Satan being the arch-enemy of the Gospel (Mat. 4:1-11). His healing of diseases and other infirmities, his casting out of demons, and even his raising of the dead, are acts which constitute the eschatological overthrow of evil powers by the Messiah....<sup>46</sup>

Byang Kato has noted that the Jaba people of northern Nigeria see Satan as a real and personal being.<sup>47</sup> In many Christian communities in Nigeria, Satan remains a significant and dreaded spirit who is capable of ruining and destroying the happiness of people by bringing sickness and other forms of horrendous misfortunes upon people. Many Nigerian theologians as well as the Christian laity have continued to view Satan as the antagonist and the chief opponent or the leader of the opposition group that fights and competes with God and Christians. Efe Ehioghae speaks for many Christians when he argues that the New Testament presents Satan “as the

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<sup>42</sup> Ihesiaba, *Exorcism and Healing Prayer*, 66.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Enoch A. Adeboye, *God the Holy Spirit: Be a Conductor of His Power* (Largo: Christian Living, 2002), 19.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> John S. Mbiti, *New Testament Eschatology in an African Background: A Study of the Encounter between New Testament and African Traditional Concepts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 140.

<sup>47</sup> Byang Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa* (Kisumu: Evangel, 1975), 37

leader of the ‘spiritual forces’ that are marshalled against God and his saints”.<sup>48</sup> This view of Satan is widespread in many African Christian communities. Undoubtedly, Mbiti represents many African theologians who consider Satan to be occupying “the leading position in the New Testament demonology”.<sup>49</sup> For Mbiti, in order to arrest the activities of the satanic forces, it is necessary to first of all capture Satan. And for him, “this is precisely what Jesus has done in his ministry, and most effectively [on] the cross”.<sup>50</sup> The majority of Christians have continued to construe Satan as a powerful leader of an opposition force who is fighting to mislead many people so as to bring such people under God’s judgment. I will argue, however, that viewing Satan as rival of God and the leader of the opposition group that competes and fights against God is misleading and inadequate. On the contrary, in the following section, I will propose that Satan is a distorter of God’s rule and a rival of God but not an equal and eternal being that competes with God.

#### **b. Satan as a Distorter of God’s Rule**

Satan is not an eternal opposite being that competes with God. Even if we see him as a fallen angel, he remains a creature of God and therefore is not an eternal rival of God. Such dualism, as I have already argued, is hardly traceable to Jesus Christ. Although Jesus directed some of his preaching, teaching and criticism against satanic and demonic forces, he maintained that God is the sole ruler of the creation. It is God that has authority over the creation and God has given this authority to the Son, Jesus the Christ.<sup>51</sup> I will argue that it is misleading to view Satan as an opponent of God in the way that suggests that Satan is an eternal competitor of God. The Christ-Event demonstrates that Satan is a ‘distorter’ of God’s rule and not an eternal spirit being that competes with God. The New Testament authors do not present their discussions on angels, demons and Satan systematically. Jesus’ discussion on Satan is not systematic in nature. “Jesus certainly took for granted the reality of Satan,”

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<sup>48</sup> Efe M. Ehioghare, “The Concept of God and Evil: A Christian Perspective,” in *God: The Contemporary Discussion*, ed. E. Ade Odumuyiwa (Ago-Iwoye; NASR, 2005), 432.

<sup>49</sup> Mbiti, *New Testament Eschatology in an African Background*, 141.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> Matthew 28:18.

writes I. Howard Marshall, “and sometimes spoke about him in a poetic manner....”<sup>52</sup> Perhaps Jesus needed not to undertake a systematic teaching on Satan, demons and the demoniac because such spirit beings were very familiar in his immediate Jewish context. But what is central in Jesus’ conversations with Satan and demons is his attempt to deconstruct, probe and reshape some of the predominant views of these spirit beings in his culture. In addition, it is important to recognize that Jesus’ ministry, broadly speaking, seeks to critique and dismantle all forms of worldviews that arrogate to human being or spirit beings the authority and sovereignty that belong to God alone. It also seeks to dismantle the cultures and beliefs systems that perpetuate dehumanization and oppression.

The identity of Satan is expressed in ‘his’ actions as the *chief distorter* of God’s rule and as the accuser of the people of God.<sup>53</sup> The debate on whether or not Satan is a personal independent spirit being does not bother the majority of Nigerian Christians as I have already argued. It should also be noted that Jesus does not discuss the mode of being of Satan but rather the activities of Satan. When approached from the perspective of the Christ-Event, it is more adequate to see Satan as a ‘distorter’ of God’s rule rather than as an eternal and equal opponent of God. Commenting on Mark 1:21-28, Morna Hooker writes:

Satan was in no sense regarded as God’s equal, but as one who had rebelled against his authority, who for the moment was allowed his way, but who ultimately would be crushed.<sup>54</sup>

The danger of construing Satan as an antagonist or an opponent of God is that some people will assign to Satan a status of an eternal rival – a position that he does not (and is never intended to) occupy. If Satan is the eternal antagonist of God, it follows that God sets God’s acts against Satan and relates to him in that capacity. This understanding of Satan will introduce a form of dualism which is strange to Jesus’ understanding of the God-creature relationship. Understood correctly, from the

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<sup>52</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text – The New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1978), 168.

<sup>53</sup> The use of masculine pronoun ‘his’ here is not suggestive that Satan is male. As a spirit being, Satan must be presumed to be genderless.

<sup>54</sup> Morna D. Hooker, *The Gospel According to St. Mark – Black’s New Testament Commentaries* (London: A & C Black, 1991), 61-62.

vantage point of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, Satan's task is to counterfeit and distort God's rule. Therefore, Satan is not a leader of an opposition group which competes with God's leadership. But although he cannot oppose God's rule as God's equal rival, it is important to recognize that Satan has the capability of distorting God's rule partly by arrogating to himself the status of an alternative ruler of the world. This is evident in the temptation of Jesus Christ at the beginning of his ministry. It could be argued that Satan desires for people to view him as the eternal opponent of God. By asking Jesus to "bow down and worship him" as a requirement for gaining earthly possessions, Satan aimed at distorting the sovereign lordship of God and wanted Jesus to see him as an alternative to and an antagonist of God.

We are to see Satan's claim of having an authority over the 'kingdoms of the world' as untruthful.<sup>55</sup> Contemporaries of Jesus Christ, including the writers of the synoptic gospels, may well have believed that the "entire populations of humans...have long been under Satan's authority", and that the majority of them are "willingly giving him glory and obeying his command".<sup>56</sup> Jesus, however, counteracts this belief. Throughout his earthly life, Jesus Christ demonstrated through some of his teaching and miraculous works that it is to him, and not Satan, that God has given a sovereign authority over the creation. We need to recall that as Jesus neared the end of his life on earth, he told his disciples "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me".<sup>57</sup> Interestingly, Jesus made this claim whilst commissioning his disciples to carry on with his ministry of restoration and reconciliation of humanity'.<sup>58</sup> This ministry of Jesus and its extension and continuation through the followers of Jesus Christ are aimed at reversing and exposing Satan's distortion of God's rule or kingdom.

Even in the Old Testament, the predominant view is that God is the sole owner and ruler of God's world. There is no indication that God has relinquished or

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<sup>55</sup> Mathew 4:8-10; Luke 4:5-7.

<sup>56</sup> Susan R. Garrett, *The Demise of the Devil: Magic and the Demonic in Luke's Writings* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 40.

<sup>57</sup> Mathew 28: 18, *NIV*.

<sup>58</sup> See chapter seven for an examination of the restoration and reconciliation ministry of Jesus Christ and how it affects humanity.

given to Satan the authority to rule over God's creation. Therefore, Satan's claim of having authority over the kingdoms of the world can not be true if we understand the claim to mean that he has a sole authority over the world. Marshall makes this point vividly:

Whereas in the OT this realm and authority lie in the hands of God, here the devil claims that it has been given to him and that consequently he has the right of disposal (cf. Mk16:14; Jn. 12:31; 14:30; 16:11; 1John 5:19; Rev. 13:2). Ultimately, however, the devil's claim was not true, nor was his word to be trusted.<sup>59</sup>

The responses of Jesus to Satan's requests during the temptation also indicate that Jesus was aware of the intention of Satan to distort the rule of God and also his intention to coerce him to believe that there was an eternal alternative opposition's rule to God's rule. Jesus reminded Satan that it was God alone who was the sole owner and ruler of the world, and therefore the only Being that was worthy of worship: "It is written: 'worship the Lord your God and serve him only'".<sup>60</sup>

Commenting on this response, Marshall notes:

God alone is to be worshipped, so that there can be no question of the Son of God offering worship and service to the devil, even for such an apparently great reward.<sup>61</sup>

As we have already seen, many Christians tend to see the relationship between Satan and God in a dualistic sense. On the contrary, I contend that an appropriate way to construe Satan, when viewed from the perspective of the Christ Event, is to see him as a distorter of God's rule and not an eternal rival of God. Satan could have achieved his aim to arrogate to himself the position of the leader of the opposition group that competes with and fights against God if he succeeded in coercing Jesus to think of him in such way. It follows that the Nigerian Christians and all people who think of Satan as the eternal antagonist of God have failed to learn from Jesus' attitude towards Satan. Such people gratify the desire of Satan to be seen as a powerful opposition leader against the leadership of God. Léon-Joseph Suenens has warned of the theological fallacy in construing Satan as the antagonist of God.

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<sup>59</sup> Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 172.

<sup>60</sup> Luke: 4: 8, *NIV*.

<sup>61</sup> Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 172.

The...dualistic Manichean speculations cautions us against all theories that present the Devil as a kind of Counter-Power, and Antagonist directly opposed to God, vying with him as an equal opponent in a battle.

For we must take care not to envisage Satan as an Antigod, thus making God and the Devil two contending absolutes: the Principle of Good grappling with the Principle of Evil. God is the one and only Absolute, sovereign and transcendent; whereas the Devil, a creature of God and originally good in his ontological reality, plays in Creation the role of a destructive, negative and subordinate parasite. He is the father of lies, of perversion.<sup>62</sup>

There is consensus among the majority of African theologians that the rule of God or the kingdom of God is the central theme in the ministry of Jesus Christ.<sup>63</sup> It should not be surprising then that Jesus tells about his (perhaps) inner experience and conversation with Satan in the ways that were designed to bring his readers to the knowledge of God's rule.<sup>64</sup> Against the popular views that among "many religious Jews" who believed that the world was "under the tyranny of Satan and evil", as Larry Hurtado notes, "Jesus' message signifies that God has begun to establish his rule" in the world.<sup>65</sup> The intent of Satan was to distract, distort, and coerce Jesus into losing focus on the very mission he has come to accomplish: to enact and announce the approaching of God's rule and the "accompanying convictions about his role as its herald, indeed, its dramatic vehicle".<sup>66</sup> To say that Jesus announced the approaching rule of God is not to suggest that prior to the Christ-Event God's rule was absent from the world. It is rather, as Mbiti argues, that "what in Judaism was yet to come has arrived in the person and work of Jesus Christ".<sup>67</sup>

Theologians disagree on the exact nature, content and character and even the meaning of the kingdom. Ukachukwu Manus argues that the nature of the kingdom

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<sup>62</sup> Léon-Joseph Suenens, *Renewal and the Powers of Darkness* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1983), 7.

<sup>63</sup> See Mbiti, *New Testament Eschatology in an African Background*, 40-44; Ukachukwu Chris Manus, *Christ, the Africa King: New Testament Christology* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1993), 147-167.

<sup>64</sup> It seems Jesus believed that Satan is a personal spirit being and not an abstract desire within human beings.

<sup>65</sup> Larry Hurtado, *Mark – New International Biblical Commentary* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1983), 22.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Mbiti, *New Testament Eschatology in an African Background*, 42.

of God is a mystery.<sup>68</sup> Walter Burghardt has reminded Christians of the progressive nature of the kingdom of God. In his thinking, the kingdom of God will “slowly but surely grow in grace and unity until the end of time when a dream divine will be realized and ...Christ the King” will present to his Father a kingdom in which peace and justice reigns.<sup>69</sup> Whatever meanings we ascribe to Jesus’ understanding of the ‘kingdom of God’, it is important to acknowledge that he wanted his hearers to know that God, through the Christ-Event, has enacted and engaged in a new relationship with humanity of which God remains the sole ruler. Although Satan distorts God’s rule by promoting and perpetuating evil in the world, Jesus counteracts Satan’s distortion of God’s rule by criticizing oppressive systems and healing the spiritual, physical and physiological wounds that Satan inflicts on people.

### **c. Satanic Forces as Tempters and Accusers of God’s People**

Whilst Satan is not an eternal antagonist of God, I argue that he is an accuser of God’s people and also a distorter of God’s rule. Satan has the power to compete with, distort, and influence people. Jesus makes this clear when he says to some of his listeners: “You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father’s desires”.<sup>70</sup> Jesus goes on to define the desire of the devil as consisting in distorting God’s truth that he mediates.<sup>71</sup> According to Russell, “Possession is one of the most common means Satan uses to obstruct the Kingdom of God”.<sup>72</sup> The indigenous worldview of Nigeria does not give a ‘pneumatological’ explanation of the origin of evil.<sup>73</sup> According to the worldview, human beings were solely responsible for their alienation from God. No fallen angels or any lesser spirit beings

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<sup>68</sup> Manus, *Christ, the African King*, 151.

<sup>69</sup> Walter J. Burghardt, “A Just King, a Just Kingdom,” *Living Pulpit* 15, no. 1 (2006): 9.

<sup>70</sup> John 8: 44, *NIV*.

<sup>71</sup> “He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is liar and the father of lies. Yet because I tell you the truth, you do not believe me!” John 8: 44-45, *NIV*.

<sup>72</sup> Russell, *The Devil*, 237.

<sup>73</sup> The expression ‘pneumatological’ is used here in a broad sense (not in the narrow theological sense of the theology of the Holy Spirit) to describe angels because of their nature as spiritual beings.

tempted and compelled them to disobey or distrust God.<sup>74</sup> According to Genesis narrative, the Serpent represents a mysterious source of temptation, which aimed at making Adam and Eve mistrust God. Some Christian theologians (due to the influence of the New Testament teachings on Satan) have interpreted the myth of the Serpent in the *Genesis-Fall* narrative as symbolic of a creaturely enemy of God; namely, Satan. The Old Testament represents Satan as a member of the ‘heavenly cohort’ and not an independently existing evil being. He is responsible for testing and coercing people to do evil. Wink notes, after examining 1 Chronicles 21:1, Zechariah 3:1-5 and Job 1-2, that in all these passages,

Satan manifests no power independent of God. Even when Satan slays, it is not Satan who does so, but God who slays through Satan.... God alone is supreme; Satan is not evil, or demonic, or fallen, or God’s enemy.<sup>75</sup>

For him, the notion of Satan as an ‘adversary’ must be understood in the context of a “faithful, if overzealous, servant of God, entrusted with quality control and testing”.<sup>76</sup>

“I call Jesus ‘the healer of multiple diseases’ and the ‘One who softens what is hard’. Anytime I call him, wonders happen in the town of Satan”.<sup>77</sup> This was the response of Shedrach Okonkwo, a member of Christ Holy Church, when he was asked about his favourite name for Jesus. When I probed him further and asked to him explain what he means by “*obodo Ekwensu*”, literally, the “town or village of Satan”, he said: “Satan has his agents, I mean, his demons, witches, wizards, and evil spirits” who help him to torment Christians.<sup>78</sup> Many Nigerian people believe that the world is filled up with spirit beings some of which are co-workers or agents of Satan. For them, the primary function of the malevolent spirits is to “make conditions

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<sup>74</sup> There are numerous Nigerian and African myths about human beings’ alienation from God. These myths are hardly popular today probably because of the influence of Christianity and Islam in Nigeria. Since this chapter is not dealing on human relationship with God, it will be unnecessary to discuss these myths here. I will, however, return to this topic in chapter seven. The basic texts that discuss these myths include Imasogie, *African Traditional Religion*, 32-33; Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 97-99.

<sup>75</sup> Wink, *Unmasking the Powers*, 14.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Shedrach Chukwuemeka Okonkwo, interview by the researcher, tape recording 25 June 2006.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

difficult for a person to fulfil his destiny”.<sup>79</sup> These spirits are innumerable and are capable of ‘possessing’ an individual either as a result of an inducement from the individuals or by the desire of the spirits to force themselves upon people, sometimes altering their consciousness.<sup>80</sup> For many Christians, demons and evil spirits (including spirits from the dead wicked people) aim to cause human beings unhappiness by executing Satan’s wicked desires. As Ihesiaba has argued:

Satan has legions of spirits who rebelled against God with him. They are sometimes called bad angels, demons, evil spirit, etc. These spirits work under Satan and they operate on his side. These are fallen angels deceived by Satan to work or carry out his evil acts against man. They are referred to as the agents of Satan and they are evil. Their duty is to possess a human body and torment it. They do the work and the will of their master – the Devil.<sup>81</sup>

Anyone familiar with the history of contemporary Nigerian Christianity will notice that there are numerous stories and testimonies by people who are delivered from demonic possession. Some of these people have gone ahead to become renowned evangelists or founders of churches. What is noteworthy about such testimonies of deliverance from demonic and satanic influences and attacks is that the truthfulness or untruthfulness of a given account does not destroy many Nigerian Christians’ belief in the existence of Satan and demons. Many of them continue to believe that demons parade everywhere and are constantly seeking the downfall of the people of God.

Most Christians hardly bother with the speculation about the origins of demons. They seem to be ‘certain’ about demons’ association with Satan. Demons are believed to be ‘fallen angels’ who followed Satan in disobeying God. The key biblical text that some of them employ to support this view is Ezekiel 28:11-19 – the prophecy against the king of Tyre. According to Ihesiaba, “Lucifer was created good

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<sup>79</sup> Imasogie, *African Traditional Religion*, 51.

