

# African Perspectives on Culture and World Christianity



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By

Joseph Ogbonnaya

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Dedicated to  
Fr. Robert M. Doran, S.J.



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## FOREWORD

Anyone picking up Joseph Ogbonnaya's book, *African Perspectives on Culture and World Christianity* will have some idea of what to expect, and will find some materials that the broadly educated person already knows. But there will also be a great variety of serious awakenings. We may have some inkling of the needs and the birthings of unique, indigenous African culture and its manifestations in the dramatic dancing welcomes given to visiting popes.

Ogbonnaya sets up the challenge: "The shift from a classicist to an empirical notion of culture emphasized by Bernard Lonergan forms the backdrop to the notion of culture adopted by this book." This book takes us substantially deeper into the experience of African Catholicism. His insights and those of his many African scholarly resources remind us of the generously heroic, but ultimately condescending chauvinism of European Catholic missionaries, who imposed a classicist Eurocentric Catholic philosophy and theology upon Africa. This calls us to focus on the unique and pressing need of African Catholicism to articulate a distinctively African Catholic theology and spirituality, which, like the similar pre-Christian foundations of European Catholicism, emerge from the bedrock of the continent. They are not to be blithely transported and imposed from an alien "Eurocentric" tradition, masquerading as "*philosophia perennis*," namely from a supposedly prime analogue of universal (Platonic) human nature, which is supposedly as universalist as mathematics.

Early on, Ogbonnaya declares his cultural independence and originality nicely justified by Bernard Lonergan's insistence on the importance of indigenous culture. Lonergan is clear: "I must contend that classicism is no more than the mistaken view of conceiving culture normatively and of concluding that there is just one human culture."

The needed emancipation from the Eurocentric, monochromatic and chauvinist classicist philosophical and theological Catholic tradition is effectively complemented by two weighty contemporaries passing judgment on traditional Catholic Thomistic theology. Walter Cardinal Kasper comments: "There is no doubt that the outstanding event in the Catholic theology of our century is the surmounting of neo-scholasticism." And Karl Rahner, S.J., writes: "I also believe that one can say that neo-scholastic theology and philosophy, for all their accomplishments, are

quite passé today.”

Catholics old enough to have enjoyed the pre-Vatican II “Octave of Christian Unity” may have witnessed the wonderful Catholic Eastern Rite liturgies in late January, which featured Eastern European languages and rituals—including Maronite, Chaldean and, marvelously, South Indian Syriac. St. John De Brito, S.J. (1647–1693) had become the *sannyasi* known as “Swami Arul Anandar.” Matteo Ricci, S.J., was the fabled “Wise Man from the West,” whose exceptionally successful inculturation of Catholicism among the Chinese led to the Chinese Rites controversy. Some may be familiar with the famous letter of Pope St. Gregory the Great telling the missionaries to England not to destroy, but to consecrate the pagan temples, after moving the animal sacrifices outside. Finally, let us note the great irony that “Gothic” architecture, now the epitome of Eurocentric Catholicism, was so named because it was barbarian/Gothic, and not properly Mediterranean/Byzantine or Romanesque. The Roman mentality, then, as in the missionary outreaches to Africa, was an ignorant and self-righteous restriction of Catholic polyphony to a Mediterranean monotone.

Andrew Greeley’s wonderful book, *The Catholic Imagination*, is filled with examples of supposedly traditional Catholic symbolism richly inculturated from the pagan cultures of northwest Europe. As the present book notes, Pope St. John Paul II pointedly summarized the correct apostolic call: “The Church comes to bring Christ; she does not come to bring the culture of another race.”

But successive seismic shocks such as the Great Western Schism, the Protestant Reformation, the Enlightenment and the expropriating nationalisms of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe forced Italian Catholicism into an extremely defensive mindset. Students of Roman Catholic Modernism recognize just how reactionary, conservative, compulsively Thomist and ultramontane Catholicism was for centuries. Such a Catholicism had precious little time to respect its own distant traditions or the “pagan” and “barbarian” cultures of recently converted continents like Africa.

Pre-Christian African culture may contribute rich cultural traditions to the ambience of world ethical sensitivity. Ogbonnaya points out that “*Ubuntu* (meaning humanism or humanness) is a whole complex of behavior, character, and integrity by which Africans express commonality and purpose in life. It emphasizes protection of human dignity and obligation to promote the common good of the community. It recognizes the personhood of all human beings and accords respect to others as fellow human beings on account of the common humanity of all persons.” Is such

a pre-Christian African sensibility not a life richly consonant with the ancient Catholic tradition of the common good, the essentially communitarian nature of humankind? Ogbonnaya contrasts the individualistic Cartesian *cogito, ergo sum*, with an African *cognatus sum, ergo sumus*.

While no one has recently singled out theology as critical for the cultural transformation of a continent, still Ogbonnaya notes the serious contribution which Catholic theology may make to the transformation of Africa. He has singled out “Enlightenment” and “Eurocentric” culture for marginalizing and destroying religion in the West. Africa, however, perhaps easily dismissed by such atheist culture as superstitious and religion-riddled, may, precisely because of its combination of deeply spiritual inculturated Catholic sensitivity and developing world technological culture, be able to manifest in Catholicism a truly transformative force. Ogbonnaya refers to a comment on Lonergan’s work: “the praxis of theology ... is proximately the transformation of culture, of constitutive meaning as the condition of the possibility of the transformation of politics, economies, technological structures, and intersubjective communities.” Such theology can uniquely confront and triumph over the “challenges posed by the problems of social transformation, good governance and nation building.”

