

## THE AFRICAN FOUNDATIONS OF CHRISTIANITY: MYTH OR REALITY?

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### Abstract

*One of the most contentious issues in the missionary field both in the past and at present has been the relationship between Christianity on the one hand and African culture on the other. Quite often Christianity has been set against everything that is African on the assumption that the African way of life is ungodly. Much of the Christian preaching and teaching emphasizes the foreignness of Christianity in Africa. In this vein it is customary to hear people saying that Christianity is a foreign religion and that it was imposed upon the African people through the activities of the white missionaries. Consequently, Christianity has alienated a great number of Africans and the faith of many believers is skin deep. In this paper it has been observed that when Christianity came to Africa it found a fertile soil for the planting of the gospel. This is because Africans have been from the very beginning God-fearing people. In this regard African Traditional Religions can be perceived as *preparatio evangelica*. It has been noted that African culture has a lot in common with the culture of the Old Testament and that people of African descent have contributed substantially to the origin and development of Christianity as evidenced in the role that Africans have played in Salvation History and in the development of Christian thought whose impact remains to the present day. It has been concluded in this paper that the African foundations of Christianity are not a myth but a reality to the extent that it can be argued that Christianity is indigenous to Africa as other traditional religions are.*

### 1. Introduction

It is customary in Africa to hear people arguing that Christianity is a foreign religion and that it was imposed upon Africans by the colonial powers assisted by the White missionaries. It seems impossible to refute this argument for historical facts concerning the expansion of the Church in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries appear to support this position. Christian churches in Africa have done very little to eradicate this myth despite its negative aspects on the expansion and consolidation of the Church in Africa but rather have chosen to imprint in the minds of the African converts the fallacy that Christianity is totally alien to the African continent. Consequently, many diehard African traditionalists have chosen to stick to their own indigenous religions, which have been passed on to them from generation to generation by their forefathers. The primary objective of this paper is twofold. First and foremost it is intended to provide a comprehensive argument in support of the theory that African Traditional Religions should be viewed as *preparatio evangelica* in relation to Christianity. Secondly, to argue that it is fallacious to consider Christianity as a foreign religion to the Africans. For as we shall see below Christianity is more African than European and American in its origin, therefore, it can, to a certain extent, be considered an African religion. This conclusion has been arrived because of overwhelming cultural, biblical and historical evidence so far available. In writing this paper, the present author has used a multidisciplinary approach, which includes anthropological, theological and historical methods.

## 2. Christianity in Africa in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries

Christianity is one of the most vibrant and dynamic World Religions in Africa. Its impact is felt everywhere on the African continent. From the time of its inception to the present day, it has brought tremendous changes in the social, economic, political and religious life of the African people. It is important to bear in mind that the history of Christianity in Africa is intertwined with the history of the missionary movement that characterised much of the history of the Church in Europe and America in the 19th century. Alec R Vidler in his book *The Church in an age of revolution* has postulated that for the churches of the West the nineteenth century was a period of unprecedented expansion.<sup>1</sup> During this period both Roman Catholic and Protestant missionaries planted churches in many countries in Africa. The expansion was of such proportion that the 19th century has been considered the greatest century since the first.<sup>2</sup> The driving force in missionary work during this period was the dominance of evangelical piety in a number of countries in Europe and America whose primary concern was the spiritual welfare of humankind and of those without the Gospel. This inspired people in Europe and America to go out and preach the gospel in Africa and other parts of the world where it had never been preached before.<sup>3</sup> This impulse led to the formation of a number of missionary societies in most parts of Europe and America, which were eventually responsible for the spread of Christianity in Africa. Because of their missionary zeal the Church in Africa has grown by leaps and bounds. Elizabeth Isichei in her book entitled *A history of Christianity in Africa* has intimated that statistics seem to indicate that there were ten million African Christians in 1900, 143 million in 1970 and that there would be 393 million in the year 2000. This means that by this time one in five of all Christians in the world is an African.<sup>4</sup>

Yet, despite its successes in Africa, Christianity is still described as an “imported religion”, the religion of the colonial masters. Sadly enough across the ages the Church in Africa has made little attempt, if any, to cast off its foreign mantle and assume the African garment in order to present itself as an indigenous religion to the Africans. Akin Omoyajowo in his paper *An expression of African Christianity* has intimated that the foreignness of the Church became more pronounced during the colonial era. During much of this period Christian missionaries presented Christianity to the Africans as a totally new religion and foreign to Africa. Their theologies were carbon copies of the theologies of their mother churches in England, Italy, Germany, France, Belgium, Portugal, the United States of America and indeed many other countries overseas. The beginning of Christianity in Africa in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century was accompanied with prefabricated theologies and rituals which advocated the total eradication of African cultural values including the religious beliefs and practices of the African people, thus alienating them from the benefits of this world religion.<sup>5</sup> It has now become apparent that the missionary approach not only estranged a great number of Africans from embracing Christianity but also that the depth of Christianity of a great number of those who profess to be Christians is skin deep.