<sup>80</sup> Vincent Crapanzano has described ‘spirit possessing’ as “any altered or unusual state of consciousness and allied behaviour that is indigenously understood in terms of the influence of an alien spirit, demon, or deity. The possessed act as though another personality – a spirit or soul – has entered their body and taken control. Dramatic changes in physiognomy, voice and manner usually occur”. See Crapanzano, “Spirit Possession” in *The Encyclopaedia of Religion*, vol. 4, ed. Mircea Eliade (London: Collier Macmillan, 1987), 12. See also James L. Cox, “Spirit Mediums in Zimbabwe: Religious Experience in and on behalf of the Community,” *Studies in World Christianity* 6, no. 2 (2000): 190-207.

<sup>81</sup> Ihesiaba, *Exorcism and Prayer*, 33.

and perfect without blame”, but after he “exalted himself and ...prided himself against his maker” he “was thrown out of the presence of God”.<sup>82</sup> Since Satan is created, Ihesiaba argues that he is not omniscient.<sup>83</sup> To make up for this, Satan relies on his demons to monitor Christians.<sup>84</sup> Ihesiaba challenges Christians to be careful not to attribute omnipotence to Satan for he “has limited power [and] therefore cannot be everywhere.”<sup>85</sup>

Another thing that is noteworthy is the abode of Satan and evil spirits. On this Ihesiaba has written:

After being thrown out of heaven, down to earth and seas, [Satan] now roams about the face of the earth, seas and the sky, from these areas he and his agents relentlessly carry out their functions of destruction.<sup>86</sup>

In the Nigerian indigenous worldview, the abode of the demons and evil spirits (or spirits in general) is ambivalent. The Igbo believe that the spirits live beneath the earth.<sup>87</sup> Idowu notes that the spirits of the dead who have not been accorded proper burial ceremonies, like the spirit of wicked people who are dead, become “wanderers of a place of no abode”.<sup>88</sup> The Nigerian indigenous worldview, as Imasogie observes, teaches that evil spirits hover around “everywhere and are particularly active at night”.<sup>89</sup> Some Nigerians believe that traditional healers can invoke some evil spirits and “send them to destroy their enemies”.<sup>90</sup> Evil spirits are also believed to have the power, when not bridled, to “make conditions difficult for a

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>87</sup> Ogbu U.Kalu, “Church Presence in Africa: A Historical Analysis of the Evangelization Process,” in *African Theology en route: Papers from the Pan African Conference of Third World Theologians, December 17-23, Accra Ghana*, ed., Kofi Appiah-Kubi and Sergio Torres (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979), 15.

<sup>88</sup> Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition*, 187.

<sup>89</sup> Imasogie, *African Traditional Religion*, 38.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

person to fulfil his destiny”.<sup>91</sup> The belief that evil spirits and demons operate at night explains perhaps why some Christians organize ‘night vigils’ or all night prayer services. Most of them believe that Satan and his demons have their meetings and execute their evil plans in the night. These Christians devote most of their time praying and pronouncing judgment on Satan and his agents during the night vigils. Most of them use Scriptural passages as their spiritual munitions to wage war against evil spirits.

In Nigerian Christianity, theological discussions on the influence of the malevolent spirit beings on the human world have followed two opposite directions. The first view dismisses the belief in the impact of the malevolent spirits on people’s daily lives as mere superstitions and as a consequence a fear.<sup>92</sup> According to Kato, the “dominating fears and superstitions concerning the spirit world are so dreadful” that what the Jaba people and all African peoples are in need of is “an instantaneous and complete cure...”<sup>93</sup> Kato’s objective is to discredit some of the traditional beliefs about the spirit beings.<sup>94</sup> For example, he considered the Jaba people’s traditional belief about the domain of Satan as superstitious. He narrated a story that he believed indicated that the “backbone of the superstition [about Satan] was broken” when the missionaries of the Sudan Interior Mission built their station around one of the purported domains of Satan.

The Spirits are always associated with ‘Kuno’, Satan. Jaba have never doubted the existence or activities of Satan. He is a real person to them. Iron smelting is an old trade in Jaba land.... Legends are told of the hearths being old mansions of Satan. Before the advent of missions, it was taboo to dig up any of the furnace hearths. People firmly believed that if a person dug out the hearth, he would become mad. When the Sudan Interior Mission built their station near one of the forbidden sites, and later had the occasion to dig up the ‘Satan house’, the local

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>92</sup> For a radical version of this view see I. M. Lewis, *Religion in Context: Cults and Charisma*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 39. For criticism against the hysterical explanation of the exorcism of Jesus Christ, see David Instone Brewer, “Jesus and the Psychiatrists,” in *The Unseen World: Christian Reflections on Angels, Demons, and the Heavenly Realm* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 133-148; Andrew Crislip, “The Sin of Sloth or the Illness of Demons? The Demon of the Acedia in the Early Christian Monasticism,” *Harvard Theological Review* 98: 2 (2005): 143-169.

<sup>93</sup> Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*, 38.

<sup>94</sup> Kato does not seem to deny the existence of all the lesser spiritual beings whether malevolent or benevolent as it is construed in the traditional religion.

people at Kwoi expected them to become mad. As this did not happen, the backbone of the superstition was broken. Very few people still believe in this 'Satan house'. But the belief in Satan as a person persists.<sup>95</sup>

I will return to critique this view after we articulate the second view that is undoubtedly the most popular in Nigeria. For many Nigerian Christians, the effects of the works of the malevolent spirit beings permeate and influence every aspect of the lives of human beings. Many of these Christians believe that every phenomenon in the human world is a result of an action or decision of some spirit beings. They construe their health, wealth, wellbeing, poverty, spiritual life and every aspect of their lives against the backdrop of the belief in the power and influence of the spiritual beings.<sup>96</sup> They see their lives most of the times as battlefields on which bad and good spiritual beings engage in warfare.<sup>97</sup> Consequently, many Christians see Christianity or the local churches as spiritual battlefields. As the bishop of Church of God Mission, B. C. Edohasim has noted:

Christianity is warfare.... The battleground of the devil is not in the political arena, but the church. There are people in the church who do not know that there is a warfare going on. Ironically, some may not know that the devil can turn an elder against the pastor, a deacon against the deaconess or the congregation against the church authority.<sup>98</sup>

Many Christians think of their existence, not only in relation to God, but also in relation to the lesser spirit beings, particularly the evil spirits. The issues of spiritual warfare that Paul speaks of in Ephesians 6 preoccupy the hearts of most these Christians so much that they constantly see themselves to be at battle with demons, Satan, and evil spirits. According to Edohasim, the moment a "person opens his soul to receive Christ as the Saviour", Jesus evicts Satan from the person's spirit. However, Satan "does not give up the battle". He continues to fight to regain control

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<sup>95</sup> Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*, 37.

<sup>96</sup> Many Nigerian Christians, devotees of the indigenous religions and Muslims continue to interpret the daily events in their lives from the perspective of the spirit-human interrelation. See Umar Habila Dadem Danfulani, "Factors Contributing to the Survival of the Bori Cult in Northern Nigeria," *Numen* 46, no. 4 (1996): 412-447.

<sup>97</sup> This view underestimates the roles of human beings in the perpetuation of 'demonic' activities in the world and the responsibility of human beings in dismantling the 'demonic' activities in their societies. The danger is that many Christians continue to look for the source of evil in the spirit world but ignore that some of their actions and beliefs that promote racism, sexism, poverty, dehumanization, and injustice are evil and demonic.

<sup>98</sup> B. C. Edohasim, *Don't Be Talked out of your Miracle* (Aba: Fraternal, 1999), 23.

over the person.<sup>99</sup> When a Christian is ill, barren, poor, and non-prosperous, he or she has an already-made answer to the source of these conditions he or she construes as misfortunes: Satan and his host of demons and evils spirits. This mindset propels some Nigerian Christians to pray to God for deliverance and to obtain a divine power to cast out the demons that are responsible for the majority of their misfortunes. This mindset equally sets the stage for Jesus Christ to battle against Satan and his demons with the intention to free his followers from their snares. Since many Christians believe that there is no aspect of their lives which Satan and his cohort cannot influence, they are compelled to surrender to Jesus Christ who they believe is able to confront and defeat Satan and his legion.

The foregoing two views of the ‘operation’ of the malevolent spirits are misleading and are incapable of generating an adequate and relevant Christology that probes and critiques Nigerian Christians’ understandings of the spirit world and the spirit beings. The interpretation of the belief in demon possession as mere anachronistic and superstitious risks a distortion and underestimation of the importance of Jesus’ understanding of his life and ministry in relation to the complex malign, dehumanizing and oppressive activities of demons and evil spirits. As O’Collins notes,

During his ministry Jesus presented his activity in the service of the present coming kingdom of God as a victorious conflict with satanic powers (e.g. Mark 3:27). He taught his followers to pray for deliverance ‘from the evil one’ (Matthew 6:13; Mark 14:38; Like 11:4). Jesus knew his redemptive work to involve liberation from sin, evil and a misuse of the law and to bring the gift of life in abundance.<sup>100</sup>

Jesus’ teaching, preaching, exorcism and other miraculous healings indicate, as Roy Yates has noted, “his Messianic assault on the powers of evil”.<sup>101</sup> The inability of many Nigerian contextual theologians to provide some constructive Christologies that engage with the beliefs in demons and other malevolent spirits is partly responsible for the readiness of many Christians to consult some diabolic and occult sources when they encounter persistent misfortunes. Prior to the advent of Western

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>100</sup> O’Collins, *Jesus Our Redeemer*, 116-117.

<sup>101</sup> Roy Yates, “Jesus and the Demonic in the Synoptic Gospel,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 44, no. 1 (1977): 39-57.

Christian missionaries in Nigeria, the indigenous religions “had provisions for spiritual healing, casting out of inimical spirits...and material prosperity”.<sup>102</sup> The indigenous ways of dealing with evil spirits vary depending on the prescriptions of a diviner or a native doctor. When a person suspects the activity of an evil spirit or wicked people, the normal thing to do is to consult a diviner to find out what and who is responsible for the misfortune.<sup>103</sup> Many Christians visit prophets and prophetesses to seek knowledge about the sources of their problems. The credibility of these diviners, native doctors, prophets and prophetesses is not the concern of this study. What is of interest here is the willingness of many Christians to consult such people in order discover the causes of and the possible solutions to their misfortunes. Some diviners sometimes may require the person to “make sacrifices to appease the evil spirits”.<sup>104</sup> Imasogie notes that whilst the sacrifices “may not be expensive”, they “are irksome”.<sup>105</sup>

Some churches which belong to the category of ‘African Independent or Indigenous Churches’ (AICs) and most Pentecostal churches rose quickly to fame in Nigeria partly because they provided a practical ‘Christian’ response and ‘procedures’ for dismantling and exorcising evil spirits from the lives of people. But the view that sees misfortunes in human life as a consequence of the actions of the malevolent spirits can become an escapist notion that diminishes human responsibility and overemphasizes the activities of the malevolent spirits.<sup>106</sup>

From the perspective of the Christ-Event, Satan has the power to influence the people of God. One example is the apostle Peter. Jesus rebuked Peter for speaking and acting under the influence of Satan. On hearing Jesus’ prediction of his death, Peter “took him aside and rebuked him”.<sup>107</sup> Jesus responded immediately with

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<sup>102</sup> George O. Folarin, “Contemporary State of the Prosperity Gospel in Nigeria,” *Asia Journal of Theology* 21, no. 1 (2007): 70.

<sup>103</sup> Imasogie, *African Traditional Religion*, 38.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> It is also an attempt to render Christian spirituality a matter of management and technique.

<sup>107</sup> Matthew 16:22, *NIV*.

a sharp warning: “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men”.<sup>108</sup> One of the key ideologies that Jesus aims to dismantle here is the idea of self-accumulation. In the Nigerian context, this idea is subsumed in the desire of many Christians to seek solution from Jesus Christ. Peter seems to desire for Jesus to complete his ministry without experiencing the suffering and humiliation of the cross. Although, as I will argue in the next chapter, the cross of Jesus Christ exposes the wickedness and evil actions of humanity, Jesus’ stern rebuke demonstrates that he considers Peter’s easy escape mindset (crown without the cross) to be in contradiction with the acts of self-giving and self-sacrificing which are central to the Christ-Event. What many Nigerian Christians who have allowed the solution-oriented mindset to shape their Christologies have overlooked is that Jesus Christ preaches self-giving and not self-accumulation. In some cases, when Nigerian Christians pray to Jesus to deliver them from the attacks of the evil spirits so that they can bear children, make profit in their businesses, enjoy good health and so on, they do so because they want to enjoy and to accumulate the things that they consider to be essential to living a fulfilled life. But the Christ-Event shakes this mindset to its foundation. Nigerian Christians need to rediscover that Jesus is simultaneously a question and a solution to their needs. Jesus is not simply ‘there’ to solve the problems of human beings; he seeks to inform and remould their understandings of their problems, needs and aspirations.

It is noteworthy that the demonic activities against the rule of God do not always have to come in the form of possessing a few people. Satan and his demonic cohort can be subtler than living within people and even in the case of using the possessed people to bring about some good such as healing the sick or foretelling the future.<sup>109</sup> Since ushering in the kingdom of God, Jesus has given his followers the power and grace to expose and criticize injustice, and dismantle oppression.<sup>110</sup> It follows that the individuals, groups of people and/or governments that have

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 16:23.

<sup>109</sup> Acts 16: 16-40.

<sup>110</sup> Luke 4.

promoted oppression and injustice are under demonic influence. Manus has argued that the numerous accounts of the

healing miracles by Jesus and his disciples, the victory over the powers of demons, especially the vanquishing of the oppressive, destructive anti-social forces which pontificated as Legion (Mt 5:9) and the condemnation of all vices arising from wealth and its inordinate pursuit described with the Semitic imagery, *Mammon*, riches (LK 16:13), represent Jesus as the harbinger of God's sovereignty so eagerly awaited by many.<sup>111</sup>

It is surprising that Manus, a Nigerian who is articulating a New Testament Christology for the African context, does not go on to situate his foregoing contention within the concrete experiences of African peoples. But he has provided us with a helpful context for expressing the extent of the activities of Satan. It can be argued that the most effective way Satan and his cohorts have perpetuated their activities in Nigeria is by infiltrating the ecclesiastical and political systems. Anyone that is familiar with Nigerian history will notice that the majority of the people have continued to experience injustice and oppression. These manifestations of demonic influence can be seen in the lives of many people who are living in abject poverty whilst a few individuals steal and siphon the country's resources. The sad consequence is that the majority who are poor cannot get justice when they have an encounter with the few 'powerful' rich individuals. The time is really overdue; Nigerian Christians must learn to extend their responses against the demonic activities to all systems that promote injustice, dehumanization, subjugations and oppression. They need to use the power that Jesus has given them to tear down the structures of oppression in their societies. In this way they will continue with Jesus' work against satanic and demonic activities.

## **B. Dealing with the Malevolent Spirits: The Christ-Event in relation to the activities of Satan and the 'Demonic Forces'**

### **1. Jesus Christ and People of God as Restrainers of Satan and Demonic Forces**

Jesus Christ understood his ministry to include restraining the powers, distortions, and influences of satanic forces. And he achieved this by refusing to succumb to the temptations of Satan, by rebuking demons that lived within people

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<sup>111</sup> Manus, *Christ, the African King*, 152.

and tormented their lives, by exposing and condemning social and ecclesial systems that promoted injustice, and by solving the spiritual and physical problems of the people that encountered him. Knowing fully well that the goal of Satan is to distort God's rule or the kingdom of God by deceiving people and coercing them to believe that he is an equal competitor of God, Jesus, through his ministry and life, initiated the process of curbing the activities of Satan and his cohort. It is interesting to note that Jesus has equally given authority to "his apostles to expand his attack upon demonic power".<sup>112</sup> All followers of Jesus must oppose demonic activities. Like Jesus and the apostles, Christians have the authority to restrain demonic activities against God's rule on earth by following Jesus and the apostles in rebuking demons from people and combating demonic activities in their communities and societies. But in what ways are Christians to understand the approaches Jesus employed in dealing with demonic forces? And what are the implications of such approaches for contemporary Nigerian Christians? These questions introduce us to the critical issue of how Christians respond to satanic forces and activities.

#### **a. 'Cohabiting' with the Malevolent Spirits**

It has become customary for Christians to assert that Jesus Christ *defeated* Satan and demonic forces. Commenting on Luke 8:26-30, Robert Stein argues:

Jesus defeated the demons, a legion in number (8:30) and with superhuman power to break chains (8:29)". The supernaturally powerful demons, however, could only 'beg' (8:28) Jesus, for they had not ability to counter the power of the 'Son of the Most High God'.<sup>113</sup>

James Dunn and Graham Twelftree have argued that "Jesus saw his exorcisms as the defeat of Satan".<sup>114</sup> Ihesiaba speaks for many Christians who believe that Jesus has defeated Satan and all evil powers. He encourages Christians to remember that "Jesus is [their] victory; he conquered death and all the powers of the enemy".<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Hurtado, *Mark*, 26.

<sup>113</sup> Robert H. Stein, *Luke – The New America Commentary*, vol. 24. Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 259.

<sup>114</sup> James D. G. Dunn and Graham H. Twelftree, "Demon-Possession and Exorcism in the New Testament," *Churchman* 94, no. 3 (1980): 219.

<sup>115</sup> Ihesiaba, *Exorcism and Healing Prayers*, 67-68.