Can Africa offer a renewal similar to the ancient Irish contribution to an exhausted European tradition, as Ireland did so many centuries ago, embodying an inculturated Celtic Catholicism, preserving Catholic truth and re-introducing it to the Europe that had originally birthed Irish Catholicism? So, even while burdened with the developmental problems of all emerging countries, Africa is graced with unique opportunities to be a Catholic exemplar, continentally a “city built on a hill.”

Gerard Manley Hopkins, S.J., concluding “The Wreck of the Deutschland,” says of Jesus: “Let him easter in us, be a dayspring ...” Does not Africa already contribute such a dayspring? Could not the indigenous spirituality of Africa contribute to a Catholic transformation of the rest of the planet? I recommend this book.

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## INTRODUCTION

The resurgence of Christianity as a world religion contradicts the triumph of secularism which aimed at reducing the impact of Christianity as an important institution in public policy in the global North. Secularism's hope of spreading post-Christian societies across the world and the privatization of religion across cultures through various forms of cultural contact, including imperialism, has been unsuccessful as various Christian denominations mushroom and spread even in societies in the global North.

The growth of Christianity is stunted in the global North owing to the reforms of the Enlightenment and later modernity, and the current post-modernity which carries forward modernity in whole new ways. At the same time, immigrant religious expressions keep alive the growth of Christianity in Europe and North America. Intra-ecclesial tensions in the global North arise from both cultural differences between traditional Christian doctrines and modernity, and the cultural differences among Christians from diverse cultures in the West.

The questions raised are those of the appropriateness of Christianity in contemporary post-modern culture on the one hand, and what is the best way of being Christian on the other. The challenge is one of the appropriate inculturation of Christian faith in contemporary Western societies in ways that preserve individual freedom and responsibility and promote the open society characterized by cultural and religious pluralisms. A desire for a missional church recognizes multiculturalism and is committed to diversity, both in the appropriation and expression of the one Christian faith.

Unlike the global North, "the ferment of Christianity," in the global South, among the majority of world people, "the spontaneous coming into being of Christian communities among populations that had not been Christian"<sup>1</sup> has been astronomical. The Pew Research Center's report on Global Christianity (2010) illustrates the growth of Christianity in the global South:

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<sup>1</sup> Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity: The Gospel beyond the West* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 22.

Although Europe and the Americas still are home to a majority of the world's Christians (63%), that share is much lower than it was in 1910 (93%). And the proportion of Europeans and Americans who are Christian has dropped from 95% in 1910 to 76% in 2010 in Europe as a whole, and from 96% to 86% in the Americas as a whole. At the same time, Christianity has grown enormously in sub-Saharan Africa and the Asia-Pacific region, where there were relatively few Christians at the beginning of the 20th century. The share of the population that is Christian in sub-Saharan Africa climbed from 9% in 1910 to 63% in 2010, while in the Asia-Pacific region it rose from 3% to 7%. Christianity today—unlike a century ago—is truly a global faith.<sup>2</sup>

Specifically, the report asserts:

A century ago, the Global North (commonly defined as North America, Europe, Australia, Japan, and New Zealand) contained more than four times as many Christians as the Global South (the rest of the world). Today, the Pew Forum study finds, more than 1.3 billion Christians live in the Global South [61% of all Christians live in Asia, Africa, and Latin America], compared with about 860 million in the Global North (39%).<sup>3</sup>

Despite the shift in the center of gravity of Christianity to the global South, intra-ecclesial tensions globally remain those of the relationship of culture to religion. The questions posed revolve around to what extent Western Christianity should be adapted to local cultures? Should we talk of Christianity in non-Western contexts or majority world Christianity? Is it appropriate to describe the shift as the emergence of global Christianity or world Christianity?<sup>4</sup> Should Christianity in the global South mimic

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<sup>2</sup> Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion and Public Life, "Global Christianity: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Christian Population," December 19, 2011, 10. <http://www.pewforum.org/2011/12/19/global-christianity-exec/> (accessed August 13, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>4</sup> Lamin Sanneh popularized the distinction between world Christianity and global Christianity. World Christianity is Christianity taking shape in the culture of formerly non-Christian peoples, while global Christianity presupposes Western cultural Christianity as the ideal form of Christianity, and other cultures when they convert to Christianity adapt to this in the light of their various cultures. See Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity?*, 22. Philip Jenkins, who prefers global Christianity, takes the medieval form of Christianity as Christendom as the ideal and therefore writes about the *Next Christendom* referring to the growth of Christianity in the global South as replicating the medieval Christian example. See Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

Christianity in the global North, or can they be different in the light of the diversity of their cultures? Can Africans, Asians, Latin Americans, Europeans and North Americans—the entire global community—speak of God in the same way? In the words of Kevin J. Vanhoozer, is there “One Rule to Rule Them All?”<sup>5</sup> That this is impossible is presumably common knowledge now.