This author is of the view that the only way in which Christianity can be relevant to the majority of the African people is by affirming the truth that Christianity is truly indigenous to Africa as all other African traditional religions are. This affirmation will fulfil two fundamental

1. Alec R Vidler, *The Church in an age of revolution*, London: Penguin, 1961, p. 246.

2. Vidler, *The Church...* p. 246.

3. Vidler, *The Church...* p. 249.

4. Elizabeth Isichei, *A history of Christianity in Africa*, London: SPCK, 1995, p.1.

5. Akin Omoyajow, *An African expression of Christianity*, in M Motlabi (ed.), *Black Theology*, n.d. p.62.

objectives. Firstly, it will enable Africans to see Christianity not as a “foreign religion” but as a religion that has sprung from the bosom of mother Africa. Consequently, African people will identify themselves with it and appropriate the spiritual benefits of this very important world religion. Secondly, it will enable African theologians to develop a theology that is relevant to the African dream of humanity, which emphasises community-based relationships rather than individualism. The argument that Christianity should be understood as an indigenous religion to Africa is based on cultural, biblical and historical considerations, which we shall now proceed to examine.

### 3. Cultural evidence

It is interesting to note that when Africans read the Bible, especially the Old Testament, they discover themselves in it because there are many similarities between the beliefs and practices described in the Old Testament and the African way of life. These similarities have been explained in two ways. The first theory holds the view that the similarities that exist between some African religious beliefs and practices and those found in the Old Testament may be a result of the encounter between Africans and the Jews of the Diaspora. According to this theory, Africans came under the influence of Jewish culture as a result of the fall of the Northern Kingdom in 721 BC and the fall of the Southern Kingdom in 587 BC, both of which led to the deportation of Jews to many parts of the world. Ype Schaaf in his book entitled *On their way rejoicing: the history and role of the Bible in Africa*, has indicated that the Jews swarmed out under pressure and settled everywhere they could survive. In the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, the Jews of the Diaspora established themselves throughout the Near East, in Egypt, North Africa and Sudan as far as Ethiopia. The Jews practised their religion wherever they went. This included, among other things, their belief in God, public worship in the synagogues, reading of the Law and the prophets and prayer. In the process, they influenced their neighbours including the African people.<sup>6</sup>

The second theory traces a common descent in Africa for both the Jews and African people based on contemporary archaeological findings. According to this theory, Africa should be considered as the birth place of humankind since the earliest and first human (*homo sapiens*) was discovered in East Africa in the Lake Rudolf region in Kenya where Richard Leakey, the son of the late archaeologist and anthropologist Louis B Leakey, was co-leader of the expedition that found the bones of the earliest man. It is conjectured that from that point humankind, including people of the Jewish descent, migrated throughout the world.

Interestingly enough this view has, in recent years, found support in another dramatic fossil found in South Africa. In December 1999, Dr Ron Clarke announced the excavation of a complete arm and hand of an *Australopithecus* ape-man believed to be 3.3 million-years-old at the Sterkfontein caves in Gauteng further boosting Africa’s claims to be the cradle of humankind. In this context, it is argued, Africa is directly connected to very ancient secular and religious civilizations and that most of the Old Testament developed from African roots. This, as we shall see below, is evidenced by the fact that many biblical passages both in the Old Testament and, to some extent, in the New Testament refer to Ethiopia and Egypt. The term Egypt, it is held, was once used to mean all of Africa, which was called the “Land of Ham.” This theory goes further to assert that ancient historians such as Flavius Josephus, Celus, Plutarch, Tacitus, Eusebius and Diodorus have intimated that the original Hebrews were a group of Ethiopian and Egyptian captives who were forced to leave Egypt and migrate to

6. Y Schaaf, *On their way rejoicing: the history and role of the Bible in Africa*, Carlisle: Paternoster, 1994, pp.4-5.

Canaan.<sup>7</sup> The implication of this theory is that the Hebrew people had a lot of African blood in their veins and that their culture was imbued with African cultural values, some of which appear distinctively in the pages of the Holy Scriptures. Be that as it may, the interaction between the Hebrew people and the African peoples seems to have been extremely close and beyond dispute. This may account, to some extent, to the similarities that we find in the religious cultures of these very important people.

### *The concept of the High God*

The concept of the High God similar to but not identical with the Hebrew deity as described in Deut.6:4 has been prevalent in most African societies. He is known variously as *Modimo*, *Mulungu*, *Namalenga*, *Nkulunkulu*, *Leza* and so on. The idea of God as one predates the arrival of Christianity and Islam in Africa. Tom Brown in his book titled, *Among the Bantu nomads*, has argued that the word *Modimo* for God among Batswana was not introduced by the missionaries but in the early days of missionary work among Batswana this was the word that they gave to the missionaries as the only word which was equivalent for the word used by the missionaries in their teaching.<sup>8</sup> It is important to note that one of the most fundamental characteristics of the African peoples' concept of God is the absence of graven images. Within the many diverse tribes of Africa, there are no known instances of physical representation of the High God. It is commonly believed that God is spirit and must be worshipped in spirit. This is in line with the Old Testament Law according to which ancient Israel was admonished not to make any graven image, or likeness of anything that is in heaven above, that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth and were forbidden not to bow down themselves upon them or serve them. (Ex.20:4-5).

