

## Christian Apologetic Theology In A West African Context

### *Introduction:*

In his book, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition*, Professor E. B. Idowu delineates three distinct stages in the history of the study of African Traditional Religion. These stages are what he calls the "period of ignorance and false certainty," the "period of doubt and resisted illumination" and the "period of intellectual dilemma."<sup>1</sup> Each of these periods is characterized by a definite attitude on the part of the Western scholar towards the African Traditional Religion.<sup>2</sup>

It appears to this writer that we have now reached a fourth stage which may be designated as a *period of reflection and utilization* for the purpose of Christian apologetics. With the emergence of a large body of materials on African Traditional Religion and theology, a more positive attitude is being generated. I may add that it is positive only in contradistinction to the former snobbish attitude rather than for the over-all enhancement of the cause of Christ. The question that now agitates the mind of any Christian in the face of these facts revolves around their relevance to Christian apologetic effort. Thus far there has been no unanimity in the understanding of this question and the appropriate approach towards its solution. The wide-spread revival of culture growing out of national consciousness and identity has tended to complicate the issue. Consequently such terms as indigenization, contextualization and "Theologia Africana" have been suggested as rubrics under which the task of utilization may be accomplished.

The problem of Christianity vis-a-vis culture and cosmic divine consciousness is a perennial one. It is not peculiar to the West Africans alone. It has been faced by every group that has been confronted with the message of the Gospel. There will be no attempt in this paper to explain away the reality of this problem nor the need to make Christianity relevant to the West African context in spite of it. The thrust of the paper will focus on an effort to define Christian apologetic theology, its methodology in the light of the apologetic challenge of West African traditional theology and how it may operate within the context.

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<sup>1</sup> E. B. Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition*. (London, SCM Press, 1973), p. 86.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of these stages see pages 86-102 of the book referred to above.

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CHRISTIAN APOLOGETIC THEOLOGY AND ITS  
METHODOLOGY

The term "apologetics" is often misunderstood in non-Christian circles because of its association with such cognate terms as "apology," "apologize" and "apologetic." In everyday usage, to "apologize" means to say or write something as a means of atoning for an improper act of fault committed in words or deeds. In the same way the word "apologetic" in ordinary discourse implies an attempt to excuse a fault by means of rationalization. In view of these meanings associated with apologetics it is possible for the non-Christian to have a wrong view of Christian apologetics. As Reid remarks, the non-Christian may think "if there is need for apologetics, there must be some flaw, fault or weakness to be excused."<sup>3</sup>

From the standpoint of Christian history the word is derived from the Greek ἀπολογία which comes to mean an oral or written defense or reply to a specific attack made against one's position. This was the way the early Christians, such as Justin Martyr, used the word as reflected in his first and second "Apologies." These are records of his written defence to counter the attack which the non-Christians of his day made against some aspects of Christianity. Thus in the traditional Christian concept apologetics has come to mean "the study of the principles underlying the correct defense of the Christian faith."<sup>4</sup> I am, however, not happy with the defensive role which this view of apologetic connotes. The Christian faith is missionary in essence and cannot afford to wait to be attacked by the non-Christian world before bestirring itself to defence. It must be on the offensive in loyalty to Christ by virtue of what God has done in Christ.

This writer has found Langmead Casserley's understanding of Christian apologetic theology to be very relevant to the position taken here. For Casserly, Christian apologetics is "an ecclesiastical agency of the Church entrusted with the communication of the Christian faith to the world outside the Christian circle. Its main task is to commend the Christian life and theology to the contemporary non-Christian world."<sup>5</sup> This view combines the historical understanding of Christian apologetics as defined above and what is referred to as evangelism in modern Evangelical circles. In other words, Christian apologetics that is valid must grow out of a vital I-Thou relationship between the Christian and Christ. Such a Christian apologist must be one who having come to understand the person of Christ as elucidated by Christian theology, informally or formally acquired, now seeks the best ways in which his existential experience may be communicated and commended to his generation. In order to do this successfully it is incumbent on him to take

<sup>3</sup>J. K. S. Reid, *Christian Apologetics*. (Grand Rapids, Mich., W. E. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1969), p. 9.

<sup>4</sup>Benjamin B. Sardield, "Apologetics," Schaff-Herzog *Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, ed. Samuel Suctson, Vol. I (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1949), p. 232.

<sup>5</sup>Langmead Casserley: *The Christian in Philosophy*. (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1949), p. 253.

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account of the cultural, spiritual and intellectual milieu of the non-Christian to whom he seeks to communicate the Christian life. As important as this knowledge is it is indispensable that the apologist be grounded in Christian theology. This can not be over emphasized as long as the term Christian apologist presupposes a Christian spiritual experience and subsequent measure of coherent understanding of the person of Christ that has grasped him. You may call this understanding theology if by theology we mean a measure of systematic reconstruction of the core of the Christian faith. That means that Christian experience and theology must always be prior to apologetics that is informed by Christian bias. Failure to take account of the right relationship that must exist between theology and apologetics inevitably leads to tragic consequence for the Christian Church.