Onah Odey has equally argued that salvation is described in the Bible as “God and Christ breaking the gates of brass, iron, death and hell”. He goes on to contend that this view of God and Christ

represent the defeat of the power of Satan and his cohorts which the Bible calls principalities, powers, rulers of darkness, wickedness in high places, prince of the air and demons.<sup>116</sup>

We are to become, however, cautious of the language of ‘defeat’ when examining the relationship between Jesus and Satan and all malevolent spirits. This is because the language of defeat conjures up the image of ‘bringing something to an end’ or ‘rendering something ineffective’. In this sense, it can be assumed that Jesus has made Satan and demons ineffective or that he has brought their activities or their distortion of God’s rule to an end. But this is certainly not the case. Satan and demons continue to manifest in people’s lives, possessing and using them to extend their distortion and perversion of God’s rule. When approached from the context of the *already-not yet* tension that underlies Jesus’ proclamation of the Kingdom of God, an appropriate term for describing Jesus’ assault on satanic forces, beginning from the time of his ministry and continuing to the present time, is ‘restraining’. The language of ‘defeat’ seems to belong to the ‘not-yet’ aspect of the *already-not-ye* tension. In other words, defeat seems belong to the end of a process. By enacting a new relationship between God and human beings, Jesus began the ongoing process of restraining the powers and activities of Satan and demons. However, this process is ongoing and will only come to completion at the return of Jesus Christ.<sup>117</sup> One of the implications of this ongoing restraining of satanic forces is that Christians who are living in the human world cannot escape such spirit beings. Since Jesus has *not yet* eradicated the activities of Satan and other malevolent spirits, Christians have no option but to continue to live in the world in which satanic forces can influence. But this should only make them continue to use the authority Jesus has given to them to restrain, rebuke, and exorcise satanic forces.

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<sup>116</sup> Onah Augustine Odey, “Superstitious Beliefs and Practices: A Challenge to the Gospel,” *Uyo Journal of Humanities* 7 (2002): 145-146.

<sup>117</sup> See Revelation 20:7-10.

## **b. Confronting the Malevolent Spirits: Silencing, Rebuking and Exorcism**

Many Christians have not only learned to cope with the malevolent spirits (because in their thinking they cannot escape them) but also to confront them. This state of affairs, of course, is not unique to them. Before the advents of Christianity and Islam, many Nigerian people had formulated ways to deal with, appease, exorcise, and confront the spirit beings they believe to be malevolent. Two beliefs undergirded this state of affairs. The first is the belief that, using the right technique and appropriate power and approach, human beings can transform (or sometimes confuse) a malevolent spirit, making the spirit become benevolent, or at least stopping the spirit from causing misfortunes.<sup>118</sup> The second is the belief that the most effective and safe way to deal with a malign spirit is to confront the spirit by rebuking, binding and exorcising the spirit from the lives of people. These two beliefs have informed many Nigerian Christians' attitudes toward the malevolent spirits.<sup>119</sup>

Before exploring how these Christians respond to the activities of Satan and malevolent spirits, I will highlight some of the encounters that Jesus had with some evil spirits. This will help to create a useful christological milieu to examine the attitudes of Nigerian Christians toward the malevolent spirits. The writers of the synoptic Gospels record some of Jesus' confrontations with the malevolent spirits. Jesus rebuked, silenced, and exorcised demons from people. "Be quiet!" said Jesus sternly, 'come out of him!'.<sup>120</sup> Mark's intent here is to show that Jesus has authority over evil spirits.<sup>121</sup> In addition, Mark aims to show the irony that some "demons know [Jesus], but the people cannot perceive his real significance".<sup>122</sup> However, it is

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<sup>118</sup> Yusufu Turaki, *The Unique Christ for Salvation: The Challenge of the Non-Christian Religions and Culture* (Nairobi: International Bible Society Africa, 2001), 61; see also John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969), 79-83.

<sup>119</sup> Luke, however, warns against merely using the name of Jesus for exorcism without having a relationship with him. See Acts 19:11-21.

<sup>120</sup> Mark 1:25, *NIV*. See also Luke 4:41.

<sup>121</sup> Mark 1:27.

<sup>122</sup> Hurtado, *Mark*, 29.

clear from the narratives of Jesus' encounters with demons that he demonstrated his authority over them by rebuking and expelling them from people. Interestingly, Mark shows that Jesus' authority derives from God and not from Beelzebul.<sup>123</sup> That Mark recorded some occasions when Jesus withdrew from the crowd to pray to God is an indication that God is the source of Jesus' authority. As Hurtado argues,

Mark's account shows the source of Jesus' power against illness and demons and also provides in Jesus' behaviour an example for his readers in Jesus' earnest and dedicated pursuit of God in prayer.<sup>124</sup>

Many pastors and Christians in Nigeria mimic the steps of Jesus for dealing with demonic forces. Some have published books that contain practical steps on how to deal with Satan and demons.<sup>125</sup> Ihesiaba's list of the steps to take in dealing with Satan and demons is long and include praying "in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit", confessing sins, inviting the Saints to assist in the process, inviting angels, singing praises to God, and inviting the blessed Virgin Mary. At a glance one can sense the Roman Catholic background of Ihesiaba. But like the majority of Nigerian Christians, irrespective of their denominations, Ihesiaba instructs his readers to rebuke, bind, destroy, and silence Satan and demons and to break down their strongholds. He writes,

Rebuke and bind any spirit that will hinder the prayers, healing, deliverance, exorcism, etc. The enemy, the devil, is within and around; in the air, sea, or land; therefore arrest and destroy him and his handworks. Declare war at his kingdom, destroy his weapons, let there be fire in his operation room, or wherever he may be operating from. Remember that 'whatever you bind on earth shall be considered bound in heaven (Matt. 18:18).<sup>126</sup>

It is misleading to read Jesus' confrontation with Satan and evil spirits as a prescriptive way or as a set of rules for his apostles and Christians to follow in dealing with Satan and demonic forces. For example, when Jesus silenced some evil spirits by not allowing them to speak it was not merely because he wanted to demonstrate that he had power to silence demons. The silencing of demons should

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<sup>123</sup> Mark 3:20-30;

<sup>124</sup> Hurtado, *Mark*, 29.

<sup>125</sup> A good example is Joe Chuks Atado, *Welcome Jesus, Bye Bye Satan: Spiritual Pills to Overcome Your Problem* (np. Our Lady of Sorrows, 1990).

<sup>126</sup> Ihesiaba, *Exorcism and Healing Prayers* 124.

rather be understood in the context of the theme of the ‘messianic secret’ that Mark was developing.<sup>127</sup> Therefore, Christians cannot consider Jesus’ silencing of demons as a model for confronting evil spirits. It is a mistake to assume that Jesus has prescribed rules, methods and principles on how to restrain satanic forces as Ihesiaba has suggested.<sup>128</sup>

There are several problems with emulating or mimicking Jesus’ style of exorcism but two are noteworthy. First, the exorcist may become the centre of attraction. People may praise him rather than Jesus Christ who is the source of power for restraining the activities of Satan. In Nigeria today, many Christians move frequently from one church to another in pursuit of a pastor or prophet they believe to be a specialist in healing and exorcising demons and evil spirits from people and businesses, and in breaking ancestral curses.<sup>129</sup> Second, there is an ontological difference between Christians and Jesus Christ. He is divine and human, but Christians are only human. As the one who is consubstantial with God, Jesus embodies divine deliverance which surpasses mere restoration of the physical or mental conditions. His healings included the spiritual condition of the people. He was not able only to expulse demons from people; he was also able to cure everything that separated them from God.<sup>130</sup> He criticized and rebuked the people who dehumanized and relegated the poor and vulnerable to the periphery of the society. Thus, the ability of Jesus to deliver people from their physical and mental sufferings and also his ability to bring them into a relationship with God are the key elements that distinguish Jesus from other exorcists of his time.<sup>131</sup>

The most penetrating lesson that Christians are to learn from Jesus’ encounter with Satan and evil spirits is that remaining and constantly drawing strength and

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<sup>127</sup> Mark 1:24-25, 34; 3:11-12; cf. 8:29-30; 9:9. See Hooker, “‘Who Can This Be?’ The Christology of Mark’s Gospel,” 98.

<sup>128</sup> Ihesiaba, *Exorcism and Healing Prayers*, 77-86.

<sup>129</sup> The irony is that some of these preachers have been exposed as members of several occult societies. Joshua Balogun in *Redeemed from the Clutches of Satan* testifies that some Nigerian well-known preachers came to him to obtain powers when he was a renowned native doctor before his conversion to Christianity.

<sup>130</sup> Stein, *Luke – The New America Commentary*, 258.

<sup>131</sup> Dunn and Twelftree, “Demon-Possession and Exorcism in the New Testament,” 220.

encouragement from Jesus is the ground from which his followers can successfully contribute to the ongoing restraining and dismantling of the activities of Satan and other malevolent spirit beings. Jesus rebuffed the Jews who claimed that “he manipulated demons to bring himself glory”.<sup>132</sup> The key issue is the source of the power by which Jesus accomplished his exorcism. Jesus refuted the accusation that he manoeuvred or appeased Beelzebub in order to achieve deliverance or healing. Unlike the “diabolical power of magicians”, Jesus argued that his power is “rather a triumph of God” over Satan and evil spirits.<sup>133</sup> Demons aim to promote activities that are opposed to the characteristics of the Kingdom of God. To use the words of C. F. D. Moule, demons have infiltrated into human society and have continued to promote evil practices such as “broken homes and false relationships and setting up tensions where there should be harmonious co-operation”.<sup>134</sup> Since Jesus aimed to promote the characteristics of the Kingdom of God – the way of life that reflects God’s rule – he was in conflict with Satan and demonic forces that induced people to exhibit contrary characteristics.<sup>135</sup> The challenge for Christians is to detach their allegiance from the indigenous worldview which teaches that human beings can manoeuvre and induce malevolent spirits to bring good fortune. Also, they must re-think and allow Jesus Christ to critique their solution-oriented mindset which has shaped their Christologies. Nigerian Christians need to become aware that dehumanization and oppression carried out both in the church and in the society at large are demonic and must be criticized and overturned. This implies that Christians should be ready and willing to work with other Nigerians who are not Christians in tearing down all forms of satanic activities.

In conclusion, I have explored the significant place of the identity and activities of the malevolent spirits in contextualizing the significance of the person and work of Jesus Christ. I also explored how the relationship between Jesus and the malevolent spirits can provide a helpful context for examining and critiquing some

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<sup>132</sup> Hurtado, *Mark*, 28.

<sup>133</sup> Garrett, *The Demise of the Devil*, 45.

<sup>134</sup> C. F. D. Moule, *The Gospel According to Mark – The Cambridge Bible Commentary on the New English Bible* (Cambridge: University Press, 1965).

<sup>135</sup> See Matthew 12:8.

Nigerian Christians' interpretation and appropriations of the Christ-Event. The solution-oriented mindset and the Nigerian indigenous understandings of the interrelatedness of the spirit and human worlds are the two major ideologies that are largely responsible for the majority of Nigerian Christians' perceptions of the identity and work of the malevolent spirit beings and their understandings of Jesus' power over such spirit beings. And as I have argued throughout this chapter, a Christology that underestimates the encounter between Jesus and the malevolent spirit beings is in danger of eclipsing an important element that helps us to define the person and work of Jesus Christ. But an adequate Nigerian contextual Christology needs to construe Jesus as the person who questions and reconstructs Nigerian Christians' understandings of the malevolent spirits.

If Jesus Christ is the 'enactor' of God's rule, satanic and demonic forces are the distorters of God's rule. From the onset of Jesus' ministerial life, Satan (like in the Garden of Eden in Genesis) tempted him with the intention to seduce him and coerce him to distrust God and ultimately to distort God's rule on the earth. "The devil's aim", Marshall argues, "is evidently to persuade Jesus to disobey, dishonour and distrust God".<sup>136</sup> But the Christ-Event dismantles the strongholds of Satan and demons. Jesus is the one who victoriously restrains and will ultimately put to an end the activities of Satan and evil spirits that have continued to torment humanity.

For just as a conqueror invades a territory, proclaims himself as king to the existing inhabitants, and demands that they now serve him – emphasizing that he is the ruler by various shows of strength, including the defeat of any rebels who oppose him – so Jesus proclaims the arrival of God's rule in what was Satan's territory, sets free Satan's captives, and attacks Satan's allies.<sup>137</sup>

The attack on and the restraining of Satan is ongoing. Jesus' restraining of the activities of satanic forces will continue through his followers for he has given them the authority to do so. "Calling the Twelve to him, he sent them out two by two and gave them authority over evil spirits".<sup>138</sup> There is no doubt that this authority extends

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<sup>136</sup> Marshall, "The Christology of Luke's Gospel and Acts," in *Contours in the New Testament*, 124.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>138</sup> Mark 6:7.

beyond the twelve initial followers of Jesus to include those who will believe in Jesus through their message.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> John 17:20.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### HUMANITY IN THE NIGERIAN CONTEXT: A RE-APPRAISAL IN LIGHT OF THE CHRIST-EVENT

In chapters five and six, I examined the understandings of God and the malevolent spirit beings as construed by the majority of Nigerian Christians, focusing on some ways in which such understandings can provide some helpful contexts for engaging with and interpreting the mystery of the Christ-Event. I argued that Jesus Christ mediates and interprets divinity and humanity. In this chapter, I will probe some of the predominant understandings of humanity in Nigerian Christianity as reflected in the writings of some key Nigerian theologians.<sup>1</sup>

Humanity is a mystery. In a sense, it can be argued that humanity-talk can be more difficult than God-talk. This is because we can assume that God, as a self-existent being, is capable of knowing God's self exhaustively and completely.<sup>2</sup> Also, although we can talk about God and associate God with some categories that are available to us, God remains a mystery and cannot be reduced to our categories.<sup>3</sup> Humanity, when it is defined to include the beginning, existence, action, and future destiny of human beings remains a great puzzle. The mystery of humanity is responsible partly for the confusion in present-day culture and theology regarding the essential constitution of the meaning and properties of human beings.<sup>4</sup> Throughout the history of Christianity, theologians have wrestled with the issue of the 'meaning, purpose and nature of human beings'. And as David Kelsey has pointed out, theologians have pursued these issues, not from a distinctively anthropological spectrum, but from several theological themes such as creation, revelation and sin.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The majority of Nigerian theologians have discussed their theological anthropologies in their broad theological works.

<sup>2</sup> Some North American Evangelical theologians have debated vigorously God's knowledge. The debate has centred on open-theism and classical theism. See John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Dowers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998); Bruce A. Ware, *God's Greater Glory: The Exalted God of Scripture and the Christian Faith* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004); Bruce A. Ware, *God's Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2000); Clark H. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> Ben Fubura-Manuel, *The Greater Purpose: The Sovereignty of God in the Concept of Mission* (Lagos: Aide, 2004), 24.

<sup>4</sup> John McIntyre, *Theology After the Storm: Reflections on the Upheavals in Modern Theology and Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 66.

<sup>5</sup> David H. Kelsey, "Human Being," in *Christian Theology: An Introduction to its Traditions and Tasks*, ed., Peter Hodgson and Robert King ((London: SPCK, 1983), 141-167.

Shaped by their theological worldview, many Nigerian Christian theologians have continued to explain human beings in relation to God.<sup>6</sup> Some others have discussed the meaning of humanity from the Nigerian indigenous views of human beings.<sup>7</sup> My overarching task in this chapter is to explore the meaning, identity and hope of humanity from the perspective of Christology, particularly from a Nigerian contextual christological discourse. I will argue that in order for Nigerian Christians to come to a true knowledge and experience of what God desires for humanity they are to constantly engage with the mystery of Jesus Christ. The Christ-Event invites them to re-think the Nigerian indigenous views of humanity and human beings' relationship with God in the light of the identity and mission of Jesus Christ. As I will argue later, the indigenous views of humanity partly shapes many Nigerian Christians' understandings and beliefs of who they are, what they are to expect from Jesus and how they are to relate to God. An adequate Nigerian contextual Christology, therefore, should interact with and probe the Nigerian indigenous perceptions of humanity. It is not sufficient for Christians to seek to know the meaning and destiny of humanity only from their preconceived ideas of humanity. On the contrary, they are to simultaneously explore what it is to be essentially human from their history and experience and in and through the Christ-Event. This implies that a Christian theological anthropology should be christocentric. The Tanzanian theologian, Andrea NgWeshemi, makes this point when he writes:

the history of the man Jesus of Nazareth contributes constitutively toward the answer to the question concerning the essential nature of human beings. He is the image of what is human to which Christian commitment to the human can refer for guidance.<sup>8</sup>

But how then should Christians construe humanity from the Christ-Event? I have argued throughout this study that the grand purpose of the Christ-Event is the enactment of a relationship between God and humanity. This 'enactment' exposes two things. First, it demonstrates God's deep desire to be in a loving relationship and covenant partnership with human beings. Second, it exposes human beings' flight away from God and the serious consequences of their rejection of God's offer of relationship. Jesus Christ critiques and sometimes radically reshapes people's

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<sup>6</sup> See Uchenna A, Ezech, *Jesus Christ the Ancestor: An African Contextual Christology in the Light of the Major Dogmatic Christological Definitions of the Church from the Council of Nicea (325) to Chalcedon (451)* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2003).