Many African peoples also conceive God as Creator and have stories, which account how God created the world, and man some of which are similar to the Biblical story of creation. The *Nyasaland Diocesan Chronicle*, for instance, reports that the Chewa people who live in the present day Malawi had in their folklore a story similar to that of the Garden of Eden. It is told in their creation story that in the beginning there was a garden wherein was a man and his sister. When Bishop Chauncy Maples of the Anglican Church preached for the first time on Likoma Island and narrated the story of Adam and Eve the people were amazed and said to him "that is exactly what we have been taught at the initiation ceremony (*nkhole*) by our elders."<sup>9</sup>

### *The concept of the ancestors*

It seems plausible to argue that the concept of ancestor hood, so common in African Traditional Religions, is also prevalent in the Old Testament. Yahweh revealed himself to Moses through the burning bush on Mount Horeb as the God of the fathers. In Exodus 3: 16 God is portrayed saying to Moses: "Go, and gather the elders of Israel, and say unto them, *The Lord God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob*, appeared to me, saying, I have surely visited you, and seen that which is done to you in Egypt." Allusions to ancestor hood are made in many parts of the Old Testament and to some extent in the New Testament. For instance, both the Gospels of Matthew and

7. CH Felder (ed.) The original African heritage study Bible: King James Version, Nashville: James C Winston, 1993, p. 102. See also the Economist, *Another dramatic fossil found in South Africa*, Gaborone: 22-26 December 1999, p. 6.

8. Tom Brown, *Among the Bantu nomads*, New York: Negro University Press, 1926, p. 118.

9. *Nyasaland Diocesan Chronicle*, no. 52, July, 1916, p. 26.

Luke begin with the genealogy of Jesus, a kind of a family tree, which is traced back as far as Abraham in the case of Matthew (Mt.1:1-17) and as far back as Adam, who was the Son of God, in the case of Luke (Lk.3:23-38). Practically everywhere in Africa, ancestor hood plays a significant role in the life of African people. Ancestor hood is a symbol of identity of a given group of people and ancestors provide channels of communication between the living and the Living God. They are also considered as guardians of public morality.

### *The religious significance of circumcision*

It is interesting to note that circumcision was at the centre of the covenantal relationship between Yahweh and his people. It was given to the people of the ancient Israel as a form of reaffirming and verifying the covenant between Yahweh on the one hand and the Jewish people on the other. Beginning with Abraham (Gen.17:9-27) circumcision has been the hallmark of the Jewish people as a kingdom of priests, a holy nation and God's peculiar treasure above all people. (Ex.19:5-6). It is held that in the Old Testament the significance of circumcision was so great that an Israelite could be cut off from the covenant if he was not circumcised on the understanding that he disobeyed God's law. (Ex.4:25-26)<sup>10</sup> It is noteworthy that in Africa circumcision has been practiced by the Africa people from time immemorial as a school for moral education and preparation for both fatherhood and motherhood. In the context of Botswana these are known as *bogwera* (for boys) and *bojale* (for girls). Although these initiation ceremonies had certain negative aspects that led to their abolition in Tswana society, they had tremendous religious significance in enhancing the unity and morality of the youth and the community at large. They also bound together the living and the living-dead.

### *Sacrifices/offerings*

It is important to bear in mind that the religious system of the Hebrew people was dominated by sacrifices and offerings. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew people used to make sacrifices to Yahweh as part of their worship. They had different types of sacrifices and offerings such as burnt offerings (Lev. 1:3), peace offerings (Lev.3:1) sin offerings (Lev.4:24) and others. The book of Leviticus contains minute details on how these were made. Sacrifices and offerings occupy a very important place in the worship of many African societies. Schaaf has reported that in the countryside around Lake Chad, a very interesting discovery was made among the Massana people. When the American Lutheran missionary called Revne began to translate the Old Testament into their language he discovered, much to his amazement, that the Massana people had exactly the same sacrifices as those described in the Bible in the book of Leviticus.<sup>11</sup>

One significant element in these sacrifices is the element of atonement. Tom Brown has observed that inherent in the Tswana sacrificial system is the idea of atonement. Sacrifices and offerings quite often entail the act of bringing together two or more people who have alienated from each other the restoration to a peaceful state of those who have been estranged. It means an act of reconciliation. It is reckoned that without sacrifice or offering there can be no reconciliation with God, no forgiveness of faults committed, no restoration to former position and no remission of the penalty of alienation.<sup>12</sup>

It is very important to note that one of the dominant elements in the sacrifices of the Old

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10. Felder, *The original African*. p. 24.