Just as Christians are diverse theologically and geographically, their expression of faith has equally to be diverse. Andrew F. Walls expresses the cultural factor in contemporary theology by exposing the inadequacy of Western theology in non-Western contexts using Africa as an example:

Africa is already revealing the limitations of theology as generally thought in the West. The truth is that Western models of theology are too small for Africa. Most of them reflect the worldview of the Enlightenment, and that is a small-scale worldview, one cut and shaved to fit a small-scale universe. Since most Africans live in a larger, more populated universe, with entities that are outside the Enlightenment worldview, such models of theology, cannot cope with some of the most urgent pastoral needs. They have no answers for some of the most visible desolating aspects of life—because they have no questions. They have nothing useful to say on issues involving such things as witchcraft or sorcery since they do not exist in an Enlightenment universe. Nor can Western theology usefully discuss ancestors, since the West’s does not have the family structures that raise the questions. Western theology has difficulty coping with principalities and powers, whether in relation to their grip on the universe or to Christ’s triumph over them on the cross. The reason is that it is hard for Western consciousness to treat them as other than abstractions.<sup>6</sup>

The central challenge for Christianity in the world church remains, as in the global North, one of inculturation; a plurality of models of inculturation in the light of the diversity of cultures. World Christianity dialogues with cultures of people who have converted to Christianity as they struggle to make sense of the mysteries of the Christian faith in the light of the mysteries of their traditional religious cultures.

Lamin Sanneh reminds us that “Christianity from its origin was marked by serial retreat and advance as an intercultural process,”<sup>7</sup> and these

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<sup>5</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “One Rule to Rule Them All: Theological Method in an Era of World Christianity,” in *Globalizing Theology: Belief in an Era of World Christianity*, edited by Craig Ott and Harold A. Netland (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 85.

<sup>6</sup> Andrew F. Walls, “Globalization and the Study of Christian History,” *Globalizing Theology: Belief in an Era of World Christianity*, 75–76.

<sup>7</sup> Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity?*, 36.

“developments had to do with cultural shifts.”<sup>8</sup> The advancement of Christianity as a world religion means its involvement with various cultures. The dynamism of cultures, their interrelation with the Gospel, the institutional structures, many interpretations and ways of expression of the Christian faith is intrinsic to world Christianity. This book is devoted to examining varieties of the inculturation process in world Christianity. It understands culture broadly as common meaning upon which communities’ social order is organized. Culture in this sense is the whole life of people. It is the integrator of the filial bond holding people together and the various institutional structures—economic, technological, political and legal—that guarantee peace and survival in societies, states, and nations locally and internationally. The centrality of culture for world Christianity equally showcases the important position the scale of values occupies in world Christianity.

The first four chapters give the theoretical underpinnings of culture in world Christianity. Chapter One<sup>9</sup> is a general overview of the universal Christian approach to world cultures initially from the Western theoretical perspective. Chapter Two is the response of the majority world church to the Eurocentric view of culture and the quest for a new way of doing theology in ways cognizant of the plurality of cultures. Chapter Three instantiates such theology by tracing the history and development of African theology. Because Black Theology of South Africa, which emphasizes race amidst the struggle against the apartheid regime is often understood as opposed to theology from other parts of sub-Saharan Africa attuned more to culture and ethnicity, Chapter Four<sup>10</sup> relates both theologies by examining the significance of Black Theology of South Africa to African theology.

The essays in Chapters Five to Eight discuss the foreground of the relationship of culture to world Christianity. They broaden the meaning of culture to include the creative institutional structures responsible for the social order in Africa. Chapter Five compares the ethical order in African traditional societies with the new moral order brought about through the intercultural process by Christianity. Chapter Six<sup>11</sup> concretely investigates

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 37.

<sup>9</sup> I published aspects of this chapter as “Towards A More Indigenous African Catholicism: Insights from Lonergan’s Notion of Culture,” in *The Ecumenist: A Journal of Theology, Culture and Society* 51, no. 1 (2015): 17–23.

<sup>10</sup> An earlier version of this chapter was published in *Journal of Inculturation Theology* 14, no. 1 (2013), 23–49.

<sup>11</sup> An earlier version of this chapter was published in *Australian eJournal of Theology* 22, no. 1 (April 2015): 19–32.

evangelization in the globalized world. Globalization brings about new sets of values that equally influence ways of proclaiming and appropriating the Good News in Africa. Chapter Seven<sup>12</sup> seeks ways of humanizing globalization to be beneficial to most Africans. It appeals to Christian anthropology and suggests inculturating Christian anthropology with the African traditional anthropological structures manifest in *Ubuntu*. Chapter Eight is an appeal for the sociopolitical transformation of Africa, one that makes for good governance. For this to happen it argues for the emergence of critical culture, one that can critique the “squandermania” by the elite of Africa that perpetuates endemic corruption.

Chapters Nine and Ten are devoted to the implementation and existence of cordial relationships between culture and world Christianity, manifest in the struggle for method in African theology and the dialogue of African and Western theologies. These chapters seek answers to whether the shift in the center of gravity of Christian faith from the Northern to the Southern hemisphere implies total discontinuity of Western theologies in the global South, or whether there are continuity and mutual enrichment of both theologies.