Christian apologetics without a sound biblical theology may result in the fusing of Christianity with a reigning intellectual or religious climate of opinion. But when such intellectual or religious fad becomes defunct Christianity is left with the awful task of extricating itself from the unholy wedlock to a moribund world view.

Apart from the danger of fusion there is also that of reductionism if the above precaution is not observed by the Christian apologetic. "The apologist may be tempted to reduce the Christian faith to such proportions as are easy to commend to the men of his generation. In brief, he evolves his own brand of theology which has no essential relationship to the historical Christian theology."<sup>6</sup> A modern example of this is the fast vanishing "death-of-God-theology" movement. In order to avoid such pitfalls it is imperative that the authentic relationship that ought to exist between Christian theology and apologetics be clearly understood by the Christian apologist. That relationship may be summarized thus:

Whereas it is for theology to decide what shall be communicated, a theology intellectually free from any domination by apologetic motives, the function of a genuinely Christian apologetics, an apologetic dominated by profoundly theological motives, is to examine how in any reigning climate of opinion the verdicts of theology are to be communicated to those outside the Church.<sup>7</sup>

### *THE METHODOLOGY OF CHRISTIAN APOLOGETICS*

If the apologist is to carry out his task of communicating the Gospel message successfully he needs a methodology to guide his activities. But in order to devise his methodology, he must attempt to spell out the nature of the problem which he faces. What then is the problem that calls forth apologetic efforts on the part of the Christian Church? Briefly stated, the Christian Church is convinced that God has, soteriologically speaking, acted decisively in Jesus Christ. It is its conviction that this once-and-for all divine action in Christ has cosmic consequences for the

<sup>6</sup>Osadolor Imasogie, "Langmead Casserley's Understanding of Christian Philosophy as a Basis for Apologetics" (Unpublished Th.D. Dissertation, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, 1972), p. 226.

<sup>7</sup>Langmead Casserley: "Theology and Apologetics," (*Canadian Journal of Theology*, Vol. 5, 1957), p. 226.

salvation of all men everywhere. The corollary of this is that it is the serious duty of the Church to proclaim this good news to all men. In pursuance of its task, however, the Church discovers that it is faced with a world where most men reject Christ consciously or unconsciously.

Faced with this problem of rejection the Church has to find out why men consciously or unconsciously reject Christ so as to know the best way to proclaim the message. It may be suggested that man reject Christ on, at last, two possible grounds. Some men, though very few, may reject the Christian faith on the basis that after a very critical and objective scrutiny of the faith they find unreconcilable intellectual inconsistencies. Such people may remain neutral, religiously, without commitment, having suspended their final judgment. Others may reject the Christian faith "because of prior acceptance of some intellectual or religious position which for them is either incompatible with the Christian faith or a viable alternative to it."<sup>8</sup>

Unlike the first group the problem of this second group is lack of convincing reasons to question the validity of their prior religious posture without which they can not become open to the possibility of a conversion to the Christian faith. We can safely say that most of the non-Christians in West Africa fall within this category. They are either adherents of Islam or traditional religion. In view of this, namely, that the preponderance of the non-Christians in West Africa lie within this category, this will be taken as a paradigm around which a viable apologetic methodology will be illustrated.

In dealing with a man who rejects the Christian faith either because it is incompatible with his present intellectual stance or his current religion is considered to be a viable alternative, the apologist must bear two facts in mind. Firstly, it is possible that the man is mistaken in holding that his intellectual position is irreconcilable with Christianity. If this is the case the apologist should try "to isolate and diagnose his intellectual error and trace it to its source."<sup>9</sup> The aim of the apologist here is to show that a more objective and critical analysis of the nonbeliever's "assumption, carried out in the light of a more insightful understanding of Christianity, will reveal no such incompatibility."<sup>10</sup> Secondly, the unbeliever may see his religious faith to be as good as the Christian faith and therefore feels no need to consider Christianity. If this is the case the apologist must seize the initiative to show the untenableness of that faith as a substitute for Christianity. The immediate purpose in this approach is not to establish the truth of the Christian message but to question the tenableness of the man's faith. In doing this the unbeliever is led to "re-examine his prior commitment and thereby become free to consider the Christian message in a new light. This aggressive method is necessary because unless a person's presupposition is threatened he is likely to remain impervious to any attempt to conversion.

<sup>8</sup>Osadolor Imasogie, *op. cit.*, p. 102

<sup>9</sup>Langmead Casserley, *Apologetics and Evangelism*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1962), p. 141f.