<sup>7</sup> See O. Imasogie, *African Traditional Religion* (Ibadan: University Press, 1985),

<sup>8</sup> Andrea M. Ng'Weshemi, *Rediscovering the Human: The Quest for a Christo-Theological Anthropology in Africa* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2002), 103.

preconceptions of humanity and divinity as part of achieving God's purpose of the Christ-Event. Therefore, in order for Christians to understand and appreciate who they are as human beings, and how they are to relate to God and the spirit beings, they need to rethink humanity in the light of the Christ-Event. This presupposes that the Christ-Event mediates and interprets humanity in the ways that are recognizable to human beings. The question that this presupposition attracts is: what is humanity from the perspective of the Christ-Event? I will argue that the Christ-Event shows that human beings express 'God's relationality', are 'fallen creatures of God', and are 'restorable creatures of God'. I will examine these presuppositions, locating them within Nigerian Christianity.

This chapter is divided into two major sections. I examine in the first section the theological meaning of the claim that humanity expresses God's relationality and its implications for the Nigerian Christian context. In the second section, I examine and critique some Nigerian indigenous views of humanity's separation from and restoration to God. I will also examine some key Nigerian theologians' interpretations of the fall and restoration of humanity.

## **A. Humanity and God's Relationality**

The Christian and the Nigerian indigenous views of human beings as the creatures of God presuppose God's relationality. In chapter five, I argued that the classical Christian concept of the Trinity entails God's relationality. God exists as a relational being and as a community – as the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Since God, as the Nigerian indigenous religions and Christianity claim, has created human beings, it follows, theologically speaking, that God has equally exhibited and demonstrated God's relationality by creating and relating to the beings who are ontologically different from him. The relationality of God towards humanity presupposes that human beings are both 'dependent creatures of God' and 'precious creatures of God'. These views of humanity, however, pose problems for some theologians who explain the meaning of humanity primarily in terms of human beings' sins against God. The views also pose a problem for many Christians who relate to Jesus and God in the ways that suggest that God exists primarily for the purpose of solving the problems of humanity. In what follows, I will explore how these understandings of God and humanity shape many of the existing Christologies in Nigerian Christianity.

## 1. Human Beings as God's Dependant Creatures

There are several myths regarding the origin of human beings in the indigenous cosmologies. These myths are usually terse.<sup>9</sup> Writing specifically about the Yoruba myth of creation, Osadolor Imasogie observes that it is not “clear as to where the first people were created. It would appear that they were created in heaven” and afterwards “sent down to inhabit the earth” by the Supreme Being.<sup>10</sup> Like in the indigenous cosmologies of Nigeria, in spite of the equivocal nature of the myths of creation, the majority of the indigenous cosmologies of Africa teach that the Supreme Being is the source of all that is in existence, including human beings and the lesser spirits.<sup>11</sup> In the thinking of the Kenyan theologian, John Mbiti, the majority of African peoples “place the creation of man towards or at the end of God's original work of creation”.<sup>12</sup> According to him, the African peoples also believe that human beings came into existence in pairs as “husband and wife, male and female”. However varying the African indigenous accounts of creation are, argues Mbiti, the belief that “God is the originator of man” exists in the majority of the creation myths.<sup>13</sup>

With the advent of Islam and Christianity, the myriad of African creation myths have suffered a huge blow: they have been progressively disappearing and rapidly giving way to the Christian and Islamic concepts and theologies of creation. But what have remained somewhat intact are the beliefs that the Supreme Being created human beings and that human beings are the most important living creatures in the human world. As the most important creature in the physical world, human beings, in the indigenous Nigerian thought, are at the centre of existence. These beliefs are not unique to Nigerians; they are widespread in Africa. Mbiti is one of the earliest African theologians to have articulated the idea that the indigenous African peoples believe that human beings are “at the very centre of existence”.<sup>14</sup> He goes on

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<sup>9</sup> Some of these myths are not compelling. For example, some teach that the Supreme Being sent chameleon on several occasions to the earth after creating it to see if it was both solid and habitable before he created and sent human beings down from heaven to live on it. Imasogie, *African Traditional Religion*, 31.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ng'Weshemi, *Rediscovering the Human*, 23.

<sup>12</sup> John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969), 93

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 92.

to argue that African peoples' belief about the centrality of human beings in the world has become a hermeneutical framework through which they explain their roles in the world.

African peoples see everything else in its relation to this central position of man. God is the explanation of man's origin and sustenance: it is as if God exists for the sake of man. The spirits are ontologically in the mode between God and man: they describe or explain the destiny of man's afterlife.<sup>15</sup>

This indigenous understanding of human beings has made some theologians dub the African worldview as 'anthropocentric'. "African ontology", writes Tokunboh Adeyemo, "is basically anthropocentric. Man is at the very centre of existence and everything else is seen in its relation to the central position of man".<sup>16</sup> Uchenna Ezeh shares a similar view. He writes,

In the African universe, man occupies a pride of place. Basically the African traditional religion is anthropological. Man being the centre of the universe, he is the bridge between the spiritual beings and the material beings.... Man is the epicentre in the created order, and understands himself, his role, and prospects in the scheme of things in the world as such.<sup>17</sup>

Again he argues that for the African people, life

revolves around man and his overall welfare and not primarily God and the deities.... There is no worship of God for its sake. The result is that when the African makes contacts with God either through prayers, sacrifices, divination or fortune-telling the overriding concern is to advance the overall human wellbeing, as well as to ensure protection from all dangers.<sup>18</sup>

Although the indigenous thought of Africa teaches the centrality of human beings in the world, it does not see human beings as competitors of God. It is also important to distinguish the idea that human beings are the 'crown of creation' from the understanding of humanity as the centre on which all other creatures, spirit beings, including God, revolves. It is vital to note that the majority of the indigenous African cosmologies teach that God created human beings and that human beings can only discover and achieve their full potential in relation to God and other spirit beings who are God's ministers. As Emefie Ikenga Metuh notes, "Man comes from God. He has a definite mission to fulfill in God's plan and he will eventually go back to God".<sup>19</sup> A form of Christian eschatology may have influenced Metuh's contention.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Tokunboh Adeyemo, *Salvation in African Tradition* (Nairobi: Evangel, 1979), 56.

<sup>17</sup> Ezeh, *Jesus Christ the Ancestor*, 50-51.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>19</sup> Emefie Ikenga Metuh, *African Religions in Western Conceptual Scheme: The Problem of Interpretation* (Ibadan: Claverianum Press, 1985), 95.

In the indigenous cosmologies, the goal of human beings is to join the ancestors after their death and not go back to God. However, Metuh correctly argues that the view “which sees the African religion as purely anthropocentric and God on the periphery in the African worldview” is greatly mistaken.<sup>20</sup> The anthropocentric reading of the African indigenous ideas of human beings needs to be guarded cautiously so as to preserve the notion of human dependence on the spirit beings such as ancestors, gods and the Supreme Being. But it is vital to acknowledge that although the indigenous cosmologies construe human beings as lower in status than the ancestors, the lesser spirit beings and the Supreme Being, and therefore dependent on them, they equally perceive human beings to be at the centre of creation in the way that suggests that God exists to serve humanity. I will argue that the view that humanity occupies a central role in the world can generate and promote idolatry.<sup>21</sup> Three arguments can be presented to buttress this contention.

First, the understanding of humanity as being at the ‘centre of existence’ (when it is understood in the way that is suggestive that God exists to serve human beings) subtly enthrones human beings to the status that is due only to God. Mbiti’s popular phrase “it is as if God exists for the sake of man” captures the subtlety underlying the indigenous African quest to enthrone human beings to the status of glory while dethroning God. It can be argued that the indigenous Nigerian and African peoples’ view of human beings as being at the centre of existence magnifies the significance of human beings and subtly diminishes, dethrones and distorts God’s significance in the world. In this sense, then, the African peoples’ belief in the centrality of human beings in the world poses a serious ‘threat’ to God’s glory and centrality in the world. Yusufu Turaki, one of the Nigerian leading Evangelical theologians, contends that any attempt by human beings to arrogate to themselves the status of glory and centrality is sin against God. He writes,

Man’s worship of self is a very serious crisis of false identity.... Since man has lost his original identity in God his creator, he must instead create a false one upon which to rest and anchor his self-made identity.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., *God and Man in African Religion: A Case Study of the Igbo Nigeria*, 2nd ed. (Enugu: SNAAP Press, 1981), 54.

<sup>21</sup> I will adopt Sam Oleka’s definition of idolatry as “anything in the life of an individual or group that claims or is given the loyalty which belongs to God alone”. See Oleka, “The Living God: Some Reflections on Acts 17 and African Traditional Religions,” in *Issues in Africa Christian Theology*, ed. Samuel Ngewa, Mark, and Tite Tienou (Nairobi: East African Educational, 1998), 131.

<sup>22</sup> Yusufu Turaki, *The Unique Christ for Salvation: The Challenge of the Non-Christian Religions and Cultures* (Nairobi: International Bible Society Africa, 2001), 151.

I will examine some Nigerian theologians' perceptions of sin and humanity later in this chapter. Here, it suffices to note that, although we can trace humanity's desire for autonomy and flight away from God back to the Genesis theories of humanity's separation from God, we are to recognize that the issue of human beings' desire to dethrone God and to enthrone humanity as the centre of existence are informed by complex factors. These include the ever-changing worldviews of human communities, the ongoing cross-cultural interactions among peoples of different cultures, and several social conditions.

But how does a Revealer Christology model, as developed in this study, engage with the indigenous Nigerian views of humanity that I have argued are idolatrous? To put it differently, how does Jesus Christ, as the one who mediates and interprets humanity and divinity, interact with the indigenous cosmologies which present humanity as the glory of existence in a way that suggests that God exists to guarantee the wellbeing of human beings? In this study, I have argued that to construe Jesus Christ or God as primarily a problem-solver is to distort the relationship that God enacts through the Christ-Event. We are to bear in mind that Jesus upheld the glory of God throughout his ministry. Even in his miraculous work, which could have placed him at the very centre of existence, Jesus usually introduced God-talk with the intention of leading people to focus on God as the very source and centre of existence. Expressions such as "No one is good – except God alone", for example, indicate not only Jesus' solidarity with humanity, but also his desire to refocus the attention of his contemporaries on the centrality of God as the creator and as the one who sustains the entire creation.<sup>23</sup> An adequate Nigerian Christian anthropology, therefore, should be suspicious and critical of any view of humanity that underestimates and eclipses the glory and centrality of God in the world.

The second argument which can be advanced in support of the contention that viewing human beings as the centre of existence can become idolatrous is that this view of human beings is largely responsible for the readiness of many Nigerian people to use God, the lesser spirit beings and even their fellow human beings as 'tools' to achieve wellbeing. To be human, according to the indigenous worldview of Nigeria, entails enjoying life which requires possessing wealth and good health. Many people consult native doctors, sorcerers and medicine people to inquire about their condition so as to make appropriate sacrifice in order to, negatively, protect

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<sup>23</sup> Mark 10:17-18, *NIV*.

themselves against any misfortune, and positively, to gain and accumulate more wealth and to experience good health. The practice of consulting mediums, diviners and native doctors for the purpose of knowing the causes of misfortunes is widespread in many African societies.<sup>24</sup> The key issue to note here is that the practice of consulting some ‘intermediaries’ is driven by the assumption that human beings are at the centre of existence and, therefore, possess the ‘right’ to draw insights and resources both from the human and spirit worlds to sustain their central place in the world.

The practice of using God, other spirit beings, and even human beings as tools to achieve wellbeing by some Nigerian people is rooted in a dubious relationship. The missing ‘gene’ in this practice is a relationship that is not rooted in selfishness. People choose the gods that they believe can help them to achieve their goals and drop the gods that seem powerless to help them to achieve their goals.<sup>25</sup> What immediately comes to mind here is Jesus’ stern rebuke of the people who followed him simply because of the things they could gain from him.

I tell you the truth, you are looking for me, not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. On him God the Father has placed his seal of approval.<sup>26</sup>

Contrary to building a relationship on selfish motives, Jesus enacts a relationship that is rooted in God’s unselfish, self-dispossessing, and self-giving in and through the Christ-Event.<sup>27</sup> Jesus challenges and encourages his contemporaries to seek a relationship with God on the basis of self-giving.<sup>28</sup> This is one of the christological implications of the Christ-Event that many theologians have not explored. Some, however, have discussed the theme of self-giving only when they discuss the cross-event. Turaki, for example, writes, the “greatest offer of Jesus to humanity is his offer of himself to humanity on the cross...”<sup>29</sup> In chapter five, I argued that God’s acts of self-giving are demonstrated throughout the Christ-Event and not only on the

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<sup>24</sup> John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 166-193. See chapter six.

<sup>25</sup> Donatus Ibe Nwoga, *The Supreme Being as Stranger in Igbo Religious Thought* (Ahiazu Mbaise, Hawk Press, 1984), 8-9.

<sup>26</sup> John 6:32-33, *NIV*.

<sup>27</sup> See chapter five for discussion on the nature of God’s self-giving as manifested in and through the Christ-Event.

<sup>28</sup> John 3:16; Philippians 2:5-8.

<sup>29</sup> Turaki, *The Unique Christ for Salvation*, 161.

cross. The incarnation, death, and the entire life of Jesus Christ seek to dismantle self-accumulation and solution-oriented mindsets. Nigerian Christians need to rediscover and explore the implications of God's self-giving as manifested in the Christ-Event. One of such implications that relates directly to this study is that God's self-giving contrasts the quest for solution to the spiritual and other needs of humanity which is prevalent in Nigerian Christianity and in the indigenous religions.

The third argument is that many Nigerian Christians abandon Jesus Christ to consult and worship other gods when Jesus, in their thinking, appears not to be solving their problems. This manner of relating to Jesus is idolatrous. For Jesus Christ, serving two masters or worshiping God and other gods is an act of idolatry.<sup>30</sup> By consulting other gods for solutions to their problems, the Christians who engage in such practice bestow upon creaturely images, idols, and demonic forces the reverence that is due to God alone. The apostle Paul considered such acts as misplaced and nefarious. In his Epistles to the Christians in Rome, Paul wrote:

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles....<sup>31</sup>

Any human act that misplaces God's sovereignty over God's creation and bestows upon human beings or things the reverence that is due to God alone is idolatrous. This is the main consequence of the indigenous construal of human beings as occupying the central spot in the world. It is an assault on and attempt to suppress God's glory. One of the aims of the Revealer Christology paradigm that is developed in this study is to explore, from the perspective of the Christ-Event, the implications of God's self-giving for understanding what God intends for and requires from humanity. I will return to this issue later in the chapter. In what follows, I will first explore some of the theological and anthropological implications of the Nigerian Christians' claim that God is the Creator of human beings.

## **2. Human Beings as God's Precious Creatures**

Some Nigerian theologians explain humanity primarily from the perspective of humanity's sin against God. But I will argue that this theological anthropology has overshadowed some biblical representations of human beings as precious, beautiful

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<sup>30</sup> See Matthew 6:24.

<sup>31</sup> Romans 1:21-25, *NIV*.

and wonderful creatures of God who are made in God's image and likeness.<sup>32</sup> The majority of Nigerian theologians hardly examine the implication of God's estimation of human beings as precious creatures. Even when this status of human beings is hinted at in discussions of *imago Dei*, some theologians run quickly through its theological consequence in order to get to what they consider to be the most important starting point for a Christian theological anthropology; namely, the fallen condition and sinfulness of human beings. Turaki, for example, poses the question: "what are the biblical definition, condition and relationship of man to his Creator?"<sup>33</sup> His response to this question illuminates the sin-driven theological anthropology of many Nigerian theologians. He writes:

The state of man in relation to his Creator has been described in Genesis.... In this book, we see man's falling away from the 'origin' and the 'beginning of man's alienation from God'. The fall of man into sin through disobedience to his Creator brought ruin to man and the entire humanity and creation.<sup>34</sup>

According to Turaki, the sinful condition of human beings places them in a lost state. He warns that the theologies of many African theologians will remain weak if they continue to ignore the seriousness of the sinfulness of humanity.

African theology seems not to have this powerful definition of the sinful state of humanity. It is not critical enough about 'African culture and traditional religion'.... The Bible has clearly defined the fallen and sinful state of humanity. The mission and evangelism agenda is almost absent in African theology and this is because African theology has a very weak theology of the fall, sin and redemption.<sup>35</sup>

We need to make a distinction between underestimating the influence of sin in discussing human beings' relationship with God and overemphasizing human sinful acts or sinfulness to the point of underemphasizing the preciousness of human beings as God's image bearers. Turaki's concern about some theologians who underestimate the influence of human sins and sinfulness in order to construct the theologies of salvation, religions, and God that synchronize with the African indigenous worldviews is legitimate. He is not the first to register this concern. Some of his Evangelical predecessors such as Kato and Adeyemo have accused some

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<sup>32</sup> Genesis 1:26. Some earlier Christian theologians made a distinction between 'image' and 'likeness'. But the majority of contemporary theologians argue that image and likeness "represent the kind of repetition characteristic of ancient Hebrew style". See William C. Placher., "What's Wrong with Us? Human Nature and Human Sin," in *Essentials of Christian Theology*, ed. William C. Placher (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 134.

<sup>33</sup> Turaki, *The Unique Christian for Salvation*, , 220.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 223.

African theologians such as John Mbiti and Bolaji Idowu of constructing weak theological anthropologies. Kato argued persistently that the “Christian message of total deliverance from the original and practical sins of the individual is what African people...need”.<sup>36</sup> But Kato, Turaki and others who have underemphasized the preciousness of human beings in order to construct their anthropology, Christology and soteriology commit essentially an opposite error.