11. Schaaf, *On their way...* p.4.

12. Brown, *Among the Bantu...* pp.114-115.

Testament was the religious significance of blood. It is generally agreed that in Hebrew religion blood was a symbol of life and quite often it was used to bind God and his people together in a covenant. Blood played a significant role in the sealing of the Sinai/Horeb Covenant between Yahweh on the one hand and his people on the other as recorded in Exodus 24:7-8. Similarly, it is evident that in many African societies blood plays a very important role. It has been generally observed that it is customary among African peoples to pour, place or sprinkle blood as a symbol of life upon alters, shrines or other sacred places during religious ceremonies possibly intended to please the ancestors and other deities which are concerned with the affairs of humankind.

### *Purification rites*

Hebrew religion was characterized to a great extent by purification rites. One of the most outstanding institutions given to the children of Israel by Yahweh was that they should be holy and sanctified to God at all times. In this regard, cleanliness was one of the factors that enabled the Israelites to remain pure in the sight of God. Purification rites ensured that the people were protected from the sickness and diseases common in many societies. There were purification rites after birth, death and during menstruation periods (Lev. 5:3-12; 10:10; 12:1-8). A number of scholars have observed that there are great similarities between purifications rites as practised in Hebrew society as commanded by God Almighty and purification rites practiced in many African societies after childbirth, death, puberty, harvest and other ritual occasions. In the context of Botswana purification rites after birth and death are strictly observed. For instance, among the Bakwena immediately after birth the child is made to inhale smoke from a burnt herb locally known as *tupa* or *lehetla*. This is done in order to protect the child against any evil influences that can emanate from the people who come to see the newly born baby. A week later, the child's hair is removed and traditional medicine is given to both parents to wash their feet. The father's feet are believed to be hot if he has met other women outside marriage. By using this medicine, the husband is allowed to move in and out of the house in which the wife is confined. At the end of the period of seclusion, another ceremony is carried out by medicine men so that the child can be taken out to be seen and be carried by anybody.<sup>13</sup>

Likewise, there are purification rites after death. John Mackenzie, one of the early LMS missionaries in Botswana, is reported to have observed that Tswana mortuary rituals bear a close resemblance to the purification rites in the Levitical code.<sup>14</sup> In the context of Botswana the purification rites of widowhood (*baswagadi*) needs special mention here. There is strong belief among Batswana that widowhood has adverse effects. Widows and widowers are said to be in a state of "hotness" which is the antithesis of "coolness" and that the hotness of their bodies can result in drought and crop failure. Widowhood can also affect domestic animals and children who are under the age of two years. More serious still widowhood can cause an incurable disease if a person in a state of widowhood engages himself or herself in sexual relations with another person before the purification period is over. It is strongly believed that a widow or widower can only be free of these dangers if he or she undergoes the necessary purification rites according to custom.<sup>15</sup>

13. S Ntloedibe, *Purification rites in Tswana culture: A case of the Bakwena in Molepolole*. A BA thesis, Gaborone, University of Botswana, pp.10-13.

14. Brown, *Among the Bantu...* p. 143.

15. Francis Semathane, *Moila (taboos) amongst Balete-Ramoutsa* in ABT Byaruhanga-Akiiki (ed), *Religion in Botswana Project*, vol.6, Gaborone: University of Botswana, 1984, pp. 14-16.

### *Religious functionaries*

It appears also that there are great similarities between African culture and biblical culture in the area of religious functionaries. It has been noted, for instance, that one chief characteristic of the Hebrew religion was the Aaronic priesthood. It is maintained by some scholars that the Aaronic priesthood as described in Ex.28:1-3 has a lot in common with the priesthood system found in a number of African countries. One good example is the priesthood system found among the Grebo people of Sierra Leone. Among the Grebo people, for instance, a chief priest bears the title “*bodia*”. This chief priest has been compared with the High Priest of the Hebrews in the story of Aaron. He is normally appointed in accordance with the prophecy of an oracle. Like in the Aaronic priesthood, the “*bodia*” is anointed at an elaborate ceremony during which the priest is given a ring to wear on his ankle as a badge of his priestly office and the doorposts of his house are sprinkled with blood of a sacrifice of goat.<sup>16</sup>

### *Plural marriages*

It is not our intention here to argue for or against plural marriages but only to indicate that they were endemic in the Old Testament. The earliest example of polygamy was the marriage of Lamech to Adah and Zillah (Ge.4:19). There are other examples in the Old Testament of men who were polygamists some of whom found favour in the sight of God. These include people such as Abraham (Gen.16:15), Esau (Gen.26:25); 28:9), Jacob (Gen. 29:16-30; 30: 3-9), Gideon (Judges 8:30) and Elkana (1 Sam. 1:2). Among the kings, David, a man after God's own heart, (1 Sam. 18:27; 2 Sam.5:13-16; 11:15, 27) and Solomon (1 Kings 11:3) had the reputation of having several wives. At the time of Moses, polygamy was legislated as a social and legal institution (Deut.21:15).