<sup>10</sup>Imasogie, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

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It must be stressed that nothing in this methodology should be construed as a belief in the ability of the apologist to argue someone into the Christian faith. No, not when faith is defined as "a total response of the whole man to the operation of the Holy Spirit in the depths of one's self-consciousness."<sup>11</sup> The act of faith from the Christian perspective definitely "transcends the mere logic that leads up to it."<sup>12</sup> This, in no way precludes the validity of rational apologetics which aims at clearing the intellectual, cultural and religious obstacles which must be removed before any meaningful response to the impingement of the Holy Spirit can be expected.

In spite of the above explanation of the intention of this methodology some may still object to it supposedly on the grounds that it tends to make dialogue impossible. In answer to such an objection, I submit that an objective analysis of dialogue can not sustain it. No real dialogue can take place without definite presuppositions on the part of the people involved. The purpose of a dialogue in a secular context may be seen from two perspectives. It may be a forum which enables each stand to be presented and defended with a view to winning over the opposite side. On the other hand, the aim may be to create an intellectual atmosphere in which a synthesis of the two divergent views may be forged. In any case dialogue is meaningless in an ideological vacuum. It is clear from what I have already said that a third dimension is introduced into a Christian apologetic dialogue. The conviction of the Christian apologist is that in the process of dialogue the non-Christian may be led to become open to the Holy Spirit of God who alone effects spiritual conversion. Such openness is more likely after the intellectual and religious obstacles shall have been cleared.

One other thing that must be noted in the methodology adumbrated here is that there is no intention to effect a cheap reconciliation of Christianity with any other faith or intellectual position. As has been pointed out earlier, a faulty apologetic method has too often led to a spineless plea for the acceptance of Christianity as being compatible with current intellectual or religious posture without any effort to challenge the validity of the posture. In the process the apologist reinterprets his mission not in terms of communicating the Christian life and theology but in terms of "reconceiving Christianity in a form that is communicable by a particular strategy of communication."<sup>13</sup> The only possible upshot of such apologetic methodology that is not theologically motivated is the transformation of the Christian message into a mere appendage to any current cultural, intellectual or religious situation. As Casserley points out:

The aim of . . . (such an) apologist is to add Christianity to the secular man's present list of affirmations, to supplement his existing way of life with a kind of distilled essence of Christianity, which would enrich but not modify his accustomed system of thought and affirmation.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Imasogie, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

<sup>12</sup> Casserley, *ibid.*, p. 140.

<sup>13</sup> Casserley, *ibid.*, p. 145.

<sup>14</sup> Casserley, *ibid.*, p. 146.

Christian faith calls for a definite decision, a radical transformation that involves the whole person in all its dimensions of existence. As Paul insists, "when any one is joined to Christ he is a new being: the old is gone, the new has come. All this is done by God, who through Christ changed us from enemies into His friends, and gave us the task of making others his friends also." (II Cor. 5:17-18 TEV). Indeed, Christian apologetics informed by such a theological grounding leaves us no option to present the Gospel message as a mere addition to the list of affirmations of the non-Christians. On the contrary, the Gospel calls for such a radical orientation that is so unique that it virtually becomes a new existence from which perspective all other life experiences must be viewed and judged. To do otherwise is not a Christian apologetics but a conscious or unconscious attempt to "transform the Christian Church into a goodwill agency for the diffusion of refined and cultured idealism which has lost all intrinsic relation with the central apostolic consciousness that we are to be witnesses to God and His revelational dealing with man and the world."<sup>15</sup> At this juncture let us turn to the Christian apologetic challenge of West African Traditional Religion and see how the Christian apologetics and its methodology enunciated here can be used in meeting that challenge.

#### *CHRISTIAN APOLOGETIC CHALLENGE OF WEST AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION*

It will be recalled that Christian apologetics has been described as the ecclesiastical agency of the Church charged with the responsibility of seeking the best ways and means for communicating the Christian life and theology to non-Christians. In that connection it has been suggested that if this task is to be successfully prosecuted the apologist must take cognizance of the particular spiritual, cultural and intellectual milieu of the non-Christian world to which he addresses himself. This is imperative because the Gospel is never preached in cultural, intellectual and religious vacuum. In fact, it never comes in a neutral garb but always coloured by the spiritual, cultural and intellectual hue of the particular Church that sends out the apologist. This realization is in the best interest of both the apologist and his target audience. The eternal message of the Church is universally relevant inspite of the local setting, for in the divine economy the Word must become flesh and dwell within the local environment in order to be apprehended. The task of the apologist, therefore, requires such spiritual perception that will enable him to translate the Gospel in such a way that the Word may again metaphorically speaking, become incarnated, as it were, in the language and life of the people to whom it is preached. This is *sine qua non* for successful apologetics. As I have argued elsewhere, "the permanence and

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<sup>15</sup>Hendrik Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*. (London: James Clarkes Co.; Ltd., 1956), p. 293.