It is important to articulate some of the consequences of underestimating and underemphasizing the preciousness of human beings as God’s image bearers. In both Christianity and the indigenous religions, human beings are believed to be the creatures of God. As human beings, we exist because God is and has made a decision to bring us into existence. A helpful way to understand the connection between God and humanity is to construe human beings as the consequence of God’s gracious act of giving.<sup>37</sup> When we construe humanity in this way, we will exercise more caution when speaking of human beings as ‘enemies of God’ and ‘totally depraved’. As God’s gifts, human beings are precious creatures and companions of God. But even as God’s precious gifts, human beings can distort what and who God intends them to be by mistrusting and disobeying God.<sup>38</sup> However sinful human beings are, it is important to acknowledge that God has never ceased to love them and to extend fellowship and relationship to them. This, of course, includes judging them for their sins. In both pre-Fall and post-Fall, human beings have remained God’s image bearers who have continued to attract God’s mercy, love and relationship.<sup>39</sup>

The view of human beings as the ‘enemies of God’ is demeaning and responsible partly for the emphasis on the divinity of Jesus Christ and the underestimation of his humanity in Nigerian Christologies. As we saw in chapter three, most Nigerian lay Christians see Jesus Christ as God, the Son of God and the Messiah, and rarely see him as one of them, a human being. Some theologians have also continued to explain the person of Jesus Christ predominantly in terms of his divinity. What Nigerian theologians and lay Christians need to rediscover is the dialectic that underlies the divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ. The Christology

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<sup>36</sup> Byang H. Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa* (Kisumu, Evangel, 1975), 43.

<sup>37</sup> Serene Jones, “What’s Wrong with Us? Human Natures and Human Sin,” in *Essentials of Christian Theology*, 143-144.

<sup>38</sup> Genesis 3.

<sup>39</sup> I will explore the concept of the ‘Fall’ under ‘Human Beings as Fallen Friends of God’.

that discusses the person of Jesus Christ predominantly in terms of his divinity to the exclusion of his humanity or vice versa is inadequate.<sup>40</sup> Such a Christology underestimates the mystery of the unity of humanity and divinity in Jesus Christ as articulated in the Nicene and Chalcedonian councils.<sup>41</sup> In addition, such a Christology needs to rethink the mystery and the import of the incarnation and God's grace in the relationship that God provides for humanity through Jesus Christ.

Christians are not (supposed to be) deists primarily because they claim that God has maintained a relationship with the creation. Through creating and relating to human beings, God elevates the status of human beings to that of precious creatures. As a result of these divine acts, human beings have formed a community with God in and through Jesus Christ. That God chooses to reveal God's self in human history as a human being (in Jesus the Christ) demonstrates, not only God's interest in human beings as God's gifts and creatures, but also God's love for humanity. It follows, then, that any action, perception, and theological view that devalues and demeans human beings is in direct conflict with God's perception of human beings. As the precious creatures and gifts of God, human beings express the glory of God. In human beings, then, we can expect to experience the splendour, awesomeness and the grandeur of God's gifts. The Christ-Event needs to be located within this context of God's love and willingness to be in a relationship with human beings in spite of their sinfulness.

It is noteworthy that the indigenous worldview sees human beings as part of the Supreme God's 'comprehensive story', in which human beings exist in a communal relation with fellow human beings, with God and with other spirit beings. As Peter Paris observes,

...the community is a sacred phenomenon created by the Supreme God, protected by the divinities and governed by the ancestral spirits. Thus a full participation in the community is a fundamental requirement of all human beings.<sup>42</sup>

The notion of human beings as the product of community-making is a distinctive characteristic of the indigenous African perceptions of human beings that is rooted in

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<sup>40</sup> Philippians 2:6-7; Hebrews 1:1-3; John 1:14.

<sup>41</sup> See chapter five for discussions on the Christologies of the Nicene and Chalcedonian councils.

<sup>42</sup> Peter J. Paris, *The Spirituality of African Peoples: The Search for a Common Moral Discourse* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1995), 51.

the notion of communality.<sup>43</sup> In the indigenous African anthropologies human beings are believed to be created to be in a community and unless they belong to a community they will never attain their full potentials. Based on his study of the Bantu peoples, the Bashi of central Kivu of Congo, the Rwanda and the Barundi, Vincent Mulago argued that African peoples exist as a community. For him, the community includes the living, the ancestors and God.

A relationship of being and life between each individual and his descendants, his family, his brothers and sisters in the clan, his antecedents, and also with God, the ultimate sources of all life.<sup>44</sup>

Before Mulago, Placide Tempels argued, “For the Bantu, man never appears in fact as an isolated individual, as an independent entity”.<sup>45</sup> The point that Mulago attempts to make is that in the African worldviews an individual exists only because the community exists. “The life of the individual is grasped at it is shared”.<sup>46</sup> This sense of communality has withstood various threats, especially the Western notion of individualism. By comparison, the sense of individualism in the West is opposed to the community-oriented societies of Africa. The writings of the Greek theologian, John Zizioulas, have uncovered and criticized the individualistic nature of some Western cultures. In *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church*, Zizioulas provokingly postulates:

Is it not true that, by definition, the other is my enemy and my ‘original sin’, to recall the words of French philosopher, J. P. Sartre? Our Western culture seems to subscribe to this view in many ways. Individualism is present in the very foundation of this culture. Ever since Boethius in the fifth century identifies the person with the individual ...and St Augustine at about the same time emphasized the importance of ...self-consciousness in the understanding of personhood, Western thought has never ceased to build itself and its culture on this basis.<sup>47</sup>

In the thinking of Zizioulas, the greatest threat to Western individualism is the ‘other’.

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<sup>43</sup> Some African theologians have used the concept of community to develop the doctrine of the Trinity, church and the communion of the saints. See Nyamiti, *Christ As Our Ancestor: Christology from an African Perspective* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1984), 103-126.

<sup>44</sup> Vincent Mulago, “Vital Participation,” in *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs*, ed. Kwesi A. Dickson and Paul Ellingworth (London: Lutterworth Press, 1969), 138.

<sup>45</sup> Placide Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, trans. Colin King (Paris: Presence Africaine, 1959), 72.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>47</sup> John D. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church* (London: T & T Clark, 2006), 1.

Communion with the other is not spontaneous; it is built upon fences which protect us from the dangers implicit in the other's presence. We accept the other only in so far as he or she does not threaten our privacy or in so far as he or she is useful for our individual happiness.<sup>48</sup>

I have referenced Zizioulas only to highlight a major difference in the ways most Western societies and African societies construe the 'place' of the individual in the community.<sup>49</sup> But since my focus in this study is Africa, particularly the Nigerian communities, I will not engage in an in-depth comparative analysis of the concepts of community in the Western and African societies.

Returning to the idea of community in African societies, it is important to keep in mind the notions of communality and relationality that underlie the perception of human beings in the indigenous Africa. Keith Ferdinando observes:

The human being in Africa is not just a 'multiple self' but also a social self who is not to be identified simply in terms of his own individuality. It is this which sharply distinguishes African thought about human nature from much of that found in the West.<sup>50</sup>

Contrary to the Western notion of 'I think therefore I am', many African peoples posit 'I am because we are'.<sup>51</sup> As John Pobee argues:

If Descartes' *cogito ergo sum* represents the Western person's understanding of reality, i.e. individualism, *homo Africanus* would rather say '*cognatus sum, ergo sum*', i.e. 'I am because I am related to others by blood'.<sup>52</sup>

In other words, for many African peoples, the identity of an individual is embodied in, protected and defined by the community. The individual person derives his or her identity by belonging to his or her community, both the living and the dead. As Mbiti observes,

In traditional life, the individual does not and cannot exist alone except corporately. He owes his existence to other people, including those of past generations and his contemporaries. He is simply part of the whole. The community must therefore make, create or produce the individual; for the individual depends on the corporate group.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> This is not to suggest that the practice of individualism does not exist in Nigerian and African societies or that the sense of community does not exist in some Western societies.

<sup>50</sup> Keith Ferdinando, *The Triumph of Christ in African Perspective: A Study of Demonology and Redemption in the African Context* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1999), 23.

<sup>51</sup> Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 108-109.

<sup>52</sup> John S. Pobee, "Health, Healing and Religion: An African View," *International Review of Mission* 90, no. 356-357 (2001): 59-60.

<sup>53</sup> Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 108.

The cult of the ancestors is the most visible phenomenon in the indigenous African worldviews that expresses the peoples' strong belief in the "continuity between the dead and the living".<sup>54</sup> Imasogie has noted that the rites of passage are "very crucial in the African traditional set-up" because they are means of sustaining "active interaction between human and the spiritual communities".<sup>55</sup> In Nigeria, like in many other African societies, typically when a child is born, the family of the child organizes for him or her several rites of passage with the intent to introduce and incorporate him or her into the community that comprises of both the living and the dead. The ancestors, particularly the family ancestors, are expected by many African peoples to continue to provide and protect for their children from the spirit world.<sup>56</sup> Death does not amputate an individual from his community. In the indigenous African cultures, in order for human beings to attend their life potentials they must "maintain a vital relationship with nature, God, the deities, ancestors, the tribe, the clan, [and] the extended family".<sup>57</sup>

There are some issues concerning the indigenous Nigerian notion of community that merit a close examination. The definition of human beings in relation to their community provides a helpful insight into an adequate Christian ecclesiology. Although individuals make up the church, no single individual can constitute the church. The language of 'unity' that permeates the New Testament ecclesiology only makes sense within the context of a 'community'.<sup>58</sup> An individual Christian can reach his or her spiritual potential only within the community to which he or she belongs. It is unchristian to define a Christian in relation to the individual person; it should rather be in relation to the community of believers. Zizioulas has contended that the notion of a community is inherent in and indissolubly connected with the concept of a 'person'. According to him, it is "demonic to attribute one's own identity to oneself or to an a-personal something".<sup>59</sup> He maintains that a "person

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<sup>54</sup> Imasogie, *African Traditional Religion*, 37.

<sup>55</sup> *Opcit.*, 55.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> Swailem Sidhom, "The Theological Estimate of Man," in *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs*, 102.

<sup>58</sup> For example, see Ephesians 4: 1-13; Romans 12: 3-14.

<sup>59</sup> Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, 141-142.

is always a gift from someone”. Thus, for him, the “notion of self-existence is a substantialist notion, not a personal one”.<sup>60</sup>

Some proponents of the ancestor christological models have continued to maintain that the notion of human beings as the product of community-making is also a helpful context for interpreting the Christ-Event from the African perspective.<sup>61</sup> Some have argued that the notion of communality as it is construed in many African societies is similar to the idea of “corporate personality” in ancient Israel in which the acts of the individual affected the community to which he or she belongs.<sup>62</sup> But the major concentration has been, to use the words of Ng’Weshemi, on how Jesus “participates decisively in the cultural, socio-economic and political life of African brothers and sisters” as the ‘senior Ancestor’.<sup>63</sup> For him, since the Christ-Event occurred in human history, Jesus’ significance must be understood within the community of people, for it is in the context of the community that he can share “the anxiety, needs, thoughts, and hopes of fellow members and work for the transformation of the community...”<sup>64</sup>

Africans’ resilience to the ideologies that threaten their views of community may not be unconnected with the benefits that come with such community-oriented structures. In many rural societies in Nigeria, the family, clans, and kindred continue to share the burdens of each other and the joy of each other. For instance, the Nigerian marriage customs provide an opportunity for the clans to share in the blessings of the bride’s and the groom’s families. The usually expensive ceremonies are normally geared towards the satisfaction of the requirements stipulated and preserved by the elders of the clan. But a significant issue that is noteworthy is that the Nigerian people’s perception and stratification of human beings into categories has their root in the notion of communality. In the indigenous cosmologies, a child is a ‘true human being’ on the basis of a successful completion of the required rites of

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid. It is important to read Zizioulas’ understandings of community or relationality and personhood from the context of his argument on the relationality of the persons of the Trinity. See Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1985), 15-17.

<sup>61</sup> Ng’Weshemi, *Rediscovering the Human*, 151.

<sup>62</sup> This is essentially the contention of South Africa scholar Bonganjalo Goba in his essay “Corporate Personality: Ancient Israel and Africa,” in *Challenge of Black Theology in South Africa*, ed. Basil Moore (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1974), 65-73.

<sup>63</sup> Ng’Weshemi, *Rediscovering the Human*, 151.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

passage and not on the grounds of the socio-economic circumstances that he or she is born.<sup>65</sup> This way of perceiving a newborn is widespread in many African societies. Benjamin Ray observes, “Newborn infants are remade into ‘new’ beings with new social roles” during the “middle or liminal phase of transition” in African concepts of rites of passage.<sup>66</sup> During this ‘transition’ stage,

newborn infants are made into human persons, children are made into adults, men and women are made into husband and wife, deceased people are made into revered ancestors, princes are made into kings.<sup>67</sup>

Ng’Weshemi has also argued, “For Africans, one is not human simply by birth. Rather, one becomes human through a progressive process of integration in society”.<sup>68</sup> According to Imasogie, “The new-born child is looked upon... as a stranger to the family into which he is born as well as to ...human community”.<sup>69</sup>

It is vital to keep in mind that this understanding of human beings is rooted in the notion of a communal relationship.

Individuals obtain their basic identity by belonging to the community. The underlying thinking here is that an individual is never born whole and fully human. It is the family, clan, and community to which one belongs that enables one to become a mature person. One is prepared and led into adulthood in order to accomplish and live the fullness of life without disruption and to become a vital, upright, responsible and well humanized individual member of one’s community in particular, and human kind in general.<sup>70</sup>

Laurenti Magesa links Africans’ understanding of true or full humanity to the rite of marriage, especially the marriages that produce children. He argues that marriage is the “means to attain full humanity”.

The expansion of the community circle results in togetherness as those involved actualize their full humanity. But what truly completes the humanization of a person in this world is the mystical union with the ancestors, which is achieved only through the generation of children.<sup>71</sup>

Defining human beings in terms of what they have achieved through the rites of birth, puberty, and marriage is oppressive. These rites of passage generate into

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<sup>65</sup> Imasogie, *African Traditional Religion*, 52-62.

<sup>66</sup> Benjamin C. Ray, *African Religions: Symbols, Ritual, and Community* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-hall, 1976), 91.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ng’Weshemi, *Rediscovering the Human*, 15.

<sup>69</sup> Imasogie, *African Traditional Religion*, 53.

<sup>70</sup> Ng’Weshemi, *Rediscovering the Human*, 18.

<sup>71</sup> Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Tradition of Abundant Life* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1997), 128.

'taboos' when people fail to observe them or wrongly practice them. This underscores the "thin layer of difference between taboo and custom".<sup>72</sup> If the individuals who have not undergone the rites of birth and puberty are not considered to be fully human, the rites are oppressive and can generate serious identity crises. The casualties of this oppressive system are sometimes some Christian converts who refuse to perform some of the initiatory rites for their children on the grounds that they are unchristian practices. Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* describes the social standing of such Christian converts during the days of the classical Western missionary.<sup>73</sup> Many who have undergone the rites regard the individuals who refuse to undergo the rites as inferior and subhuman. In addition, sometimes they cannot share from some of the things that belong to the community such as land or even marry someone from their community.

When examined in the light of the Christ-Event – a divine act demonstrating God's liberating and undoing of all forms of dehumanization and oppression – the Nigerian perception of 'true human beings' in terms of their observance of rites of passage is wanting. This implies that people who are disabled, couples who are unable to bear children, and people who die quite young without undergoing any of the major rites of passage such as marriage can no longer be seen as 'objects of wrath' or 'people under the curse' of the ancestors or other spirit beings.

From the perspective of the ancestral cult, these classes of people are not truly human and cannot belong completely to the community which is maintained by the ancestors. Marriage is a very important rite because it is through it that couples can bear 'legitimate' children and consequently perpetuate and keep alive the traditions and lineage of the ancestors. Individuals who die without being married are normally classified as 'premature death' and sometimes as 'evil children' for they are not going to contribute to the propagation of their ancestry. The issue that immediately comes up is Jesus Christ, an individual who died without getting married and having any children.<sup>74</sup> Within the indigenous Nigerian cultures, Jesus belongs to the category of 'evil children' and his death can be seen as premature, and ultimately irrelevant. Ng'Weshemi seems to be aware of how the death of Jesus as

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<sup>72</sup> Edmund Ilogu, "African Traditional Religious Systems of Social Control: A Nigerian Example," in *African Creative Expressions of the Divine*, ed. Kortright Davis and Elias Farajaje-Jones (Washington: Howard University School of Divinity, 1991), 143.

<sup>73</sup> Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (London: Heinemann, 1958).

<sup>74</sup> We can also add the Nigerian Catholic priest who takes the vows of celibacy.

unmarried person poses a difficulty for the ancestor Christology. But he dismisses it, albeit in a non compelling way, by arguing that Jesus Christ

can be excused in light of the other essential and distinctive deeds he performs and situations he goes through for the sake of fellow community members, and which no other human beings have ever accomplished.<sup>75</sup>

In contrast to the Nigerian indigenous construal of authentic, true and real humanity in terms of the observations of the traditional rites of passage or what they have achieved, the ‘new community’ that Jesus Christ enacts defines human beings, not in terms of what they have achieved, but in terms of what God has done for them – creating and relating to them. The Christ-Event upsets, critiques, and condemns any understanding of humanity which is inherently oppressive. The Sermon on the Mount, for example, expresses Jesus’ criticism of the systems and cultural values that perpetuate the sufferings of the poor and the vulnerable. Since in the indigenous thought of Nigeria, as we have seen from the arguments of some theologians, a human being becomes truly human only when he or she undergoes the required rites of passage, it stands in need of a re-examination in the light of the Christ-Event, for it is oppressive. Human beings are precious because they are God’s creatures and because of what God has done for them in and through Jesus Christ.