The shift from a classicist to an empirical notion of culture emphasized by Bernard Lonergan forms the backdrop of the notion of culture adopted in this book. Openness to the diversity of cultural expressions of Christian faith and theology segues to continuity and not discontinuity, of mutual self-mediation of cultures and Christian faith both in the global North and in the global South. Because world Christianity is not another form of Christendom, there is actually no struggle for supremacy between European and North American Christianity and Christianities in the global South. As Lamin Sanneh reminds us:

It's hard to see how world Christianity which has become the religious reality it is today without an accompanying colonial political structure to propel it, should then be thrust forward as a crusading political ideology as Christendom. If, as is generally recognized, Christian expansion is occurring in societies marked by weak states and among impoverished populations, and where religious loyalties are stronger than political ones, then it seems fantastic to say such Christian expansion has the potential to generate structures of global political dominance in which political

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<sup>12</sup> A version of this chapter was published as part of special collection *Engaging Development: Contributions to a Critical Theological and Religious Debate*, sub-edited by Ignatius Swart and Afe Adogame in *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 72, no. 4. <http://www.hts.org.za/index.php/HTS/issue/view/122>.

loyalties will be stronger than religious ones. It will take a strange alchemy to bring that about.<sup>13</sup>

World Christianity must, therefore, attend to the dynamics of culture and the demands they make upon evangelization and commitment to Christian faith in contemporary globalized societies.

I am grateful to Marquette University for granting me a semester research leave that made the completion of this book possible. Professor Cyril Orji painstakingly helped me cross my t's and dot my i's. Special thanks also to Professor George Gilmore, for not only writing the foreword but also for editing the initial version of this book.

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<sup>13</sup> Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity?*, 27–28.

# CHAPTER ONE

## CHRISTIANITY, FAITH, AND CULTURE

The approaches to the study of culture prior to Vatican II could be narrowed down to an idea of culture with a capital “C,” used often with regard to so-called “high” cultures, and an idea of culture with a small “c,” referring to supposedly less reflective, sophisticated, or successful cultures. The former were civilized while the latter, often associated with popular traditional lifestyles, were savage. In this approach, indigenous cultures that differed from the high culture of empires were understood as only an early stage in civilization, a process controlled and spread by people of the high culture. This conception of culture—especially Western European culture—as civilization, justified several imperialist missions in which Christian missionary activities played a collaborative role.

The Christian influence mentioned above can be understood within the purview of the relationship of religion and culture. Despite the influence of secularization and apparent disregard for transcendent being in post-Christian cultures, most cultures (or the common way of life of a people) are anchored in belief in a transcendent being over and above humans. According to Christopher Dawson,<sup>1</sup> religion influences culture and is the foundation of most cultural practices. One understands cultures by comprehending the religious values underlying them. In some cultures, the social culture is bound up with religion so that the cultures are intrinsically manifestly religious. For example, Judaism is Jewish culture bound up in their religious values. The same can equally be said of African cultures that seamlessly bind the ethical, social, economic, and cultural life of the people on a religious basis.<sup>2</sup>

In other cases like the rise of Christianity, beginning with the challenges Jesus’s preaching raised for Jewish culture and the Christian transformation of Western culture, a new religion evolved from an existing religious culture. In a similar way, Islam’s transformation of cultures and

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Dawson, *Religion and Culture* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1948).

<sup>2</sup> John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1992), 262.

peoples across centuries provided the basis for the transformation of cultures transnationally, beyond racial and geographical limits in ways distinctly religious.<sup>3</sup> Whether religion is transformative of cultures or is embedded in social cultures, Dawson holds it always looks beyond society to superhuman realities towards which humans offer worship. For any religion to gain a foothold in any culture, it must take root in the culture of the people. “However universal and spiritual a religion may be, it can never escape the necessity of becoming incarnated in culture and clothing itself in social institutions and traditions if it is to exert a permanent influence on human life and behavior.”<sup>4</sup> For Dawson, religion and culture mutually influence each other. Religion explains cultural attitudes and values; culture, while being open to transformation by religion, provides religion with socio-cultural beliefs upon which religious meaning becomes manifest. Religion and culture deal with the human person, explaining the grounds of human culture and the transcendent meaning of human life. No religion can flourish without respecting the culture of the people it is evangelizing; cultures cannot have grounds for their ways of life outside transcendent religious values. Lamin Sanneh’s integration of the Gospel and culture aptly clarifies Dawson’s viewpoint above:

A central and obvious fact of the gospel is that we cannot separate it from culture, which means we cannot get at the gospel pure and simple. That is no more possible than getting at the kernel of the onion without the peel. The pure gospel, stripped of all cultural entanglements, would evaporate in a vague abstraction, although if the gospel were without its own intrinsic power it would be nothing more than cultural ideology, congealing into something like “good manners, comely living, and a sense that all was well,” the kind of genial, respectable liberalism that turns the gospel into a cultural flag of convenience.<sup>5</sup>

Dawson’s position contrasts with such viewpoints that deny the transcendent aspect of religion due to its theological-anthropological quality. Feuerbach’s position that religion is purely a human affair fails to do justice to the essence of religion, which is transcendent.<sup>6</sup> In like manner, religion is not just “cumulative tradition” visible and observable in human history. As Wilfred Cantwell Smith argues, religion should be

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<sup>3</sup> Dawson, *Religion and Culture*, 53.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>5</sup> Lamin Sanneh, “The Gospel, Language and Culture: The Theological Method in Cultural Analysis,” *International Review of Mission* 84, 332–33 (1995): 47.