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depth of Christian conversion on any mission field must stand or fall on whether or not Christianity is understood as a foreign religion transplanted to a foreign soil or a vital encounter with the Eternal living God made manifest historically in Jesus the Christ."<sup>16</sup>

The need to recognize the fact that the eternal message always takes temporal form cannot be over emphasized. The significance of it is further underlined in a statement made by the International Missionary Council at Willingen in 1952. Under the title, "The Universal Church in its Local Setting," the Council declares:

While the Church of Christ in any place and at any time must exhibit the marks without which it will not be a Church, it has the responsibility to exhibit them in a distinct way, incorporating into the service of Christ whatever heritage of cultural values it may have been given by God's grace. *This is not being rooted in the soil but related to the soil. The Church can only be rooted in Christ.* But the Gospel must be so presented to the man and woman that its contemporary and compelling relevance is recognized. It cannot be recognized as long as it disappears in a foreign guise, imitating and reproducing the characteristics of a church in some remote and alien land. Foreign, in one sense, the Church must always be; its citizenship is in heaven and it is an agent of transformation.<sup>17</sup>

Enough has been said here to make it clear that the Eternal Incarnate Word which makes Christianity unique and the temporal flesh in which the former is manifested must for ever be held in tension in any Christian apologetic adventure. With the recognition of this tension as a desideratum we now give a summary description of some conspicuous elements in the West African Traditional theology and world-view.

In spite of the differences in the religious expression of the West African people there are certain common elements which make any talk about West African Traditional theology intelligible.<sup>18</sup> The intention here is to present a synopsis of these elements for the purpose of Christian apologetics. In the first place, the West African traditional world view is a world swarming with spirits, demons and divinities. Overarching these is the Supreme Being who is not to be placed on the pantheon of the divinities because He is the absolute Creator and the source of all beings. On the surface, and especially as seen by those non-indigeneous West Africans, the supreme God is kept in the background and as remote as the Aristotelian "Unmoved Mover" who is insensible to the feelings and needs of its creation. The indigeneous West African, however, knows that the concept of *Deus remotus* is foreign to the traditional religions as borne out in his given names and in the prayers and even worship of the spirits and divinities. It is my considered opinion that the seeming remoteness of the Supreme Being is a reflection of the hierarchial structure of the traditional society which places the king at the apex of a

<sup>16</sup>Osadolor Imasogie, "African Traditional Religion and Christian Faith," *Review and Expositor*, Vol. LXX No. 3 (Summer 1973), p. 283.

<sup>17</sup>Ram Desai, quoted on p. 124, in *Christianity in Africa as Seen by the Africans*, from *International Review of Missions* (The underlining is mine).

<sup>18</sup>In spite of the apparent differences in German, American, British, Italian theologies, there is a common core that justifies the term Western theology as distinguished from Eastern theology.

complex hierarchy of varying grades of chiefs and messengers through whom the king administers his kingdom.<sup>19</sup>

In the second place, the West African traditional theology recognizes man's alienation from God—the source of his being—and his responsibility to work for a reconciliation between him and this spiritual Reality. The myth of alienation rendered in various versions is a symbolic expression of his awareness of existential breach of fellowship between man and God. Whichever version of the myth you prefer, be it the one that attributed God's withdrawal to the disobedience of a greedy woman who took more of the "skyfood" than she needed or that God withdrew to avoid the constant bickering of man or as a result of defilement caused by a woman touching the sky during her monthly period, the meaning is the same. The myth means that:

There was a time when there was no limitations at all to communications between heaven and earth." (But as a result of man's sin against) the Lord of Heaven . . . there was immediately raised a barrier which cut him off from the unrestricted bliss of heaven. The privilege of free intercourse of man taking the bounty of heaven as he liked disappeared.<sup>20</sup>

The sacrificial system represents man's effort to atone for his sin with a view to regaining the lost fellowship and thereby live in harmony with the spiritual realm. This desire to be at peace with the spiritual source of being may be said to have further enhanced the conspicuous position accorded the divinities and, to a lesser extent, the ancestral spirits generally considered as intermediaries between God and man.

In the third place, the idea of life-after-death with its concomitant final judgment is well developed in the West African traditional process through which man passes into another dimension of existence similar to this one but much fuller and freer. As man's spirit is ushered into that spirit-world he faces the inevitable divine judgment which takes full account of his earthly pilgrimage.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>As I have indicated elsewhere my study of the hierarchial structure of the Traditional Religion has led to the conclusion that the most descriptive term for the Nigerian Traditional Religion is *Bureaucratic Monotheism*. In bureaucratic social structure the King, though absolute, is apparently remote from his subjects who are more familiar with the ministers and government functionaries who regulate their day to day activities. The Nigerian expression of his God-consciousness is definitely patterned after his bureaucratic social set up. In view of this the term polytheism must be rejected since in classical polytheism there is no absolute creator as you have in the Traditional Religion where the various divinities are regarded as creatures of the Supreme Being who appoints each to take charge of a specific aspect of nature. Bureaucratic monotheism does justice to the monotheistic motif of the Traditional Religion while at the same time recognizing the *defacto* prominence given to the divinities in the religious system. For detailed argument, see: Osadolor Imasogie, "Langmead Casserley's Understanding of Christian Philosophy as a Basis for Apologetics" (Unpublished Th.D. Thesis, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky, U.S.A., 1972), pp. 205-224.