## **B. Human Beings as Fallible and Restorable Creatures of God**

Something has happened to the relationship between God and human beings – so the indigenous religions and Christianity claim. This claim is represented in the myths or religious narratives. Since myths tell something much deeper about the community that creates or believes in them, a critical examiner should look beyond the symbolic representations to excavate from the deeper structural level what the myths and religions narratives essentially communicate. I argue that in both the indigenous myths of creation and the Nigerian Christians’ interpretations of the Genesis 3 narrative, what is at stake is a broken relationship between God and humanity. But what has really happened? What are the consequences? Is it possible for human beings and God to have a good relationship again? I will explore and respond to these questions in the remainder of this chapter.

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<sup>75</sup> Ng’Weshemi, *Rediscovering the Human*, 152.

## 1. Humanity in a Broken Relationship with God

The word 'fallen' in this study refers to humanity's (both individual and communal) potentiality to sin and human beings' acts of distorting, disobeying and refusing God's offer of relationship. In the indigenous worldview of Nigeria and most African societies, God and human beings at some earliest time enjoyed a friendly relationship. As Edwin Smith observed, it "appears to be a very widespread notion in Africa that at the beginning God and man lived together on the earth...."<sup>76</sup> But this relationship was broken due to some human actions. Several myths of creations have variously explained the human actions that were responsible for the broken relationship. On this, Smith notes, "owing to misconduct of some sort on the part of the man or more frequently, of a woman – God deserted the earth and went to live in the sky".<sup>77</sup> Imasogie has summarized three surviving versions of the myths that specify the actions that purportedly caused the breaking down of the relationship between God and human beings. The first version teaches that the relationship was broken as result of a man's disobedience that was inspired by greed. The myth states that God established a "rule regulating the getting of food from the sky" that prohibited human beings from taking more food than they needed. But a greedy man broke the rule "and consequently, the sky receded ... and the easy access to heaven was sealed up".<sup>78</sup> The second version states that "God became bored with constant bickering among men and the necessity of spending much of his time reconciling them". Therefore, he "decided to move farther away from men".<sup>79</sup> The third version teaches that "a woman defiled the sky by touching it during her monthly period". Since the action "was something that was expressly forbidden", God withdrew the privilege of free communication between heaven and earth".<sup>80</sup>

Some African theologians have contended that some of the indigenous myths regarding the broken relationship between God and humanity correlate to the Genesis narrative of the Fall which has informed the traditional Christian explanation of the broken relationship between God and God's creation. Charles Nyamiti, the

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<sup>76</sup> Edwin W. Smith, "The Whole Subject in Perspective: An Introductory Survey," in *African Ideas of God: A Symposium*, ed. Edwin W. Smith (London: Edinburgh House Press, 1950), 7.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Imasogie, *African Traditional Religion*, 32.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 32-33.

Tanzanian theologian, for example, postulates that the belief in the broken relationship between God and human beings constitutes “an interesting parallelism between Christianity and ...African traditional religions”,<sup>81</sup> and also can “serve as a useful point of departure for explicating the doctrine of Redemption”.<sup>82</sup> It is difficult to determine the extent to which the traditional Christian teachings of Adam’s sin have influenced some of the indigenous myths of the broken relationship between God and human beings. What is important to highlight here, however, is that these indigenous myths neither intend to present theories of the origin of evil nor to describe the cause of human evil actions as some classical Christianity construed the ‘human sin nature’ as a consequence of the fall. The myths rather intend to explain the remoteness of the Supreme Being. They aim to explain why the Supreme Being “enters [the human world and human affairs] less frequently than might be expected....”<sup>83</sup> Equally important to note is that, according to the indigenous worldview, human beings “sought in vain for a return to a golden age of spiritual happiness and unhampered interaction” with God.<sup>84</sup> Since then, human beings can only relate to God through some lesser gods or divinities and ancestors.<sup>85</sup>

Many Christians (both the laity and theologians) have continued to employ Genesis 3 as the authentic narrative that provides the context for explaining the strained and broken relationship between God and humanity. Adeyemo represents many Christians when asserts:

Prior to the historical fall of Adam, in whom all men fall as one, an unbroken link of fellowship and communion existed between man and God.... The accounts of Genesis and the rest of the Scriptures make it plain that man did not continue in the state of purity and blessed communion with God. Man rebelled against God by yielding to Satan. And the separation that took place then affected and still does affect that many may claim to know of God.<sup>86</sup>

He goes on to state that in “any sound doctrine of salvation the question of sin is paramount”.<sup>87</sup> He contends that in the Yoruba’s indigenous thought, sin is “an

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<sup>81</sup> C. Nyamiti, *Christ as Our Ancestor* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1984), 34.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>83</sup> Smith, “The Whole Subject in Perspective: An Introductory Survey,” 7.

<sup>84</sup> Imasogie, *African Traditional Religion*, 33.

<sup>85</sup> It is primarily on the basis of the belief that human beings can relate to God through the ancestors that some African theologians have proposed and constructed their ancestor christological paradigms. See Nyamiti, *Christ as Our Ancestor*, 35.

<sup>86</sup> Adeyemo, *Salvation in African Tradition*, 25.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

act not as a nature, forgiveness consists of community acceptance after the prescribed penalty” has been met.<sup>88</sup> He considers the indigenous Yoruba’s conceptions of sin and forgiveness as inadequate on the grounds that they do not explain the presence of sin nature in human beings and that they do not account properly for human beings’ sins against God.<sup>89</sup> Kato essentially viewed the Jaba people’ concepts of sin in the same way: “Sin [for the Jaba people] boils down to only social ills”. But Kato insists, “sin against the society is only a minor manifestation of the basic sin of rebellion against God”.<sup>90</sup> After examining some of the indigenous myths regarding the destroyed relationship between God and human beings, Adeyemo notes the following difference between the indigenous and Christian biblical views of sin.

While the traditional religions [of Africa] place emphasis on the acts of sin and the consequences, the Bible places emphasis on the sin nature of every man. The biblical revelation concerning sin as a nature lies embedded in sacred history. In Genesis three the origin of sin in the human race goes back to the fall of Adam and Eve in the [garden of] Eden. All mankind was in Adam seminally. Through this seminal relationship all mankind sinned against God and the sin nature has since then been passed on from generation to all born of a man.... Biblically man is a sinner not because he sins, but man sins because he is a sinner by nature. The emphasis is not on the act or the external manifestation, but rather on the internal, the intrinsic nature and the essential condition of man.<sup>91</sup>

Adeyemo’s contention provides us with a helpful background to examine the concepts of sin in Nigerian Christianity. The majority of lay Christians will respond to the question ‘who is Jesus to you?’ by saying ‘Jesus is my saviour’.<sup>92</sup> In most cases, this answer arises from what they have been taught or what they have read from the Bible about the sin of Adam and Eve and how the sin has affected the entire humanity. Although the majority of these Christians lack the sophistication that is needed in explicating the connection between the sin of Adam and Eve and the entire humanity, they continue to believe that it is because of the sin of Adam and Eve and the impact of the sin upon humanity that God has acted in and through the Christ-Event. Jesus Christ came, according to Thompson Onyenechehie, a pastor in ECWA, “to do the work of salvation for mankind” and “to save mankind from the

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Kato *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*, 42.

<sup>91</sup> Adeyemo, *Salvation in African Tradition*, 59-60. St. Augustine has influenced Adeyemo’s view of the ‘transmission of the sin of Adam and Eve to their posterity. I will return to discuss the theological implications of this view of the Fall.

<sup>92</sup> See chapter three for an extensive discussion on Nigerian grassroots Christologies.

consequences of sin as we are taught in Genesis 3”.<sup>93</sup> Adeyemo, following Kato, argues that because of the sin of Adam and Eve the entire humanity became ‘totally depraved’. For him a ‘total depravity’ entails that “God’s image is distorted in every part of man, but not obliterated”.<sup>94</sup>

It is vital to recognize that the biblical writers describe sin and its consequence in different ways. This means that it is impossible to encapsulate sin in one terminology such as ‘total depravity’ or ‘original sin’. What Adeyemo is wrestling with is the question ‘how is it that the sin of Adam and Eve has a consequence upon humanity?’ For him, human beings were “seminally in Adam” and when he sinned against God, humanity equally sinned. Adeyemo here follows St. Augustine’s concepts of the ‘original sin’ and universal guilt.<sup>95</sup> Some scholars today argue that Augustine’s mistranslation of the Greek *eph ho* as “in whom” led him to argue that sin is seminally transmitted.<sup>96</sup> Philip Hefner notes that Augustine “elaborated the concepts of Adam’s fall, the transmission of Adam’s sin and its consequences through conception”, that is, “specifically, sin is carried by a man’s semen”.<sup>97</sup>

The key biblical text here is Romans 5:12. The apostle Paul seems to think of humanity as originating from one ancestor; namely, Adam:

The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands.... From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live.<sup>98</sup>

It should not be surprising then that he considers Adam’s sin “to spread throughout the human race from its first beginning” and that all persons have contributed “their own share of it”.<sup>99</sup> From the perspective of Romans 1 and 2, it is clear that Paul sees

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<sup>93</sup> Thompson Onyenechehie, interview by researcher, tape recording, March 10, 2006.

<sup>94</sup> Adeyemo, *Salvation in African Tradition*, 26.

<sup>95</sup> I will return to examine Adeyemo’s view of sin later in this chapter. See Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Gerald G. Walsh and Grace Monahan (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1952), 380.

<sup>96</sup> Terrance L. Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved? Reassessing Salvation in Christ and World Religions* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 75.

<sup>97</sup> Philip Hefner, *The Human Factor: Evolution, Culture and Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 126.

<sup>98</sup> Acts 17: 24-26, *NIV*.

<sup>99</sup> N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991), 39.

human beings as utterly sinful and enemies of God. In Romans 5, however, he provides the context for his views of human beings as sinful and enemies of God. Although human beings have from the beginning disobeyed God, because of his love, God has in the Christ-Event (gospel) provided the remedy for human sins which is qualitatively greater than the source (Adam) of the sins of humanity.

But the gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many! Again, the gift of God is not like the result of the one man's sin: The judgment followed one sin and brought condemnation, but the gift followed many trespasses and brought justification. For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.<sup>100</sup>

On the issue of 'original sin' which Adeyemo has raised, it is vital to probe into the meaning of this theological expression and to test its relevance and meaningfulness for a Nigerian context. It is vital to keep in mind that this theological expression is Western in origin,<sup>101</sup> and may not be wholly adequate for explaining the 'broken relationship between God and humanity' in the Nigerian context. The word 'original' in the expression 'original sin' is ambivalent. Does the word mean 'first' in which case 'original sin' means the 'first sin'? Or does 'original' refer to 'origin' in which case 'original sin' will mean 'the origin of human sin'?<sup>102</sup> Kato seems to use the expression original sin in both senses. According to Kato, "Man's fundamental dilemma is alienation from God. The historical account of Genesis 3 gives the root cause of all sufferings here and in the life to come".<sup>103</sup> Gregory Olikenyi also sees the story of Adam's and Eve's disobedience as indicating the etiology of sin:

At the very point in time in creation, all humanity was intended to find fulfillment in God. But sin entered the world with its drastic consequences – such as guilt, sickness and death – which affected the entire cosmos (cf. Gen 3:17-19; Rom. 5:12-14); all humanity, as a result, forfeited its divine destiny (cf. Rom. 3:23).<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Romans 5: 15-17; see also 8:1-4.

<sup>101</sup> Hefner, *The Human Factor*, 126.

<sup>102</sup> The theological expression 'original sin', if it is understood as the 'first sin', presupposes a state of 'original righteousness'. Theologians have also disagreed on whether "the concept of original righteousness refers to an actual historical period when human beings were sinless and from which they have fallen". See Hefner, *The Human Factor*, 127.

<sup>103</sup> Byang H. Kato, *Biblical Christianity in Africa: A Collection of Papers and Addresses* (Achimota: African Christian Press, 1985), 17.

<sup>104</sup> Gregory Ikechukwu Olikenyi, *African Hospitality: A Model for the Communication of the Gospel in the African Context* (Veroffentlichungen: At. Augustin, 2001), 62.

Since, as I have already noted, the Nigerian indigenous myths of humanity's alienation from God do not intend to communicate the 'beginning point' of human's sin, but rather to communicate the remoteness of God,<sup>105</sup> it is doubtful if the concept of the original sin, as Kato and Adeyemo use it, can communicate the Christian teachings regarding the sinful human condition effectively to the people of Nigeria. In addition, the view that the Genesis 3 narrative aims to provide an etiological context of sin is highly debateable. Hefner has noted that another possible way of reading the Genesis narrative is to see it as a description of the present sinful state of human beings.<sup>106</sup> He proposes a third way of understanding the presence of sin in humanity, which seems to be influenced by his desire to bridge the gulf between the two foregoing views and to avert the possible extremity of the two views.<sup>107</sup>

But however one understands the Genesis 3 narrative, it is important to note that in the mind of the author, the relationship between God and humanity has been affected for the worse. Although we read of several other evil or sinful acts in Genesis after the story of the disobedience of Adam and Eve, we have to wait until the New Testament era, specifically in the writings of Paul, to see a direct connection between the Genesis story of the 'Fall' and the presence of sin in humanity. Whether or not we describe the inability of human beings not to sin as the consequence of a 'sinful nature' in humanity, as many Nigerian theologians have done,<sup>108</sup> what is evident is that human beings have continued to act and live in the ways that hurt the relationship that exists between them and God: this is the present sinful condition of humanity.

Jesus the Christ acknowledges the sinful condition of humanity, but it seems that he locates this within the broader context of a 'new relationship' which God has enacted through him. He mediates and interprets, as the revealer of divinity and humanity, what God expects from and intends humanity to be. It is striking that Jesus does not make any direct reference to the Genesis story of the disobedience of Adam

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<sup>105</sup> Some scholars have queried the myths to discover if they intended to 'exonerate God's remoteness' (since it was the disobedience or 'sinful' acts of human beings that caused it) or to "show "divine capriciousness and unfairness". See Malcolm J, McVeigh, *God in Africa: Concepts of God in African Traditional Religion* (Cape Cod: Claude Stark: 1974), 137-139.

<sup>106</sup> Hefner, *The Human Factor*, 127.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>108</sup> These theologians have been influenced by the apostle Paul (See Roman 7 and 8.) and perhaps St. Augustine's concepts of *non-posse non-peccare* (not able not to sin).

and Eve in his teachings on the sinful human condition. Although we are to be very careful in erecting theological presuppositions on the ground of ‘silence’, it is not out of place to postulate that perhaps Jesus has avoided referencing the story of the ‘Fall’ in Genesis because his concern is to articulate the ‘actual human sinful condition’ and not to trace, as the apostle Paul does, the primordial source of human sinful condition. In contrast to the Genesis 3 narrative, which focuses on *human disobedience or mistrust*, in the thinking of Jesus Christ, the actual human sinful condition lies in the *rejection of the new relationship* God has specifically located in and through the Christ-Event. This does not mean that Jesus’ view of the human sinful condition and that of the author of Genesis 3 are mutually exclusive.<sup>109</sup> By disobeying God’s instruction not to eat from a particular tree, Adam and Eve ultimately rejected God’s fellowship since enjoying divine fellowship entails obedience to divine command.

The novelty of Jesus’ understanding of God-human relation lies in the fact that he preaches that God is ready to judge and deal with humanity’s disobedience and also to offer to human beings a new fellowship through the Christ-Event. From the perspective of the Christ-Event, then, what hinders human beings from having a relationship with the God of Jesus Christ is the rejection of Jesus’ invitation to all people to accept his ‘vision’ of the kingdom of God. Jesus and his gospel are not mutually exclusive. In fact, quite the opposite, rejecting Jesus means rejecting the good news he embodied and preached and vice versa. Therefore, it is not possible for anyone who rejects Jesus’ invitation to embrace his vision of the kingdom of God to become part of the kingdom of God.<sup>110</sup>

Jesus’ announcement of the kingdom of God, which was the “very centre of his mission and message”,<sup>111</sup> is intrinsically related to God’s initiative to reconcile with human beings, to ‘re-establish’ God’s self as the ruler, not only of the world in which the Jews lived, but also as the ruler of the whole world. Jesus’ announcement

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<sup>109</sup> Some theologians associate the ‘seed’ of the woman in 3:15 with Jesus Christ, and the snake bite with death to Jesus death on the cross, the crushing of the snakes head with Jesus victorious resurrection from the dead. See Turaki, *The Unique Christ for Salvation*, 163-164.

<sup>110</sup> The soteriological implications of this christological claim are to be understood within the parameters of people who live after the Christ-Event, have had the opportunity to have an encounter with the gospel of Jesus either through divine or human agency, and are cognitively capable of understanding the gospel.