Plural marriages are found all over Africa though in some societies it is less commonly practised than others. It is generally believed that the more wives a man has, the more children he is likely to have, and greater is his promise of immortality. He is reborn in the multitude of his descendants and many will remember him after he has died physically and entered his spiritual immortality. There is also an underlying belief among many African societies that the head of a big family earns great respect in the eyes of the community because the survival of community is ensured.<sup>17</sup>

### *Agricultural rites/first fruits*

It is important to bear in mind that agriculture was one of the main economic activities of the Hebrew people especially after their settlement in the Promised Land. Their agricultural activities were surrounded with religious rituals to enhance the fertility of the land and to thank Yahweh who gave them rain and made the land fertile. One of the many religious festivals observed by the Hebrews was the first fruits as described in Lev. 23:10. When the ancient Hebrews harvested their first crops of the season, the first fruits of that harvest were sanctified to God. In the African context, this is an ancient practice of many African peoples. For instance, Batswana have, from time immemorial, observed a ceremony of first fruits for the purpose of rendering the new crops good for human consumption. WC Willoughby has documented that in the past during the ritual of first fruits people used to smear themselves with traditional medicine, old fires were extinguished, all hearths were swept and new fires

16. Felder, *The original African...* p. 131.

17. Felder, *The original African...* p. 131.

were lit. Supplications were made to the ancestors that the harvest might be abundant and the first born of people and cattle vigorous and alert. The religious significance of this ritual was that the new season's crops were taboo until consecrated by this ritual in order to make them available for use by the people. It was believed that anyone who tested the new crops before this rite was done would be punished by illness.<sup>18</sup>

### *Worship*

Another similarity between African culture and Jewish culture is in the area of worship. When the children of Israel carried the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem, King David and the people of Israel took with them musical instruments and played, sung and danced with all their might. (2 Sam.6:12-15; 2 Chron.15: 28-29) It is a well-known fact that music and dance were very important parts of worship for the Hebrews. Psalm 150 enumerates the various instruments that the people of Israel used for the worship of Yahweh. Similarly dancing, singing and clapping of hands form a very important part of the religious worship of many African people. It is generally agreed that music, singing and dancing reach deep into the innermost parts of the African people. It is also held that music brings some form of inspiration which may bring to surface things that otherwise may not be readily revealed in normal circumstances (Gen.4:21, 2 Chron.5:13-14)

### *Religious symbolism of serpents*

Of great interest is also the parallelism that we find between the Hebrew religion and the African religious culture more particularly in the area of religious symbolism. In the Old Testament, for example, serpents appear to have some religious significance. Serpents appear to be endowed with some mysterious powers. The blame of the fall of Adam and Eve and indeed of the whole humanity is placed squarely on the serpent that persuaded Eve to sin. In this case, of course, serpents are a symbol of evil. They do sometimes, however, represent divinity. References are often made to the rod of Moses which was turned into a snake as a symbol of divine power (Ex.7:8-13). Snakes feature a lot in African mythology. Snake-spirits feature prominently in the rain cults of the Chewa and Tumbuka peoples who live in the present day Malawi. ML Vail, for instance, in his study of the Tumbuka religion, indicated that the Tumbuka people believed in the existence of a snake spirit called Chikang'ombe who controlled the rains that fell in the Tumbuka area. When he was content the rain fell abundantly and the land was fruitful. When he was angry he could be malevolent by withholding the rain and thus infringing a punishment over the people because of their wrongdoing.<sup>19</sup> This reinforces very strongly the view that there are many commonalities in African mythology with that found popularly in the Bible and that these similarities may be based on the fact that Jewish and African culture may have sprung from the same source more probably on the soil of Africa if the view of Africa being the cradle of humanity is maintained as gospel truth!

18. WC Willoughby, *The soul of the Bantu*, London: SCM, 1928, p.229.

19. HL Vail, *Religion, Language and Tribal myth: The Tumbuka and Chewa* in M Schoffeleers (ed.) *Guardians of the land*, Gweru: Mambo Press, 1979, p. 214.



### *Divination*

Another interesting feature in Hebrew religious life was the role played by divination. Quite often the Old Testament speaks of religious functionaries such as diviners, dreamers and sorcerers who are believed to have some supernatural powers which are not possessed by other people. These religious personalities were consulted in times of need in order to provide spiritual answers to baffling problems of human existence. Likewise the existence of such religious personalities in African societies is attested practically everywhere. Diviners as their name indicates are concerned primarily with acts of divination. In the context of Botswana diviners play a very important and significant role in healing. They practice their trade by divination. This consists of throwing of bones of animals. Each bone has its own name and stands for a particular function. The revelation regarding the cause of a disease, death or misfortune depends on the knowledge of what the bones say according to the position in which they lie after the act of throwing.<sup>20</sup> The diviners, it is believed, know the innermost secrets of people and make them known to their clients at a payment of a fees determined by the diviners themselves. While diviners are entertained, sorcerers and witches are hated as enemies of society and witches are considered as the personification of evil at its highest level. They are therefore feared and punished once discovered.