<sup>20</sup>Bolaji Idowu, *Oludumare: God in Yoruba Belief*. (London, Longman's Green & Co., Ltd., 1962), p. 22.

<sup>21</sup>The belief in divine judgment is valid inspite of the doctrine of transmigration which on the surface appears to contradict it. Technically, transmigration implies a generous grant of a chance to make amends or do penance for one's failings. Some time it affords an opportunity to revenge. But, in any case transmigration has a fixed cycle after which the entity faces the permanent status commensurate with his character.



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Thus life on earth has meaning as man is held accountable for his character and deeds in his earthly sojourn. Ancestral worship in various forms and the prior elaborate funeral rites underscore the strong belief in life-after-death and the continuity of communion between the living and the departed relatives. The funeral songs as well as the concept of the "Good" and "Potsherd" Heavens symbolize the reward for the "righteous" and punishment for "the wicked" respectively on the basis of an impartial divine verdict.

The fourth and perhaps the most prominent element in the Traditional Religion is the belief in divinities or nature gods to which I have already referred. It is significant to note here that the divinities are believed to have been created by the Creator-God and each is appointed to take charge of a specific sphere of nature. Unlike the classical Greek and Roman polytheism the divinities are not co-eternal with the creator but are created by Him and consequently they are subject to his absolute sovereignty. To emphasize the fact that the Creator must never be placed on the same pantheon with the nature gods, the West African has a specific name for the Creator which is never applied to the divinities. There is a generic name for the divinities in addition to individual names. Examination, invariably, reveals that each divinity is a deification of one aspect of nature. The significance of this interpretation will be brought out later as we discuss the apologetic challenge.

The above four theological elements in the Traditional Religion are enough for our purpose here. An objective consideration of these elements, inevitably, suggests striking similarity between them and Christian theology. It is this glaring resemblance that creates a problem of ambivalence for the West African Christian theologian. How is he to relate the West African theology to Christianity? What does the Christian Church have to tell the West African about God that is not already there in his Traditional Religion? If there is nothing new what is the point of Christian apologetics? What is unique in Christianity other than the fact that it was brought to us by the Colonialists? Now that we have virtually succeeded in throwing off the colonial yoke has the time not come to discard their religion as well? Can we not refine our Traditional Religion and put it in the place of Christianity?

Several reactions of this nature to these similarities are to be found among well-meaning West African theologians. Some among them have come to the conclusion that all religions are the same in their goals hence the forms they take are irrelevant. In other words, instead of seeking to convert the West African to Christianity we should urge him to actualize the noble principles of his religion in his daily life. At the end, so the reasoning goes, all will be "saved." There are those who call for an involvement of a West African theology that will incorporate the compatible elements of Christianity though the final product will be predominantly a West African Theology. This second position may be called a naive indigenisation of Christianity. It is naive because it does not seek to "bring Christian truth to its most vigorous and clear expression by indigeneous ways but to re-cast Christianity into an indigeneous

philosophy of life in which the dominant elements are pre-supposedly kindred Christian elements."<sup>22</sup>

It must be conceded that these sentiments are understandable given the similarity of theological elements and in the light of national consciousness which naturally tempts one to react against the obsolete apologetic approach. The old approach, you will recall, sees all non-Christian religion as "a vast degrading, and decaying section of the spiritual life of mankind, steeped in darkness and error."<sup>23</sup> This, however, is no longer tenable in the face of modern research and phenomenologically oriented methodology. In any case neither the now discredited missionary attitude nor the new syncretistic crusade rings true in the light of objective scrutiny of the available facts. There is another possible interpretation of the observed similarities which will do justice to both religions without compromising the uniqueness of the Christian message. As Hendrik Kraemer puts it, the many striking "similarities between historical Christianity and all other religions, evident in startling correspondences in psychological experience and theological expression are, therefore, not at all disquieting facts which need to be explained away, but evidences by which the unity of man as religious being is demonstrated."<sup>24</sup>

This, in essence, means that man is religious because he is created by God with a capacity for divine awareness and for some response to that awareness. This awareness is common to all men as expressed in their various religions. Hence a clear distinction must be made between West African Traditional theology and a Christian theology expressed in a West African context. West African theology must be construed as the theological explication of East African religious experience deriving from the universal God-consciousness but coloured by the West African culture and world-view.