<sup>111</sup> N. T. Wright and Marcus Borg, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Versions* (London: SPCK, 1999), 33. See also Ukachukwu Chris Manus, *Christ, the African King* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1993), 147-149; John S. Mbiti, *New Testament Eschatology in an African Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 42-44.

of the kingdom of God surprised and disturbed many Jews, not because it was a novel idea, but because the picture of the kingdom of God he painted, to use the words of N. T. Wright, “did not look like what they had expected”.<sup>112</sup> It challenged Israel’s core understandings of humanity, divinity, and God-world relation: in the kingdom of God, oppression and dehumanization have no place, God’s judgement will not fall upon the Gentiles nations alone as the Jews anticipated, but upon both the Jews and the Gentiles, God’s love will reign, Jews and Gentiles will share from the same table of fellowship; oppression will not be tolerated, and the Jews are “to abandon alternative kingdom visions” and join in Jesus’ kingdom visions.<sup>113</sup>

When human beings refuse to acknowledge and accept the new relationship that God provides and offers to them, they expose their self-centredness, rebelliousness, and disobedience to God. Jesus unveils this in his encounter with Nicodemus, as John records:

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son. This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.<sup>114</sup>

In this popular passage, Jesus presents in a most penetrating way the condition of humanity in relation to God. People who are not part of the new relationship that God has enacted through Jesus Christ are ‘perishing’ and are *ede kekritai*, ‘already condemned’. But the primary task of Jesus is not to condemn human beings, but rather to introduce them to God in the way that radically upsets, challenges, and critiques what human beings consider to be truly human; namely, to become autonomous and ultimately free from God’s relationship. “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him”.<sup>115</sup>

Misery, oppression, poverty, alienation, otherness, and sickness that are prevalent in Nigeria, and not only in Nigeria but around the globe, are some consequences of rejecting, and failing to accept the unique relationship that God is offering to human beings through Jesus Christ. According to Nyamiti, the Fall brings

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<sup>112</sup> Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus*, 35.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>114</sup> John 3: 16-21, *NIV*.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*

“unhappy consequences” which includes bodily diseases, death, evil possessions.<sup>116</sup>

Kato agrees:

The nature of man’s fundamental dilemma does not lie in mere physical suffering. It does not lie primarily in horizontal relationships with his fellow man. All human tragedies, be they sickness, poverty, or exploitation, are merely symptoms of the root cause, which the Bible calls sin.<sup>117</sup>

But for Jesus, God’s self-revelation in the Christ-Event demonstrates God’s desire to provide and sustain a new relationship with fallen humanity. But how are we to understand this relationship? This is the question I examine below.

## **2. Enacting a New Relationship**

God became human in Jesus Christ in order to bring human beings back to what God intended them to be. This is a dominant reading of the Christ-Event. But what does this perception of Jesus Christ mean for Nigerian Christians? The Christ-Event introduces a new hope for humanity: it gives humanity a hope to enjoy fellowship with God in and through Jesus Christ. This divine fellowship is multifaceted. Although it is grounded primarily in God’s offer of relationship to human beings, it is an interpersonal relationship that includes God-world relation, God-human relation, human-human relation and human-world relation. In other words, the relationship that Jesus Christ enacts and sustains connects divinity and humanity. As I have already argued, when examined in the light of the Christ-Event, sin in relation to God means repudiating and rejecting God’s fellowship. Terrance Tiessen has noted that although “the story of the tragic Fall of humankind into sin comes very early in the biblical narrative”, the “rest of the story is a wonderful account of God’s work of grace to restore sinful human beings to fellowship with himself” and also to “renew the whole cosmos”.<sup>118</sup>

The majority of Christians (both theologians and the laity) see Jesus Christ as the one who can bring about the restoration of the fallen humanity. Clear as it may seem, there is still something strange about this claim. What does it mean to posit that Jesus is the bringer or enactor of the new God-human relationship? Theologically, the claim that ‘Jesus is the saviour of the world’ means very little without explication just as the claim ‘there is no salvation outside of Jesus Christ’

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<sup>116</sup> Nyamiti, *Christ As Our Ancestor*, 55.

<sup>117</sup> Kato, *Biblical Christianity in Africa*, 16.

<sup>118</sup> Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved?*, 83.

equally means very little (in the pluralist context of Nigeria) without explication. The latter claim fits more properly into the area of 'theology of religion' and falls outside the parameters of this study.<sup>119</sup> My concern here is the former question. But what does it mean to say that Jesus is the saviour of the world or the one through whom humanity can be reconciled and restored to a divine fellowship? This is a broad question and needs to be unpacked. A helpful way to explore this question is to ask another question which fits more properly into the task of this study; namely, how is it that the fallen human beings are also restorable to God's loving fellowship? Throughout this study, I have argued that the answer to this question is inherently connected with the Christ-Event: the incarnation, teaching and preaching, death on the cross, resurrection, and the ascension are all part of God's process of initiating and sustaining a loving fellowship and covenant partnership with humanity. Therefore, Jesus Christ stands at the centre of Christianity precisely because he is the one who enacts the God-human relationship which is at the centre of the Christian faith. The restoration of fallen humanity to God is "only a possibility on the account of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ".<sup>120</sup> Ng'Weshemi makes a similar point. If "we want to discover the true and essential nature of human beings", he argues, "we have to look at Christ in whom what is fallen has been restored".<sup>121</sup> Again he writes,

Jesus stood for life, but true life result from his work as he liberates humanity from the impediments that make it difficult for them to live a full and meaningful life. Evil or sin, disease, imperfection, alienation, estrangement or segregation, exploitation, oppression, and finally death are the antitheses of life. And Jesus worked toward renewal and restoration of the original creation, and perfection of human beings to wholeness".<sup>122</sup>

The Ghanaian theologian, Kwame Bediako concurs,

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<sup>119</sup> But the key theological question is: Is Jesus Christ both ontologically and epistemologically necessary for salvation? 'Ontological necessity' raises the issue of whether or not people have experienced divine salvation, even before the Christ-Event, without the second Person of the Trinity. 'Epistemological necessity' raises the issue of whether or not people can experience God's relationship only on the basis of their hearing the gospel being preached and explicitly express their faith in Jesus. A helpful introduction to these issues is Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips, eds., *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).

<sup>120</sup> Alister E. McGrath, "A Particularist View: A Post-Enlightenment Approach," in *Four Views of Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, 171.

<sup>121</sup> Ng'Weshemi, *Rediscovering the Human*, 108.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

Jesus Christ, himself the image of the Father, by becoming one like us, has shared our human heritage. It is within this human heritage that he finds us and speaks to us in terms of its questions and puzzles. He challenges us to turn to him and participate in the new humanity for which he has come, died, been raised and glorified.<sup>123</sup>

There is a common tendency among many Nigerian theologians to concentrate on and overemphasize the cross-event and to underemphasize some other aspects of the Christ-Event when exploring the process of humanity's restoration to God. This is, however, unwarranted.

The *incarnation* indicates God's willingness to identify with human beings even in their sinful condition with the intent to critique their sinfulness and to provide them with the hope of restoration. In chapter five, I examined the incarnation and therefore need not rehearse what I have already said about this event. What I need to do here is to locate this event in God's overall process of enacting through Jesus Christ a new relationship that will bring God and human beings into a covenant partnership. Before the advent of Jesus Christ, God related to human beings in some ways that sustained the radical ontological difference between humanity and divinity. Although God spoke with human beings and communicated to them through various means such as fire, violent wind, miraculous acts, angels, and so on, God remained distanced ontologically from them: God had not yet become consubstantial with human beings. But in and through the Christ-Event, God became consubstantial with human beings.

At least two interrelated reasons can be advanced to explain the purpose of the incarnation. First, the sinfulness of humanity renders human beings incapable of enacting any effective and lasting relationship with God. Human beings are sinful and corrupt and as such cannot if unaided produce the righteousness which God requires for keeping a relationship with humanity. Thus, it is partly on the ground that human beings cannot on their own restore themselves back to fellowship with God that God has incarnated in the person of Jesus the Christ.<sup>124</sup> Most Christians readily say that Jesus came to save them from sins – the sin of Adam, the sins of their forbears and their own sins. In the thinking of these Christians, God sent Jesus Christ because human beings cannot save themselves from their sins and yet they are

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<sup>123</sup> Kwame Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa: History and Experience* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2004), 24.

<sup>124</sup> O'Collins, *Jesus Our Redeemer*, 81.

desperately in need of a relationship with God. Elizabeth Adeyemi Olusola, a member of ECWA, speaks for many when she says:

Jesus is my Saviour. He came to this world to save us [who are] sinners. As the Bible says, those who believe in him will live forever, even when [they] die in this world, [they] are going to see him [and] to rejoice with him. And I believe that God is my Saviour.<sup>125</sup>

Ben Fubara-Manuel who is a member of the Presbyterian Church of Nigeria agrees with Olusola but expresses his understanding of Jesus Christ and God's offer of relationship to humans in a more sophisticated way.

When I say that Jesus is my Saviour, I think first of all in terms of the one who gives me the sense of connection to God. I know that I am not lost, that I don't exist alone, but that I have a connection to the almighty God. For me, not to be saved is to lose this connection. To be saved is to have it back.<sup>126</sup>

Some Nigerian theologians have explored the extent sin has damaged the image of God in human beings. For Kato, sin has "distorted the image of God" in human beings but has not "destroyed [the image] in the sense of being eradicated", for if it were so, human beings "would be deprived of morality, a will to decide, and ability to make rational choices".<sup>127</sup> Although Kato does not explain explicitly what constitutes the 'image of God' in human beings, it seems that he favours the view that sees the *imago Dei* as consisting in human *cognitive faculty* that enables human beings to make moral judgment and to reason. Turaki describes the 'image of God' as "man's differentia, which marks him out from the rest of all created things" and which is "the basis of his sacredness and the sanctity... of life".<sup>128</sup> Idowu, like Kato and Turaki, sees *imago Dei* in humanity as divine substances which God has deposited in all human beings. According to him, "there is something of the divine in man which makes him addressable and responsible" and therefore indicates that "there exists in him the possibility of his spirit being in community with the Divine Spirit".<sup>129</sup> Adeyemo also describes the image of God in humanity in a cognitive sense. Like Kato and Turaki, he contends that sin has distorted the image of God in

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<sup>125</sup> Elizabeth Adeyemi Olusola, interview by researcher, tape recording, Aba, 2 June 2006.

<sup>126</sup> Ben Fubara- Manuel, interview by researcher, tape recording, Aba, 12 March 2006.

<sup>127</sup> Kato, *Biblical Christianity in Africa*, 18.

<sup>128</sup> Turaki, *The Unique Christ for Salvation*, 219..

<sup>129</sup> Idowu, *African Traditional Religion*, 55.

human beings and has made them susceptible to the temptation and incapable of worshipping God truly.<sup>130</sup>

The cognitive view of the image of God in humanity is widespread in African theological anthropologies. The major problem with the cognitive understanding of the *imago Dei*, as evidenced in the argument of Idowu, is that it leads to construing the specific feature of the image of God in terms of a ‘divine deposit’ or divine input’ in human beings. What has influenced Idowu here is the Yoruba indigenous concept of *ori* which he defines as “essence of personality, the personality-soul in a man [that] derives from *Olodumare*”.<sup>131</sup> The Igbo concept of *chi* (here construed in the sense of a guardian angel) is similar to *ori*. According to Uchenna Ezeh, *chi* is the “spark of God which God gives each person at conception”.<sup>132</sup> In the Igbo worldview, this ‘spark of God’ in human beings is called *chi*. In chapter five, we saw that *chi* in this context functions as a ‘guardian spirit’ which controls the destiny of a person. Some scholars have argued that when a person dies his or her “*chi* goes back to God to give an account of his [or her] work on earth”.<sup>133</sup> But when the individual reincarnates God may give the person a different *chi*, especially if the previous chose a bad fortune for the person.<sup>134</sup>

It is becoming predominant among some Western theologians to construe the image of God in terms of relation. For example, Robert Jenson has written:

In Genesis, the specific relation to God is *as such* the peculiarity attributed to humanity. If we are to seek in the human creature some feature to be called the image of God, this can only be our location in this relation.<sup>135</sup>

A few African theologians are beginning to interpret the image of God in humanity in a relational sense.<sup>136</sup> This understanding of *Imago Dei* fits properly the indigenous African sense of community. My interest here, however, lies in the effect of sin on humanity. Many Christian theologians today will not disagree that sin affects every

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<sup>130</sup> Adeyemo, *Salvation in African Tradition*, 26.

<sup>131</sup> E. Bolaji Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* (London: Longmans, 1962), 171.

<sup>132</sup> Ezeh, *Jesus Christ the Ancestor*, 56.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.* See also Metuh, *African Religions in Western Conceptual Scheme*, 111.

<sup>135</sup> Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology: The Works of God*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 58.

<sup>136</sup> See Joe M. Kapolyo, *Human Condition: Christian Perspective through the African Eyes* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 46-53.

aspect of human life. In most cases, this is only understood in a soteriological or moral sense. The sinfulness of humanity makes it equally impossible for human beings to comprehend and appreciate God's relationship. Human beings require a divine quickening and kindling, usually associated with the Holy Spirit, before they can rediscover their sinfulness and their status before God as God's fallen creatures. This means also that human beings need a divine relational stirring to enable them to recognize a divine relational offering of restoration.<sup>137</sup>

Second, the incarnation expresses the extent of God's love and desire to identify with humanity. The extent of this divine desire to be in solidarity with humanity is evident when we take account of the fact that human beings are fallen. As Turaki notes,

The greatest revelation of Jesus Christ the Messiah to humanity is his revelation of God as Father who seeks after the lost man. God is not seen as 'withdrawn', austere, authoritarian and whose disposition is only to judge man, the sinner. God is revealed in Christ's loving, gracious, compassionate, forgiving and faithful.<sup>138</sup>

Without the incarnation human beings may never know the depth and width of God's love for them, how much God desires to identify with them in their sinful and lowly condition, and how much God surrenders and disposes in order to bring human beings into a divine loving relationship. By becoming human, God demonstrates that the sinfulness and the sinful acts of human beings are not able to deter God permanently from having a relationship with them. Thus, although sin hurts God, and he hates it, yet God's love is very deep and continues to propel him to seek to have a relationship with human beings. The author of Isaiah presents this picture about God when he quotes God as saying:

'Come now, let us reason together', says the LORD. 'Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though your sins are red a crimson, they shall be like wool.'<sup>139</sup>

Jesus Christ also teaches that God has not allowed the sins of human beings to steer him away from having a relationship with them. Quite the opposite, it is the sinfulness and sins of human beings that inspire God all the more to seek a relationship with them by sending God's Son to enact the relationship. Responding to

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<sup>137</sup> I explored the Christian concept of the Trinity and its implication for Christology in chapter five. Here, although our focus is on Christology and humanity, it is vital to recognize that the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit *is* (in a Trinitarian sense) involved in the process of God's restoration of fallen humanity.

<sup>138</sup> Turaki, *The Unique Christ for Salvation*, 150.

<sup>139</sup> Isaiah 1:18, *NIV*.

the Pharisees who thought that it was comprehensively wrong for Jesus to dine with the people who were considered to be religiously and socially sinners, Jesus said:

‘It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.<sup>140</sup>

Through the incarnation God reopens the wound caused by human sins but does not look away; instead, God identifies with sinful and fallen humanity for the purpose of restoring them to what God intends for them to be.

The *miracles and teachings* of Jesus Christ, particularly about the kingdom of God, unveils God’s gift to and expectations of human beings in order for them to participate in and benefit from the divine kingdom. Regarding the connection between Jesus’ miraculous works and salvation he embodies, O’Collins writes:

Matthew, Mark, and Luke...recall not only that Jesus worked miracles but also that his miraculous deeds were powerful signs of the kingdom, inextricably bound up with his proclamation of divine salvation. His healings and exorcisms were compassionate gestures, the first fruits of the presence of the kingdom which manifested God’s merciful rule already in operative in and through his person.<sup>141</sup>

O’Collins correctly notes that the miraculous healings of Jesus Christ expresses God’s restoration. By healing people of their infirmities, Jesus shows that the relationship he enacts involves dealing with human sufferings. We must expand the language of suffering here to include the spiritual, emotional, physical, social and psychological aspects of human life.<sup>142</sup> By healing people of their sufferings, Jesus communicates that God’s restoration of humanity is not merely a futurist phenomenon. It is rather a two-phased phenomenon which includes the immediate and the future. Whilst God’s complete and total restoration of humanity is a future event that belongs the ‘Second-Coming event’, evidently, God has already started restoring human beings into what God intends them to be through the miraculous work of Jesus Christ. Some feminist theologians have reminded us of the ‘social healing’ that Jesus has introduced by erasing the oppressive barriers that separate males and females. In the judgement of Anne Nasimiyu-Wasike, for example,

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<sup>140</sup> Matthew 9:12, *NIV*.

<sup>141</sup> O’Collins, *Jesus Our Redeemer*, 95.

<sup>142</sup> Some Nigerian theologians have argued that the difference between the salvation of a ‘biblical Christianity’ and the idea of salvation in the indigenous religions of Nigeria is that whilst the former teaches that salvation entails experiencing God’s restoration, the latter teaches that “to be saved primarily means to be accepted” by the community of the living members of the community and the ancestors. Adeyemo, *Salvation in African Tradition*, 93-96. See also Ferdinando, *The Triumph of Christ in African Perspective*, 389-392.

Jesus' attitude toward women is clearly reflected in miracle stories, parables and discourses. All four Gospels portray Jesus in several incidents as showing concern for women, not just for their well-being but for their being as persons. He gave them their true worth and dignity. Jesus' approach to women was revolutionary. He treated women and men as equals; this was new, given the contemporary cultural view of his time.<sup>143</sup>

The teaching of Jesus Christ revolved around his vision of the kingdom of God. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus discussed several issues that differed radically from some of his contemporaries' understanding of God-human relation. For Cornelius Olowola, Jesus expressed the requirements for entering into the kingdom of God in the Sermon on the Mount. He argues that, although Jesus presents these requirements in the ways that require human action, they are nevertheless unattainable without a divine help. He writes,

It is clear from the impossible demand of this holiness that grace and mercy alone offers any hope of entering into the kingdom. Thus, Christ taught the nocturnal Nicodemus that the entry into the kingdom was possible only to those who those regenerated by the Holy Spirit (John 3).<sup>144</sup>

Olowola seems to open up the classical debate on the relationship between *divine Grace* and *human freewill*,<sup>145</sup> or to use the contemporary theological expression, the debate on 'synergism' and 'monergism'.<sup>146</sup> Many Nigerian Christians, depending on their denominational and personal theological positions, may disagree on whether or not God only saves those whom God has 'effectually' called. Roughly speaking, Christians of Pentecostal and Wesleyan backgrounds may insist that God saves only those who have in their own free will accepted God's offer of salvation. Some Christians who see themselves as 'Evangelicals' (especially those who have been influenced by Calvinism) may argue that people are only capable of accepting God's offer of salvation because God has given to them a special quickening or calling. Whereas this debate may be prominent among theological students, it is hardly a serious issue at the grassroots level. Also, the *synergistic* and *mongergistic* debate has not yet occupied an important place in Nigerian theological scholarship.