### *The religious significance of fire*

Mention should also be made here regarding the similarities that we find in Jewish and African cultures concerning the religious significance of fire. It has been observed by a number of scholars that throughout the history of Israelite religion fire was considered as an agent of purification (Jer.23:29) and that God's presence in the midst of the people of Israel was in the form of a pillar of fire (Ex.13:21). Fire was used in the burnt offerings so that the flagrant smell of the sacrifice may please Yahweh. It is apparent that in most parts of Africa fire has from time immemorial assumed religious meaning. For example, the Herero who live in the present day Namibia, have sacred fire on holy places, which is considered as a gift from God and to which the whole welfare of the people is intimately connected. It symbolizes for them national life, prosperity and a means of contact with the unseen world. Similarly, it has been noted that harvest ceremonies among the Nandi people in East Africa involve the lighting of sacred fire. At such ceremonies, prayers are offered to God for the welfare of both people and cattle.<sup>21</sup>

### *Dreams*

This discussion would be incomplete without mentioning the similarities surrounding the Hebrew belief in the religious meaning of dreams and their impact in the life of the individual and society. Dreams especially their interpretation occupied a place of great importance in the religion of ancient Israel. Likewise, in Africa dreams are considered as of great religious value. In many African societies the spirits of the ancestors communicate with the living through dreams. It is also generally believed that they inspire the work of diviners, rainmakers, priests and medicine men by imparting some divine information to them.

## **4. Biblical evidence**

It is common knowledge that Africa and the people of the African descent contributed significantly to the shaping of the gospel message, which ultimately led to the salvation of the

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20. Brown, *Among the Bantu*. p. 127.

21. Felder, *The original African...*p. 171.

entire humankind. Africa and Africans feature prominently in the accounts of both the Old and New Testaments. For example, contrary to the conservative, fundamentalist Christian attitude, which views African culture as an enemy of the Christian faith, there is ample evidence that African people have, from the beginning of the biblical times, actively participated in God's saving acts as revealed in the Holy Scriptures. It is noteworthy that Africans, as a specific cultural group, are mentioned in the sacred writings thus making the case for the inculturation of the gospel message in Africa not only stronger but also as a necessary divine imperative.

To begin with, Africa and not Europe or America appears in the story of creation where the sources of the Nile River are located in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 2: 10-13). The Old Testament frequently mentions Cush (Ethiopia) and Egypt. After his call, Abraham lived in Egypt for sometime before he finally settled in the land of Canaan (Gen.12: 10-20). Jacob and his sons sought refuge in Egypt to escape the ravages of drought and famine in the Promised Land (Gen.42-50). African presence is recorded in the land of Canaan both during the period of the Patriarchs and afterwards as major elements in the Egyptian army, which was stationed there. Robert A Bennett has noted that the early fourteenth century BC Amarna Letters (correspondence from Canaanite kings to Pharaoh Akhnaton in Egypt) testify to the early African presence there. According to Bennett, one letter, from a certain Abdu-heba, king of pre-Israelite Jerusalem, complained of the rebellious Nubian troops, which were garrisoned in the land of Canaan.<sup>22</sup>

It was in Egypt that the Israelite people were born as a nation through the Exodus event (Ex. 1-15). Moses is acclaimed to have been an Afro-Asiatic. After all, he was born in Egypt and was raised up as an African by the daughter of Pharaoh in Pharaoh's court (Ex.2: 1-10). To Moses is credited the authorship of the Pentateuch, the most sacred literature of the Hebrew Bible. It is also recorded that at one point he married an Ethiopian woman (Num. 12:1-10) something that created division between himself and his sister Miriam and his brother Aaron. Again, it appears that later in Israelite history, Nubian/Cushite soldiers became part of King David's forces which captured Jerusalem from the Jebusites and seem to have remained part of Jerusalem's militia which David incorporated as his own.<sup>23</sup> For example, after the death of Absalom in the hands of Joab, it was a Sudanese or Chushite militia whom Joab sent to King David to break off the bad news about the death of his son (2 Sam. 18: 21).

People of African descent were indeed at the centre of salvation history within the Bible itself. The Queen of Sheba who visited King Solomon (1 Kings 10:1-10; 2 Chron.9: 1-9) was a black African from Ethiopia. Schaaf has indicated that her beauty captivated King Solomon. He entered into an intimate relationship with her and bore her a son who eventually became the ruler of Ethiopia. The last Emperor of Ethiopia claimed direct descent from this union between King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba.<sup>24</sup> Down the road in Israelite history Africans seem to have been extremely active in the religious and political life of the Jewish people. For example, during the time of King Hezekiah of Judah, Israel forged a close alliance with Egypt at the time when it was being ruled by the Nubians (751-656) in a common effort to avert being captured by the Assyrians who were carving out an empire for themselves (2 Kings 9:9). There are also instances when Sudanese armies invaded the Kingdom of Judah in a bid to establish its hegemony there though they were defeated when King Asa and the Judean army