This is by no means a Christian theology whether it is done by a Christian or not, any more than Indian (Hindu) theology is a Christian theology. The aim of the Christian apologist as already suggested is to explore ways of utilizing this West African theology which reflects cosmic God-consciousness as expressed in West African world view as a fertile ground, first, for establishing the monogenism of the human race. Once it is suggested that the cosmic God-consciousness of the West African points to his solidarity with the human race which owes its being to the same Creator-God then the foundation for the transitional bridge is laid. This, in turn, will constitute the background against which the uniqueness of God's self-disclosure in Christ can be made relevant and reasonable to the West African. For, if it is true that the human race owes its origin to the One Creator-God it becomes rational to argue that "in the fulness of time" this One God became enfleshed for the purpose of the full disclosure of Himself to His creatures. Like a ripple on the bank of the

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<sup>22</sup>Hendrik Kraemer, *op cit.*, p. 317.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 284.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 285.

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ocean those who initially apprehended the revelation became the medium through which the whole world will come to the saving knowledge of and encounter with the Creator. Like the "town-crier," which is familiar in West African societies, the primary recipients of the full divine self-disclosure were commissioned to carry the message to others as heralds of the divine King.

We must, at this point, recall the major reason which has been suggested as being responsible for the West African's rejection of the Christian Message. He rejects it because he considers his prior faith-commitment as a viable alternative to Christianity. The apologetic strategy of the apologist must be geared towards convincing the non-Christian that his traditional religion is not a viable alternative to the Christian faith. But if he is to be successful he must endeavour to advance logically compelling arguments that will cause the non-Christian enough concern as to re-examine his prior commitment. For, as we have already insisted, it is at this critical material point of temporary dislodgment from his presupposition that, to use the words of Ian Ramsey, "the penny may drop" for the prospective convert. There is no attempt here, it must be stressed again, to suggest that mere logic brings about spiritual conversion. However, it is reasonable to hope that in the process of such dialogue "the penny may drop" and the non-Christian who now, perhaps for the first time, becomes open to the working of the Holy Spirit, may respond positively. With such faith in the continuing activity of the Holy Spirit the Christian apologist proceeds in his task of fulfilling his Christian responsibility to his West African brother who is already committed to traditional religion.

The Christian message, while recognizing that there is no religious awareness without the One God who has not left himself without a witness, contends that cosmic God-consciousness must not be confused with God's revelational act in the form of the Incarnate Word as manifested in the Jesus of Nazareth. This, I am convinced, is the distinction Paul intends to make in the seventeenth chapter of Acts. After declaring that God, "who made all nations of one blood," has not "left Himself without a witness," Paul goes further to assert that the "times of ignorance (meaning prior to the coming of Christ) God overlooked but now he commands all men everywhere to repent because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all men by raising him from the dead." (Acts 17:30-31, RSV). The implication here is that in Christ Jesus, the Creator-God effected a uniquely redemptive revelational act which has universal consequences. This Event, so the New Testament records testify, so dominated the early Christians that they could not for a moment turn their eyes from the historically authenticated Jesus Christ who was crucified under Pontius Pilate but whom God raised from the dead. Their testimony is that this same risen Jesus Christ is the living Lord who, following his ascension into heaven, energized his followers with the Holy Spirit so as to make them witnesses of the soteriological act of God as made manifest in the life, death, and

resurrection of Jesus Christ. This Event so transformed their entire beings that they came to see themselves as divinely appointed agents to bear the Good News to all men.

This new transforming experience did not blind the Christians to the reality of cosmic God-Consciousness in every man as they themselves had experienced it. But, the new experience, however, led them to re-interpret it as divinely appointed device to keep man aware of his divine origin and the fact of his alienation from God which inexorably goads him to seek reconciliation. Faced with this reality of a sense of alienation man everywhere gropes about in search for reconciliation with God by various means. These efforts at self-redemption and self-justification are reflected in his religion. The futility of these efforts are vividly evidenced in the never-ending sacrifices in the West African Traditional Religion. The Christian message is that in the light of the Christ-Event the cosmic God-consciousness has served its purpose in pointing man to his divine origin and the need for existential wholeness which can only be effected by reconciliation with God. As an index finger, the universal awareness of God with its implications has pointed man to the cross where the divine act of redemption was transacted once-and-for-all. With that act the time of revelational ignorance has come to an end. In the words of Freytag the message of the Gospel now is that:

“even what was true before (the Christ-Event) cannot be used as a reason for arguing against the Christ whom it proclaims. The Israel which rejects Christ has no right to call to witness the previous revelation in opposition to Christ; that which is in man's capacity to know God can never be used as a reason for renouncing the message of Christ.”<sup>25</sup>

The apologist in this approach has the example of apostle Paul's dealing with the Gentile world. Restraining the priest of Zeus and its devotees from making sacrifice at his feet, the apostle to the Gentiles declares: “We are to announce the Good News, to turn you away from these worthless things to the living God, who made heaven, earth, sea, and all that is in them. In the past he allowed all peoples to go their own way. But he has always given proof of himself by the good things he does; he gives you rain from heaven and crops at the right times; he gives you good and fills your hearts with happiness” (Acts 14:15-17, TEV).