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<sup>143</sup> Anne Nasimiyu-Wasike, "Christology and African Woman's Experience," in *Faces of Jesus in Africa*, 73.

<sup>144</sup> Cornelius Olowola, "The Person and Work of Jesus Christ," in *Issues in African Christian Theology*, 162-163.

<sup>145</sup> The debate centred upon St. Augustine of Hippo and Pelagius. The complexity of this debate explains why these two theologians have been variously interpreted.

<sup>146</sup> Contemporary theologians associate (roughly) *synergism* with Arminian and Wesleyan traditions and *monergism* with Calvinistic and Evangelical traditions. Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved?*, 17-20, 66-70.

In the West, however, particularly among some North American theologians, this debate is intense and has continued to shape soteriological discourses. For example, Tiessen has argued that “all of the [christological] positions can be categorized as either monergistic or synergistic understandings”.<sup>147</sup> He goes on to contend that “between these two [positions] there is no middle ground”.<sup>148</sup> Tiessen’s contention is theologically careless and fails to acknowledge the difficulty of subsuming theological positions under *neat* categories. The expression ‘synergism’ and ‘monergism’ are in fact misleading because both positions can (and should) intersect. Timothy Ware, one of the leading Orthodox theologians, has reminded us that it is possible to hold the essential elements of monergism and synergism together.

The West, since the time of Augustine and the Pelagian controversy, has discussed this question of grace and free will in somewhat different terms; and many brought up in the Augustinian tradition – particularly Calvinists – have viewed the Orthodox idea of ‘synergy’ with some suspicion.... God knocks, but waits for us to open the door – He does not break it down. The grace of God invites all but compels none.... But it must not be imagined that because a person accepts and guards God’s grace, he thereby earns ‘merit’. God’s gifts are always free gifts, and we humans can never have any claims upon our Maker. But while we cannot ‘merit’ salvation, we must certainly work for it, since faith without works is dead (James ii, 17).<sup>149</sup>

Ware may be accused of a simplistic explanation of a highly complex issue. However, what his contention indicates is the possibility of holding together the key essential elements of synergism and monergism. Jesus Christ teaches that salvation is a gift from God and that human beings have the responsibility to accept or reject the gift.<sup>150</sup> Consequently, the soteriology or Christology that underestimates the gracious salvific gift of God and the responsibility of human beings to accept God’s gift of salvation is inadequate and distorts Jesus’ vision of the kingdom of God.

The Revealer Christology model that I have proposed in this study argues that a Christian anthropology and Christology that aim to be relevant to what humanity means to the majority of contemporary Nigerian people must be ready to go beyond the classical debates on sin to grapple with and criticize the actual dehumanizing conditions that many Nigerian people experience. Bernard Ukwuegbu is undoubtedly

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, new ed. (New York: Penguin, 1997), 222.

<sup>150</sup> John 1:12; 3:16; Mark 1:14.

correct when he argues that the Nigerian Christians “who follow Jesus Christ [in] doing good, criticizing human [oppressive] structures, and changing society for the better” understand truly the practical implications of their faith in Jesus Christ.<sup>151</sup> Perhaps the major ‘sins’ that concern the majority of Nigerian people today are the maltreatment of many widows by some of their husbands’ relatives, poverty that is caused by and rooted in greediness, and ethnic and religious conflicts that are driven by some people’s selfish ambitions. Jesus’ vision of the kingdom of God is critical of these sins that confront the Nigerian people.

The *cross-event* graphically exposes paradoxically both the extent of human sinfulness and God’s sovereignty in orchestrating and including the sinful acts of human beings into God’s own process of restoring the fallen humanity. That the Christ-Event provides the possibility for human beings to be reconciled to God is hardly a debated issue in Nigerian Christianity. For Kato, “to seek salvation elsewhere than through the shed blood of Jesus Christ is heretical”.<sup>152</sup> According to Turaki,

Reconciliation between God and man (Romans 5:8-11; 2 Cor. 5:18; Col. 1:19-22) is rooted in the redemptive work of Christ on the cross. The enmity and the wrath of God and judgement upon man as a result of the fall has been abolished by the cross of Christ and the result is that man now has access to God, peace, and forgiveness of God upon repentance and belief in Jesus Christ the Messiah (Romans 5:8-11; 5:1, 2; 8:1).<sup>153</sup>

Many theologians are preoccupied with the ‘redemptive’ solution the cross-event provides. What is noteworthy, which is often overlooked, is that the cross-event exposes humanity’s selfishness and violence. Most theologians have become so accustomed to speaking of the death of Jesus Christ as *God’s sacrificial act* that they have overlooked the anthropological implication of the cross-event. Commenting on the difference between the ‘sacrificial death of Jesus Christ’ and the ‘ritual sacrifices’ in African indigenous religions, Adeyemo asserts:

[The] ritualistic approaches to God have failed to satisfy the deepest longings and aspirations of man. The constant reaching upward to a distant and perhaps indifferent deity has produced alternative approaches. The Christian approach is to affirm that God for all time has performed a full and final ritual of sacrifice

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<sup>151</sup> Bernard Ukwuegbu, *Confrontational Evangelization: Foundations, Features and Prospects* (Onitsha: Effective Key Publishers, 1995), 49.

<sup>152</sup> Kato, *Biblical Christianity in Africa*, 22.

<sup>153</sup> Turaki, *The Unique Christ for Salvation*, 168.

that has opened up complete and constant union with Him. This is the gracious sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross....<sup>154</sup>

According to Gunton, the “feeling of the rightness or even necessity of a sacrificial dimension to our existence runs very deep in human experience”.<sup>155</sup> Gunton uses the word ‘sacrifice’ in a metaphorical sense. He notes that the use of the word ‘sacrifice’ to describe the death of Jesus Christ is propelled by the desire to show what is “now the only one sacrifice that really matters”.<sup>156</sup> We have seen that Adeyemo makes a similar point. For him, the death of Jesus Christ is the “full and final ritual of sacrifice”.<sup>157</sup> The difference between Gunton and Adeyemo lies in their understanding of the use of sacrifice. Whilst Gunton uses the word in a metaphorical sense, Adeyemo uses it a literal sense.

My primary concern here is to explore the contribution the cross-event makes in God’s activities of restoring human beings into a divine fellowship. The concept of sacrifice is present in the indigenous religions.<sup>158</sup> In Adeyemo’s understanding, the death of Jesus Christ expresses God’s punitive act: God punishes and sacrifices Jesus Christ in order to save and reconcile humanity to God’s self.<sup>159</sup> Olowola shares this view but seems to suggest that it was Jesus Christ who sacrificed his own life. “As God’s specially appointed Priest”, Olowola argues, “Christ displayed the love and mercy of God by interceding and by sacrificing his own life on behalf of a fallen world”.<sup>160</sup> For Adeyemo and Olowola, however, the death of Jesus Christ guarantees a hope for the restoration of sinful humanity into a “spiritual fellowship and moral harmony with God”.<sup>161</sup> Jesus accepted his death neither as a fate nor as a deserved punishment for his revolutionary teachings. The death of Jesus Christ, properly understood, demonstrates Jesus’ self-giving of himself (which is in accordance with

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<sup>154</sup> Adeyemo, “The Idea of Salvation in Contemporary World Religions,” in *Issues in African Christian Theology*, 201.

<sup>155</sup> Colin E. Gunton, *The Actuality of Atonement: A Study of Metaphor, Rationality and the Christian Tradition* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988), 120.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>157</sup> Adeyemo, “The Idea of Salvation in Contemporary World Religions,” 201.

<sup>158</sup> Offering sacrifices to appease an angry ancestor is a common religious practice among those who adhere to the indigenous religions. See Adeyemo, *Salvation in African Tradition*, 33-41.

<sup>159</sup> Adeyemo, “The Idea of Salvation in Contemporary World Religions,” 201, 208.

<sup>160</sup> Olowola, “The Person and Work of Jesus Christ,” 166.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

God's purpose) for the restoration of fallen humanity. Thus, the idea that the death of Jesus Christ was God's act of punishing Jesus Christ on behalf of humanity is theologically misleading because it fails to properly account for Jesus' wilful act of giving himself as a gift. Gunton warns that if we are to avoid the "suggestions that the sacrifice of Jesus is in some way a punitive substitution, in which God punishes him for our sins", we must pay attention to the fact that the death of Jesus Christ "is not the imposed death of the beast, but the voluntary self-giving of a man".<sup>162</sup> Jesus' self-giving is striking when it is located within the Jewish context where people offer sacrifice to God. In this reversal of the roles, instead of human beings offering sacrifice to God, God gives God's self in the death of Jesus Christ to human beings God's self. For Gunton, sacrifice as metaphor when understood in the sense of God's self-giving "remains a matchless conceptual expression of the theological significance of all that Jesus began and continued among us".<sup>163</sup>

The view that God punished God's Son (Jesus Christ) by sending him to the cross to die on behalf of sinful humanity or Jesus Christ sacrificing himself on behalf of a sinful humanity blurs and overshadows the fact that the execution of Jesus Christ on the cross demonstrates the width, depth, and height of human sinfulness and wickedness. Richard Mouw puts it this way:

In the death on the cross God also took our violent impulses upon himself, mysteriously absorbing them into his very being in order to transform them into the power of reconciling love; and then he offers that love back to us as a gift of sovereign grace.<sup>164</sup>

The death of Jesus on the cross exposes the wickedness, violence and determination of human beings to remain independent and estranged from God. It is vital to point out that the word *sacrifice* needs to be carefully explained if it is not to obstruct an effective interpretation and appropriation of the Christ-Event in Nigeria.<sup>165</sup> Human sacrifice was part of the religious rituals of a few indigenous Nigerian societies. But this is hardly practiced today and many contemporary Nigerians largely consider it an evil act.<sup>166</sup> The notion that a Father punitively executes his Son for the sake of

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<sup>162</sup> Gunton, *The Actuality of Atonement*, 124-125.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>164</sup> Richard J. Mouw, "Violence and the Atonement," in *Must Christianity be Violent? Reflection on History, Practice and Theology*, ed. Kenneth R. Chase and Alan Jacobs (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2003), 171.

<sup>165</sup> In the West, some theologians have accused Christianity of promoting violence on the grounds of the doctrine of the atonement.

<sup>166</sup> See Idowu, *Olódùmarè*, 147.

having a fellowship with others will come across to many Nigerians (even in the indigenous societies where human sacrifices were practiced) as a taboo rather than as an act of *unselfish love* for others. Even the concept of a ‘once-for-all’ understanding of the death of Jesus Christ will simply not do as a way of explaining the bad omen and taboo that the imagery of a divine Father ordering the death of his Son for the purpose of saving others conjures up.

The punitive sacrificial view of the cross-event can hinder people from seeing the execution of Jesus Christ as the climax of human repudiation of God’s fellowship. The paradox of the cross-event lies in the fact that God orchestrated the evil act of human beings (that is, the execution of Jesus Christ) into God’s purpose of restoring and extending God’s loving fellowship to the sinful and wicked humanity. The death of Jesus Christ therefore (1) exposes the extent of the wickedness and sinfulness of human beings – even to the point of killing the one who ‘knew no sin’; (2) expresses the susceptibility of human beings to the influence of satanic forces even to the point of teaming up with them to distort God’s rule and to repudiate God’s offer of relationship to humanity; (3) demonstrates God’s willingness to risk the life of his Son in order to enact a relationship with human beings;<sup>167</sup> and (4) demonstrates God’s power to bring out good from human wickedness. The key paradox here is that although God comes to us as the powerless and voiceless Being by allowing Jesus Christ to be executed by human beings, God at the same time criticizes and condemns the wickedness, self-possession, and oppressive acts of violence of human beings. The resurrection of Jesus Christ illuminates this paradox. Ukachukwu Manus has written, “in raising him, God confirms [God’s] presence, [God’s] love and power in the person of Jesus Christ”.<sup>168</sup> The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead has demonstrated God’s sovereignty over the wickedness of humanity and God’s willingness to give humanity a new hope even at the cost of giving God’s self.

In conclusion, the overarching theme of this chapter is that God’s self-giving, demonstrated in the Christ-Event, has mediated and interpreted humanity in a way that upsets some of the understandings of humanity in Nigerian Christianity and the indigenous worldviews such as the construal of human beings as the centre of the world and as the enemies of God. The Christ-Event also exposes the danger of the

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<sup>167</sup> Luke 20:9-19.

<sup>168</sup> Manus, *Christ, the African King*, 210.

act of using God and human beings as tools to achieve wellbeing. Therefore, Christologies of some Nigerian Christians that are rooted primarily in the quest to gain solution from God but overlooks how God in Jesus Christ shakes and criticizes their understandings of solution is wanting. I have argued throughout this study that such a solution-driven mindset is rooted partly in the indigenous construal of humanity as being the centre of existence around which other beings and things in the world revolve. This view of humanity is idolatrous and also distorts Jesus' perception of human beings as creatures who are to continually negotiate their being, identity, purpose and destiny (within their contexts) in God's acts of self-giving. Since humanity exists because God is, it is therefore important for Christians to continue to explore afresh the implications of God's purpose for humanity (which is hidden in the mystery of the Christ-Event) and to criticize and dismantle every form of dehumanization that confronts the people of Nigeria.

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## **APPENDIX 1: QUALITATIVE RESEARCH**

### **Pre-set Questions for Semi-Structured Individual Interviews**

- 1. Who is Jesus Christ to you?**
- 2. Where do you get your knowledge about Jesus Christ?**
- 3. Are there some experiences in your life that you think have any connection with Jesus Christ?**
- 4. In your experience, does Jesus solve problems?**
- 5. In your experience, are there some Nigerian Christians who go outside of Jesus Christ to look for solution to their problems?**
- 6. If Jesus were to tell you to make a request what would you ask him for?**

## **APPENDIX 2: QUALITATIVE RESEARCH**

### **INTERVIEWS WITH MEMBERS OF THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH (ST. AMBROSE), UMUOBA ROAD ABA**

1. **James Olayinka:** May 3, 2006
2. **Chidi Maduka:** May 3, 2006
3. **Bridget Oduma:** June 20, 2006
4. **Ndidi Aharanya:** June 20, 2006
5. **Promise Chidindu Ahamefuna:** June 20, 2006
6. **Jude Nwachukwu (Priest):** June 22, 2006
7. **Christina Ezebike:** June 22, 2006
8. **Ogechi Nnanna:** June 22, 2006
9. **Tobechukwu Ihedinaobi:** June 22, 2006
10. **Teresa Akunne:** June 22, 2006

### **INTERVIEWS WITH MEMBERS OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF NIGERIA, OGBOR HILL, ABA**

1. **Dr. Amadi:** April 10, 2006
2. **Peter:** March 14, 2006
3. **Queen Mamoh:** May 18, 2006
4. **Mrs. Comfort:** June 18, 2006
5. **Ukweni O. Ukweni:** June 18, 2006
6. **Ejim Okonkwo:** June 18, 2006
7. **Ben Fubura Manuel (Pastor):** March 12, 2006.
8. **Sister Favour:** June 18, 2006
9. **Florence Nnenna Eze:** June 18, 2006
10. **Kinsley Unuegbu:** July 5, 2006

### **INTERVIEWS WITH MEMBERS OF ECWA ENGLISH CHURCH/ECWA CHURCH UMUOKEA, ABA**

1. **Moses Attah:** February 29, 2006
2. **Iliya Habu:** February 29, 2006
3. **Chioma:** March 8, 2006
4. **Blessing Oparauche:** March 8, 2006
5. **Mary Asonye:** March 22, 2006
6. **Thompson Onyenechehie (Pastor):** March 10, 2006
7. **Benedict Ufomadu:** May 28, 2006
8. **Elizabeth Adeyemi Olusola:** June 2, 2006
9. **Humble Douglas:** June 17, 2006
10. **Dosemu Bola:** June 28, 2006

**INTERVIEWS WITH MEMBERS OF CHRIST HOLY CHURCH  
(ODOZIOBODO) NO. 3, ABA**

1. **Favour Okpara:** June 25, 2006
2. **Veronica Okeke:** June 25, 2006
3. **Shedrach Chukwuemeka Okonkwo:** June 25, 2006
4. **Blessing Madu:** June 25, 2006
5. **Kate Agu:** June 25, 2006
6. **Favour Okafor:** July 9, 2006
7. **Emanuel Ahamba:** July 9, 2006
8. **Chukwuemeka:** July 9, 2006
9. **David Umeike (Pastor):** July 9 2006
10. **Chidozie Okoye:** July 9 2006

**INTERVIEWS WITH MEMBERS OF CHRISTIAN PENTECOSTAL  
MISSION, NGWA ROAD, ABA**

1. **Faith Ukaegbu:** May 6, 2006
2. **Emeka Nnabuko:** May 10, 2006
3. **Chukwuemeka Azunwa:** May 17, 2006
4. **Alex Iwuchiwueze:** May 17, 2006
5. **John Okpara (Pastor):** May 24, 2006
6. **Precious Uzobuike:** May 24, 2006
7. **Ernest Mbefo:** May 24, 2006
8. **Faith Iwuchukwu:** May 24, 2006
9. **Blessing Madubuko:** May 24, 2006
10. **Gloria Eze:** May 24, 2006