22. Robert A. Bennet, *Africa* in Bruce M Metzger & MD Coggan, *The Oxford companion to the Bible*, Oxford: 1993, p.11.

23. Bennet, *Africa...* p.11.

24. Schaaf, *On their way...* p.3.

attacked them (2 Chron. 14: 9-15). The Bible asserts that from time to time Sudanese and Libyan armies made incursions into Judah but without much success (2 Chron. 9:9). Africans were also active in prophetic circles. For instance, it is claimed that a Sudanese court official a certain Ebed-melek saved prophet Jeremiah from death under King Zedekiah (Jer.38: 7-13). Prophet Zephania is called "son of Cush" (Zeph.1: 1) possibly an indication that his mother was an African. The wisdom tradition also reveals that much of the wisdom of Israel was directly borrowed from Egypt. For example, the book of Proverbs is said to have been modelled upon the Egyptian "Instructions of Amen-em-opet".<sup>25</sup> It is also in Egypt that the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Hebrew Scripture, was put together and became a very authoritative piece of literature in the life of the Christian Church. Similarly, the Old Testament portrays Ethiopia as a place which would soon experience conversion because the Ethiopians were inclined to Yahweh worship (Ps.68:31; Isaiah 11:11; 18:7, Zeph. 3:10)

In the New Testament Africa and African people also feature significantly. For instance, when the life of Jesus was being sought after by Herod to be destroyed, his father and mother fled with him to Egypt for his life (Mt. 2: 13-23). Simon of Cyrene an African (Mt.27:32), who had come to Jerusalem during Passover, helped Jesus Christ to carry his cross on the way to Calvary (Mk.15: 21). Cyrene was the capital city of Cyrenaica a country in North Africa. It is claimed that all the people in Cyrene were black and many of them were Jews who came into Jerusalem very often to worship in the temple. Acts 2: 10 records that on the day of Pentecost there were a number of people who came from Egypt and Libya near Cyrene. Acts 8: 26-40 mentions a black Queen- Kandake-the queen of the Nubians in the ancient Ethiopian Capital of Meroe. The Ethiopian eunuch in her court, who was baptized by Philip the evangelist, is credited to have been the first African Christian convert, who eventually planted Christianity in Ethiopia - Africa. Finally some authorities have intimated that the fact that the Israelites rescued black Jews out of Ethiopia during the Operation Moses between 1980-84 in fulfilment of Isaiah 11:11 is an indisputable evidence that the early Jews were originally black.<sup>26</sup>

## 5. Historical evidence

Winston Walker in his book entitled *A history of the Christian Church* has intimated that Africa gave three great leaders to Latin Christianity namely, Tertullian, Cyprian and Augustine.<sup>27</sup> Their contribution to the development of the Christian Church in general and Western theology in particular is unparalleled in the history of Christianity. They left behind a blue print, which was specifically African in the life and thought of the Christian Church. Based on their contribution in the belief, theology, spirituality and practice of the Christian Church it can be argued very convincingly that Christianity has indeed very strong African roots and that it is indigenous to Africa like any other African Traditional Religions. In order to appreciate the contribution that Africans made to the origin and development of Christianity generally and Christian theology in particular it is necessary to examine the tremendous contribution that was made by each one of the above African theologians:

In the first place, our attention is turned to Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullian (160-220) an eminent African scholar. The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church gives him the title "African Church Father" and argues that he was the first Christian theologian to write in Latin

25. Bennet, *Africa...* p. 11.

26. James Winston, *African Heritage Study Bible Encyclopaedia*, Nashville: James C Winston Publishing Company, 1996, p.221.

27. W Walker, *A history of the Christian Church*, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1959, p. 160.

and “he may be said to have created the language of Western theology, which owes its characteristic precision to his legally trained mind”<sup>28</sup> Tertullian was a native of Carthage in North Africa. He was a lawyer by profession. He embraced Christianity between 195 and 196. He became a catechist and according to Jerome, a priest. Once he became a Christian he defended Christianity from the accusations brought against Christians because of their refusal to attribute divine honours to the emperor since they believed in One God. In his literary works, Tertullian argued, among other things, that (a) the human soul is Christian by nature, (b) that the Bible is the possession of the Church to whom alone the truth has been handed down by Christ and the Apostles. However, Tertullian is remembered mainly for his contribution in the formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity. He is acclaimed to be the first theologian who used the term “Trinity”. He used the formula “*una substantia, tres personae*” in describing the relationship of the Three Divine Persons of the Godhead. In the course of history, Tertullian provided the fundamental formulae not only for the Trinity but also for Christology which eventually entered the Latin Creeds of the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>29</sup> His contribution to the development of Christian theology makes him as one of the greatest theologians of the patristic period.