Thus the revelation in Jesus Christ is so radically unique that it may be said to be discontinuous with cosmic God-consciousness which is the basis of all religions. Christianity as the story of “God's self-disclosure and of the genuine condition of man and the world in the light of the divine self-disclosure is the standard of reference for the religious life of all mankind.”<sup>26</sup> This uniqueness is intensified by the sheer historicity of Christ. He lived, he preached, he died but God raised him, from the dead. “Although Christ lived in the world, He is not an ancestor. He is God, and Christians worship Him not as a man in the world of the dead, but as a risen Lord.”<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup>Walter Freytag, *The Gospel and the Religions: A Biblical Enquiry* (London: SCM Press, 1957), p. 38.

<sup>26</sup>Kraemer, *op. cit.*, p. 299.

<sup>27</sup>Desai, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

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One great advantage of this approach is its insistence on the unity of God who is the absolute creator "of the ends of the earth." The West African, separated by language, colour, and culture, naturally thinks of the possibility of separate gods for different ethnic or racial groups. The old apologetic method which glibly consigned his God-consciousness to the figment of imagination only succeeded in sharpening this susceptibility to polytheism. Viewed against the defunct apologetic school of thought, the truth of Professor Idowu's observation in this regard shines out brightly. The Church in Africa in the main, Idowu declares: "has only succeeded in preaching to and in teaching Africans about a strange God whom they have somehow come to identify as the God of the white man. But what has happened to the God . . . who is the foundation of their traditional belief?"<sup>28</sup> From this it is logical to conclude that "any apologetic method that de-emphasizes the cosmic dimension of God is unbiblical,"<sup>29</sup> and hence inimical to the cause of Christ.

Another theological element in the West African religion which constitutes a problem as well as opportunity for the Christian apologist is what to make of the plethora of divinities which we have described as intermediaries between God and man. Here again we can take a leaf from Paul the apostle, "For Paul, man's corrupt nature has reached the point where man can no longer see the woods for the trees. Consequently, man worships and serves the creatures of God rather than God the creator."<sup>30</sup> On the basis of this understanding, the apologist may argue that the so-called divinities in the main represent deification of natural phenomena. These phenomena such as the earth, rain, the sun etc., are evidence of God's sustenance for his creatures. Examination of the traditional religion reveals that these life-supporting natural entities have been deified and elevated to the status of intermediaries between God and man. Man's inner sense of alienation, no doubt, plays a major part in the deification process. "Thus the means of God's care for and the manifestation of his presence among his creatures are transmitted into divinities standing between man and God."<sup>31</sup> This process is the result of a combination of the chronic human bane of a substitution of means for an end and the distortion of the sacramental nature of the universe. The former implies that, even with the keenest of spiritual awareness, in course of time religious symbols and practices become substitutes for the reality they are intended to symbolize. The latter means that the nature of the universe is such that everything in it is transparent from divine perspective and hence is potentially a means of revelation. This is why the Psalmist could sing: The heavens tell out the glory of God, the vault of heaven reveals his handiwork." (Psalm 19:1, NEB).

It is noteworthy to observe that even the Christian Church is still beset by this human problem of substitution and distortion. The apologist can

<sup>28</sup>Bolaji Idowu, *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs*. (eds. Dickson and Ellingsworth) (Mary Knoll, N.Y. Orbis Books, 1969), p. 13.

<sup>29</sup>Imasogie, *op. cit.*, p. 253.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 256f.

<sup>31</sup>Imasogie, *loc. cit.*

tell the traditional religionist that his divinities, on analysis, turn out to be deification of natural phenomena symbolic of God's providential care for his creatures. The deification process is triggered by the realization of the life-supporting qualities of these phenomena and the feeling of dependence on them for existence seen against the backdrop of the inner sense of man's alienation from God. This has resulted in the ascription of not only divine but intermediary status to them.