<sup>6</sup> Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1989).

substituted because of the possible objectification of religion.<sup>7</sup> Any relationship of religion and culture must, as Paul Tillich thought, account for faith which “is the state of being ultimately concerned.”<sup>8</sup>

Tillich’s ultimate concern is God. Depending on awareness of God as the content of the ultimate concern, Tillich distinguishes between true faith and idolatrous faith on the one hand, and ontological faith and moral faith on the other. When one mistakes what is a mere preliminary concern, such as success or one’s country (among others) as the ultimate concern, one is said to have idolatrous faith. Ontological faith refers to the experience of God, while moral faith refers to the judgment of action that commands how we should live, the holiness of what ought to be.<sup>9</sup> Faith as ultimate concern unites ontological and moral faith.<sup>10</sup> The content of ultimate concern is mediated by language and community. Only within a community of faith can one have content for his ultimate concern. Only in a community of language can one actualize his or her faith. This, however, does not mean the community dictates the content of faith and even replaces the ultimate concern with an institution—the church. Tillich talks about “creative faith,” which can resist the onslaught of destructive faith.<sup>11</sup> Faith subsists within a community guided by common meaning (culture).

The relationship of Christianity and culture received a sharp focus in H. Richard Niebuhr’s classic, *Christ and Culture*.<sup>12</sup> Numerous challenges beset the faith and culture relationship. According to Niebuhr, the challenge of Christianity and culture lies in the dilemma of Christian belief, which is monotheistic and therefore exclusive, contrasting with societal values that tend towards tolerance of all rites and rituals, religions and creeds, and cater to the secular political, economic, and socio-cultural values advanced by diverse peoples. There is tension among Christians on what ought to be the correct Christian attitude towards faith and cultures.<sup>13</sup> Reconciling this relationship is so crucial that significant moments of Western history bear the mark of this relationship of faith and culture. It becomes the “enduring problem” of theology and Christianity. For example,

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<sup>7</sup> Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1962, 1991), 156.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1958), 1.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 72–73.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>12</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1951).

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 10.

The Constantinian settlement, the formulation of the great creeds, the rise of the papacy, the monastic movement, Augustinian Platonism, and Thomistic Aristotelianism, the Reformation and the Renaissance, the Revival and the Enlightenment, liberalism and the Social Gospel—these represent a few of the many chapters in the history of the enduring problem. It appears in many forms as well as in all ages; as the problem of reason and revelation, of religion and science, of natural and divine law, of state and church, of nonresistance and coercion. It has come to view in such specific studies as those of the relations of Protestantism and capitalism, of Pietism and nationalism, of Puritanism and democracy, of Catholicism and Romanism or Anglicanism, of Christianity and progress.<sup>14</sup>

In the history of the West, Niebuhr distinguished five inadequate forms of the relation of Christ and culture. First, there is the opposition between Christ and culture (Christ against culture), whereby the Christian interpretation of culture is negative: Christ is opposed to human cultures because they stand opposed to what Christ teaches and what Christians value. And vice versa, culture is opposed to Christ. Tertullian, the great North African theologian, represents this position whereby Christians are enjoined to shun the world, including politics, military service, trade, etc. The radical Christianity that emerges from Christ against culture despite its contributions to the spirituality and tradition of the Church is contradictory to the reality of societal existence. This is because Christians live in society and draw from, interact, influence, and are influenced by human culture. It resulted in centuries of the dichotomy of church and world, when the church saw itself in tension with the world and society. It still rears its ugly head today among some radical Christians who stand opposed to public theologies' engagement with human promotion.

Second, there is the relation of fundamental agreement between Christ and culture in which Christ is a hero of culture, as the culmination of culture. The accommodation to and identification of Christ with culture and the selection from culture of what seems in consonance with Christ (presented in a rational form of knowledge to the enlightened) is one challenge of the Christ of culture model. It risks losing sight of the supernaturality of Jesus Christ as the Son of God raised from the dead, by relying solely on reason almost to the neglect of revelation. It can, like Immanuel Kant's *Religion within the Limits of Reason*, simplify the nature of Christ and reduce Christianity to another form of knowledge for the enlightened. The intellectualization of the faith equally is one of its strengths over a radical Christian view of culture against Christ. At least it

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

finds Christ relevant to the issues of the time, the challenges and struggles of human life and institutions for the common good.

The third model identifies Christ with culture but equally emphasizes the supremacy of Christ over culture. “Christ is, indeed, a Christ of culture, but he is also a *Christ above culture*.”<sup>15</sup> This relationship (the centrist Christ-above-culture model) lives out the contradictions of Christ and cultures. People who relate Christ and culture this way accept the validity of Christ (religion), but, they also recognize the authority of the secular society or culture. They recommend obedience to the church and civil authority, the two worlds within which humans live their lives. The challenge of this model in the history of Christianity is the inability to synthesize Christ and culture by paying attention to the contemporary situations of each epoch of Christianity. This relation might lapse into cultural Christianity because of the tendency to endorse a cultural appropriation of Christianity as the correct relation of Christ and culture.

The fourth relationship is the dualist model that associates culture with the corruption of human nature because of the Fall (i.e., of Adam and Eve).<sup>16</sup> Consequent to this, Christ and culture are in a paradoxical relationship. Emphasis is placed on religious reform with little interest in social, structural reform. In Pauline-inspired Christianity for instance, people are encouraged to a deep spiritual life while slavery and other forms of dehumanization like unequal social stratification are left intact. Slaves are encouraged to obey their masters and women are to be submissive to their husbands.

The fifth model, the conversionist model, chooses the radical conversion of culture instead of its change, a transformation akin to a rebirth. The conversionist position is anchored in a view of the events of history in God’s action and humankind’s responses as the history of salvation. It upholds the view that creation is good both in its origin from God, and in its order instantiated in the goodness of beauty and the mutual service of creatures.<sup>17</sup> This position is represented in Augustine, who despite his dualism interprets Christ as the transformer of culture.