Another great African theologian in ecclesiastical history was Thascius Caecilianus Cyprianus. Winston Walker speaks of him as the intellectual heir of Tertullian whom he called master. Born in Carthage about 200 AD he was converted to Christianity in 246. Eventually he became Bishop of Carthage. He contributed substantially to ecclesiology, that is, the doctrine of the church. It was Cyprian who expounded the teaching that the Church is the one visible orthodox community of Christians. In his words “There is one God, and Christ is one, and there is One Church and one chair (episcopate) founded upon the rock by the word of the Lord” and “He who can no longer have God for his father cannot have the Church for his mother”. To Cyprian are also attributed the words “There is no salvation outside the Church”. He also developed the idea that the Lord’s Supper is a sacrifice offered by the priest to God.<sup>30</sup> Though Cyprian was no match to the intellectual brilliance of Tertullian he, nevertheless, contributed significantly to the theological debate. His pastoral concerns and pastoral letters impacted the society of his day and gained great popularity among his followers. Some of his writings were also of great theological importance. His theological contribution left lasting imprint in the area of Christian understanding of the nature of the Church, the sacraments and church ministry.<sup>31</sup>

We now come to one of the most distinguished sons of Africa in the history of Christianity—St. Augustine. Winston Walker has indicated that Augustine was the greatest of the three African theologians that dominated the history of the Early Church. In the words of Walker “in Augustine the ancient church reached its highest religious attainment since the apostolic times.”<sup>32</sup> According to Walker,

Augustine was the father of much of what was most characteristic in medieval Roman Catholicism. He was the spiritual ancestor. His theology was largely rooted in his own experience as an African though, of course, such experience was enshrined by his deep

28. FL Cross (ed.), *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, London: OUP, 1958, p. 1334.

29. Cross (ed.), *The Oxford Dictionary*. p. 1334.

30. Walker, *A history of the Christian Church*. p. 67.

31. Cross (ed.), *The Oxford Dictionary*. p.363.

32. Walker, *A history of the Christian Church*. p. 160.

knowledge of Scripture, philosophy and church traditions.<sup>33</sup> Paul Tillich has described Augustine as “the man who is more than anyone else the representative of the West, he is the foundation of everything the West had to say. His influence overshadows not only the next thousand years but also all periods ever since.”<sup>34</sup> The tremendous impact of Augustine in the theological debate is seen by the fact that his theological ideas have stood the test of times and continue to the present day. Paul Tillich has observed that “we can trace a line of thought from Augustine to the Franciscans in the Middle Ages, to the Reformers, to the philosophers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, to the German classical philosophers including Hegel, to the present-day philosophy of religion.”<sup>35</sup>

Space does not allow us to enumerate in detail Augustine’s contribution to the development of Christianity generally and Christian theology in particular. However, the following need to be mentioned here. In the first instance, Augustine contributed considerably to the doctrine of man. According to him, man has been so corrupted by the fall that he is bound at some point to sin. In his analysis of original sin, Augustine intimated that it is biologically transmitted to later generations through the sexual procreation of the human race. The only cure from sin lies in the miracle of God’s grace through Christ. Coupled with this Augustine developed St. Paul’s doctrine of predestination according to which, God has predestined some human beings to blessedness in the life to come through his mercy and others to punishment merited by their sins.

Besides Augustine contributed substantially to the debate concerning the ecclesia, he argued that the Church is a mixed company of good and bad people, which means that the Church is much less distinguishable from the world at large than if it were a community of saints. Concomitantly the line of demarcation between the Church and the world is blurred since, as the Church is not wholly good, so the world is not wholly bad. In addition to this, Augustine elucidated on the concept of just war. Over and above what Cicero said about the just war before him, Augustine added two points namely that the motive for war must be love and that if the war is to be just, one side must be unjust. Moreover, Augustine contributed tremendously to the debate concerning the relationship between Church and State. According to Augustine, the purpose of the state is to maintain justice, defined as giving to each his due. To Augustine this meant primarily the rights of life and property. The state, however, need not be just in order to be a state. However, the state may be, at least, an approximate instrument of justice, especially if administered by Christian rulers and those rulers need the direction of the Church. If the Church is to direct the state, the state is to uphold the Church, even to the point of using coercion in the interests of the true faith.

Moreover, Augustine is credited to have given a definitive shape to the Catholic teaching on human sexuality and marriage. He saw the primary purpose of sex and marriage as procreation and argued that ideally, there should be no sexual relations save for procreation. Finally, Augustine, by means of analogies, was able to make the traditional doctrines of the Church such as the Doctrine of the Trinity intelligible to people.<sup>36</sup> It should be noted that though some of Augustine’s views have been heavily criticised by a number of theologians in

33. Walker, *A history of the Christian Church*. p. 160.

34. Paul Tillich, *A history of Christian Thought*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1968, p.104.

35. Tillich, *A history of Christian Thought*. p. 104.

36. Roland Baiton, *Christendom*, New York: American Heritage Publishing, 1966.

the breadth and width of ecclesiastical history, their impact have been felt by succeeding generations in the Western Christianity both in the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches to the present day. In view of all the above it appears plausible to argue that the African foundations of Christianity are not a myth but a reality.

## **6. Concluding remarks**

In this paper, it has been argued that in view of the affinity that exists between the culture of the African people and the culture of the Old Testament it seems plausible to maintain the view that African Traditional Religions are a *preparatio evangelica* in their relation to Christianity. It has also been argued in this paper that cultural, biblical and historical considerations seem to point to the view that Christianity is not a foreign religion to the African people and that it can, to a certain extent, be considered as an African religion, therefore indigenous to Africa. This accounts to the fact that when missionaries came to Africa they found a fertile soil for the planting of the Gospel which has become a religious power to reckon with.