By this interpretation the apologist has asserted some universal theological facts about man and the universe. He has shown that man has an inner awareness of his divine origin, his estrangement from this origin, and his inability to effect a true reconciliation without the services of a mediator. Secondly, the interpretation presupposes that this universe is sacramental in the sense that everything in it mediates divine presence and providence. But since man's perception is blurred and marred by sin he is plagued by distortion leading to the malady of substitution of means for an end. It is the distorted combination of these theological truths about man and the universe that has produced the divinities. At this point the apologist may bring in that statement of Paul in Romans chapter one which speaks to the situation. The Gospel, says Paul, is "God's power to save all who believe, first the Jews and also the Gentiles. For the Gospel reveals how God puts men right with himself: it is through faith alone, from beginning to end. As the scripture says 'He who is put right with God through faith shall live.' God's wrath is revealed coming down from heaven upon all sin and evil of men, whose evil ways prevent the truth from being known. God punishes them, because what men can know about God is plain to them. God himself made it plain to them. Ever since God created the world, his invisible qualities, both his eternal power and his divine nature, have been clearly seen. Man can perceive them in the things that God has made. So they have no excuse at all! They know God, but they do not give him the honour that belongs to him nor do they thank him. Instead, their thoughts have become complete nonsense and their empty minds are filled with darkness. They say they are wise but they are fools; instead of worshipping the immortal God, they worship images made to look like mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles . . . They exchange the truth about God for a lie; they worship and serve what God has created instead of the Creator himself, who is to be praised for ever." (Romans 1:16-25 TEV).

On the basis of the above the apologist can call the attention of the non-Christian to the fact that Christ is the only mediator between God and man. For as the scripture avers: "there is one God and there is one mediator between God and man; the man Jesus Christ, who gave himself as a ransom for all, the testimony to which was born at the proper time." (I Timothy 2:5-6, RSV).

The importance of taking the world-view of a people into account in Christian apologetics has been emphasized. It only remains for me here to illustrate how this method operates in apologetics. The West African Traditional world-view implies that there is interpenetration between the physical and the spirit worlds. Not only this but also that the physical

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world is replete with spirits and demons in fear of whom the West African lives his life. In spite of modern scholars' effort to substitute "eisegesis" for the exegesis of the New Testament, the West African world-view is of one piece with the New Testament world-view. Like Paul, especially in his epistle to the Colossians, the Christian apologist to West Africans must stress the all-sufficiency of Christ as the Saviour from the powers of demons and spirits. Jesus Christ must be presented as a conqueror of demons and deliverer from all fears.

Bishop Stephen Neil hits the nail on the head when he writes: "Unless the first deliverance from fear has been fully accomplished, unless Jesus has really been enthroned as conqueror of the demons, the believer is still living half in the old naturalistic world in which the spirits have power; and the time has not yet come in which his ears will really be opened to hear the teaching concerning sin, righteousness, repentance and forgiveness."<sup>32</sup>

The failure to note this in the past has resulted in a situation in which many respectable Christians have resorted to the procurement of charms, divination and incantations in times of crisis. Mere condemnation or denial of this world-view does not free people from its influence. The spiritual forces whose existence is generally accepted have to be destroyed. As far as the people are concerned, Christ can be "Saviour only if he has first been (the) destroyer. Reconstruction can begin only if the sovereignty of the old life has been totally extinguished and the people have really made their exodus from the dominion of the ancient spirit world."<sup>33</sup> No religion can be relevant to a people if it neglects any area of their total existence as perceived by them.

### CONCLUSION:

The thrust of this paper has been the presupposition that in Christ, God has decisively revealed Himself for the salvation of man everywhere. In the face of the Christ-event, whatever God-consciousness man may possess pales into insignificance having served its appointed role of preparing man everywhere for the historical manifestation of God in the Jesus of Nazareth. The status of those who died before the Christ-event and those who have not been confronted with the Gospel Message is best left to divine wisdom. The Church is held responsible for confronting the world with the Good News of Salvation in Christ. Once the Christian Church has come to this conclusion and has accepted its consequences she is under divine obligation to proclaim it to men everywhere. But in doing this the Church needs a methodology. Such a methodology requires the following guidelines:

1. The apologist should understand the theological core of the Christian faith as informed by the apostolic kerygma. He must be motivated by apostolic zeal and sense of mission.

<sup>32</sup>Stephen Neill, *Christian Faith and Other Faiths: The Christian Dialogue with Other Religions*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 148.

<sup>33</sup>Neill, *loc. cit.*

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2. The Christian apologist should possess insightful knowledge of the religions and general world-view of the non-Christian. This is imperative because as Kraemer says "the preaching of the Gospel is a translation of meaning and not of detached words."<sup>34</sup> A true translation is impossible without understanding the world of the particular people.
3. The Gospel must be presented against the "background of the universal human problems of aspiration, misery, sin, because these men and women must be for us in the first place human beings, fellowmen, and not non-Christian."<sup>35</sup> In other words, the Gospel must be presented as being relevant to the totality of human life because man cannot be dichotomized into the categories of body and soul.
4. The apologist should be able to use the thought-forms of the people in expressing the revelation of God in Christ. This must be done in such a way that the uniqueness of the biblical revelation stands out in such a way that calls for an existential response to Christ against the background of their world-view. Thus by using their thought-pattern the apologist is ensuring the incarnation of the Christian Truth in the world of the people.

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<sup>34</sup>Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, p. 303.

<sup>35</sup>Kraemer. *loc. cit.*