Niebuhr’s typologies of the approaches to the “enduring problem” of Christ and culture remain relevant. It not only expands Ernst Troeltsch’s typology, it presents a genetic study of the Christian attitudes to culture prior to Vatican [Council] II.<sup>18</sup> Troeltsch’s typology deals with the

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>16</sup> Gen. 2–3.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 210.

<sup>18</sup> Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of Christian Churches*, vol. 1, trans. Olive Wyon (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992).

problem of the church's relation to the world (culture). He was concerned with how what is religious or otherworldly like Christianity, can be related to the economic, political, and social forces of the world (i.e., culture). He looked primarily at those instances, in Medieval Catholicism and in Ascetic Protestantism, where the church harmonized with the world to achieve a "unity of civilization."<sup>19</sup> Troeltsch's dualism of religion as the mystical relation of the individual with the divine spirit and religion as socio-cultural, political, and economic phenomena creates tension between an abstract relationship and the concrete situations of the world. Troeltsch, therefore, created an antinomy between the sect type and the church type of being religious in his analysis of the relation of religion and society. He could not synthesize his idea of spiritual religion, the ideal of Christian eschatological utopia and the historical situation in which humans in various cultures seek to express this idea. According to D. Stephen Long, "H. Richard Niebuhr provided one of the most important and long-lasting answers to the question how theology and culture relate to each other by expanding on Troeltsch's typology."<sup>20</sup> Paul Ramsay and James Gustafson equally have only praise for Niebuhr's taxonomy.<sup>21</sup> Ramsay reminds his critics that Niebuhr takes no stand on the typologies, but instead his taxonomy exposes the relations of faith and culture which can be seen to be at play in the contemporary explorations of the relations between Christ and culture. Some people adopt the Christ-against-culture approach with the relation of Christian faith and ideology; for example, like the condemnation of apartheid in South Africa as a heresy. Sometimes the Christ-of-culture or Christ-above-culture model is adopted, depending on the Christian attitude to the culture being proposed.

Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon think Niebuhr's book obscures the Christian interpretation of culture.<sup>22</sup> The foremost Black Liberation theologian, James H. Cone, devotes a section of his Black systematic theology text *God of the Oppressed* to Niebuhr's typology endorsing his preference for the conversionist model which he sees as

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<sup>19</sup> Duane K. Friesen, "Normative Factors in Troeltsch's Typology of Religious Association," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 3 (1975): 272.

<sup>20</sup> D. Stephen Long, *Theology and Culture: A Guide to the Discussion* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2008), 62.

<sup>21</sup> See Bruce L. Guenther, "The 'Enduring Problem' of Christ and Culture," *Direction* 34, no. 2 (2005) for a list of other criticisms of Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture*.

<sup>22</sup> Stephen Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1989), 40.

“helpful for our examination of the issue of ideology.”<sup>23</sup> Cone, however, faults Niebuhr’s Christology and definition of culture for not making identification with the poor his point of departure both in his Christology and in his definition of culture. Cone writes: “Although Niebuhr’s five types provide important insights into the Christ-culture problem, his presentation nevertheless is seriously weakened by his failure to make the necessary distinction between the oppressors and the oppressed as their historical strivings are related to Christ’s proclamation of freedom for the captives.”<sup>24</sup> Following Cone’s criticism, it is clear Niebuhr’s taxonomy tends towards a monocultural interpretation of culture and is written within the context of Western culture as the one culture Christ relates to. As Geertz observes, Niebuhr’s notion of culture leaves out an important aspect of culture as one way in which people make sense of life, as a system of meaning that gives people direction in life.<sup>25</sup> The major flaw in Niebuhr’s *Christ and Culture* is reflected in the title of the book. It lacks a broader understanding of Christianity and culture. It is trapped in the limited perception of culture normatively as European civilization current when it was written. It lacks the pluralistic view of culture, equally new even in the Catholic Church. As Aylward Shorter observes:

The pluralistic view of culture is relatively recent, and the Catholic Church did not adopt it until the middle of the twentieth century. The first glimmerings of a pluralistic or modern view of culture to be found in a papal document, for example, date from 1944. For nearly sixteen centuries, from the late Roman times until our own, a monocultural view of the world held sway among bishops, theologians, and thinkers in the Catholic Church. It was a view not unlike the restricted “highbrow” view of culture..., but it applied to the entire human race. Culture, during these centuries, was a single, universal, normative concept.<sup>26</sup>

Qualify Shorter’s view above to read that a pluralistic view of culture is relatively recent in the modern Catholic Church. This is because the early apostolic and post-apostolic churches knew of the pluralistic nature of the Christian faith. No culture is, therefore, inferior or illegitimate as God is not partisan. Being Christian equally means being authentic in the light of one’s cultural values and when the need arises, critiquing

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<sup>23</sup> James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2012), 81.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>25</sup> Clifford Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System,” Donald Cutler, ed., *The Religious Situation* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1968), 641.

<sup>26</sup> Aylward Shorter, *Toward A Theology of Inculturation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2006), 18.

unwholesome elements of one's culture opposed to the Gospel and working for reform. According to Lamin Sanneh, whose works popularized this viewpoint, Christianity, unlike Islam, expands not by diffusion but by being translatable. Its scripture is translated into other languages and it is receptive to other cultures. The success of missionary activities in Christianity is measured by the extent they permeate its host culture. They borrow elements from various cultures to express the mystery of the faith. Even while conscious of the tension between faith and culture, the missionaries see every culture as worthy of carrying the message of the Good News. In Sanneh's apt descriptions, "Christianity was born in a cross-cultural milieu, with translation as its birthmark."<sup>27</sup> "There was now not one cultural center but a multiple frontier where the saving God was the new exclusive center of gravity. No one culture was any longer the exclusive standard of the redemptive power of the one God, a position that challenged the Greco-Roman world as relentlessly as it had done the Judaic world."<sup>28</sup> However, as Christianity became much more institutionalized, the tension between the one Gospel and a plurality of cultures gave rise to monocultural expressions of the faith.

Such a monocultural classical view of culture informed the missionary enterprise in Africa. Prior to Vatican II, the Catholic Church shared in the classicist mentality arising from the cultural domination of Europeans claiming their culture to be the "world culture" with a capital "C," charged with the responsibility of civilizing (putting an end to "barbarism," "savagery," "primitiveness"). Christianity eventually became identified with world culture as the Church and Empire united in "Christendom." Consequent upon this, it was presumed that

The Gospel must be proclaimed everywhere in a single, "perfect," cultural form. Any deviation was deemed to be either a deviation or a stage of development towards the, as yet, unrealized ideal. When classical Graeco-Roman philosophy came to be applied to the truths of revelation during the high Middle Ages, the immutability of the Christian cultural ideal was sealed.<sup>29</sup>

The Catholic Church adopted this classical universalistic approach to culture for sixteen centuries. Christian missionaries to Indians, Africans, and to the rest of the Third World proclaimed the Gospel as "world culture" and saw themselves as charged with the responsibility of

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<sup>27</sup> Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), 49.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>29</sup> Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation*, 18.

civilizing barbarians, savages, and primitive peoples to this culture. As Sanneh acknowledged: “attitudes of missionary superiority persisted, but often only by force of habit.”<sup>30</sup> This inhibited their missionary activities and the churches they left behind.

### Appraisal of Missionary Enterprise in Africa

One must begin any appraisal of missionary activities in Africa by appreciating the heroism of the missionaries who responded to God’s call, “with ardent apostolic zeal, [and] came to share the joy of revelation.”<sup>31</sup> The fruit of their work is evident: millions of Africans and so many formerly unmissioned territories have converted and are still converting to Christianity. Andrew Walls extols missionary activities for being responsible for the spread of the faith and making Christianity a world religion. “Missions have not been the sole agency, then, in the demographic transformation of the Christian church; but they formed the detonator of the vast explosion that it brought about.”<sup>32</sup> However, the nineteenth-century missionaries’ classical conception of culture as European civilization became the Achilles’ heel of African Christianity. Their paternalism bred dependency and attached Africans to the apron

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<sup>30</sup> Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, 57. Mention of Sanneh is important here because he argues that because missionaries promoted translation of the Scripture in native languages and researched aspects of the culture of the people, they were receptive to local cultures and actually preserved and advanced them. That may be true but the classicist attitude remained an obstacle to missionary activities and to a large extent impacted the judgments missionaries passed on the local cultures in their writings. See Lamin Sanneh, “Renewed and Empowered: The Christian Impact,” *Ogbomoso Journal of Theology* XV (2010): 14; Lamin Sanneh, “Christian Mission in the Pluralist Milieu: The African Experience,” *Missiology* XII, no. 4 (1984): 421–33. Lamin Sanneh, *Encountering the West: Christianity and the Global Cultural Process* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993). Tinyiko Sam Maluleke, critical of Sanneh, is curious to know whether one can distinguish the Western missionary imperialist tendencies from the work of the Western missionaries who disparaged African cultures in their various mission stations. See Tinyiko Sam Maluleke, “Black and African Theologies in the New World Order: A Time to Drink from our Own Wells,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* (1996): 9.

<sup>31</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Africae Munus* n.113. (Subsequently, *AM*). [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_exh\\_20111119\\_africae-munus\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xvi_exh_20111119_africae-munus_en.html).

<sup>32</sup> Andrew F. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 65.

strings of Western Christianity. Their condemnation of indigenous African cultures as savage and heathen continues to negatively affect Christianity in Africa today.

For example, Bede Jagoe, a Dominican priest working in Nigeria in the 1960s, mentions that prior to Vatican II it was not customary for missionaries to learn anything about traditional practices, which were condemned as evil and as coming from the devil. He gives an example of how “some former missionaries forbade a festival to give thanks to God for the harvest of yams since there was no blessing for this in the Roman Ritual.”<sup>33</sup> Such condemnation of African cultures has not only given rise to syncretism, with Africans having a dual allegiance to Christianity and their traditional religions, but also the lack of integration of Christian faith with African cultural and religious values has given rise to Africans regarding Christianity as alien. The result has been the emergence of homegrown African independent churches, as well as the African anthropological crisis—the new experience of domination by external cultural forces, including religious forces, when compelled to be Christians in a manner defined by foreign cultures.

Another example is drawn from Fr. Alex Chima’s experience in Malawi and equally corroborates the anthropological crisis among African Christians, one often manifested in tensions and contradictions in their spiritual lives. Although the people attended the Mass over which he presided, they also rushed away to participate, at the behest of their chief, in a rain sacrifice at the foot of a hill about four miles away. This practice, which is all too common in Africa, testifies to the need to make Christian faith and worship relevant to the people by responding to their real needs rather than on faithfulness to liturgical laws.<sup>34</sup>

Examples of how this might be done can be grasped from other missionary experiences, such as Ronald Allen’s short experience as a missionary in China (1895 to 1900 and later in 1902) and Vincent Donovan’s unique missionary experience in the Masai Kingdom, East Africa (1955 to 1973). Their practices, methods, and suggestions offer positive insight into measures towards new evangelization in Africa and other contexts and also highlight the flaws of traditional missionary enterprises. Ronald Allen realized that indigenizing Christianity was functionally efficient for the spread of the faith. He suggested that evangelization accompanies the establishment of self-propagating, self-supporting, self-governing churches able to evangelize their neighbors

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<sup>33</sup> Bede Jagoe, “Vatican II Comes to Africa,” *Worship* 79, no. 6 (2005): 550.

<sup>34</sup> Alex B. Chima, “Africanizing the Liturgy—Where Are We Twenty Years after Vatican II?” *African Ecclesiastical Review (AFER)* 25 (1983): 282.

without depending on foreign missionaries for leadership or financial support. Allen asserted:

If the Church is to be indigenous it must spring up in the soil from the very first seeds planted. One or two little groups of Christians organized as Churches, with their bishops and priests, could spread all over an empire. They would be obviously and without question Native Churches. But if we establish Missions rather than Churches, two evil consequences, which we now see in greater or less degree everywhere, sterility and antagonism, inevitably arise.<sup>35</sup>

Spontaneous expansion of the church was hindered also by the missionary insistence on Christian morals, which meant the European customs they accepted as civilized and believed must be inculcated to the new converts to Christianity.<sup>36</sup> Such demands not only disrupted the social order of most communities, they exposed converts to Christianity to ridicule and rejection by their families. Civilizing the natives, taking them away from their ways of life and cutting them off from their kith and kin, was the standard procedure for evangelization where to be Christian meant to be like the missionaries. Instead of seeking to make Europeans of African converts, Allen suggested a spontaneous expansion of the church whereby African converts to Christianity freely share the Christian faith with their neighbors, becoming missionaries to one another. This presupposes respect for the culture and patterns of life of indigenous peoples.

Vincent Donovan, a missionary priest to the Masai, was very much influenced by Allen's work. Writing several decades later about the limitations of missionary work, he urged starting afresh:

There is no mistaking that missionary work is in shambles. Born in slavery, disoriented by the school system, startled by independence, and smothered in nation building—mission in East Africa has never had the chance to be true to itself. To make any sense out of mission, out of the meaning and purpose of missionary work, one has to start all over again—at the beginning.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Ronald Allen, *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church: And the Causes That Hinder It*, (Kindle Edition, Jawbone Digital, 2012), loc. 30.

<sup>36</sup> Augustine S. O. Okwu, "The Weak Foundations of Missionary Evangelization in Precolonial Africa: The Case of the Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria 1857–1900," *Missiology: An International Review* 8, no. 1 (1980): 32.

<sup>37</sup> Vincent J. Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered: An Epistle from the Masai*, (London: SCM Press, 1982), Kindle Edition, Loc. 477-485.

Starting afresh for Donovan is starting evangelization with a deep respect for the cultures of peoples and appreciating that people have a culture from which their lives derive meaning. Recognizing a people's culture implies that missionaries must not substitute that culture with any other. Donovan found that the very concept of mission must change. Missionaries, he says, are not sent to plant a church or to preach the church, but to tell the good news of God's universal salvation in Christ. The Eurocentric response to the good news is not the only response to the Gospel, and each community must respond under its own culture. The new evangelization, characterized by the preaching of the Gospel to the poor and a dialogue with the cultures of peoples informed by profound respect for these cultures as vehicles for the Good News, is one most important achievement of Vatican II.

### **The Vatican II Stance on Culture**

The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*) links culture to human dignity, calls for human freedom to realize the dignity of the human person, and recognizes the plurality of cultures.<sup>38</sup> It delves into the problems of continuity and change, the preservation of traditional cultures arising from "the increased exchanges between cultures," especially those caused by modernization. The relationship of faith and culture is expected to promote integral salvation, the Gospel instruction to Christians to be agents of social transformation by participation in the humanization of their world through culture. *Gaudium et Spes* recognizes the cultural and hence contextual nature of divine revelation "where God's progressive self-communication adapted itself to the culture of different ages."<sup>39</sup>

Vatican II's stance is very significant for the church's relationship to culture. First, culture is fundamental to what it means to be human. To disregard, deny, or disparage a people's culture is to dehumanize and insult them. Each people must be free to live by the intendments of its culture, to express its unique identity. Culture, however, is not static but dynamic; it develops and is amenable to various forms of influences, both internal and external. Africans have distinct cultures that integrally harmonize their lives religiously, socio-politically, and economically, among other ways. Evangelization must take such cultures as its starting

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<sup>38</sup> *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott, S.J. (New York: Guild Press, 1966). *Gaudium et Spes* n. 52–62 is devoted to culture as well as its relationship to the faith, revelation, and the Gospel.

<sup>39</sup> Michael Paul Gallagher, S.J., *Clashing Symbols: An Introduction to Faith and Culture* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2003), 46.