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A table of contents for the *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* can be found here:

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# EVALUATION OF THE THEOLOGY OF BOLAJI IDOWU

*Bulus Galadima*

*Bolaji Idowu has been one of the more influential theologians in Africa during the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, as a pioneer in developing African Christian Theology, he has made a profound impact on theology in Africa. How do evangelicals assess his approach to theology in the African continent?*

*Dr. Bulus Galadima examines his theology as evidenced in his three major publications: Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief; African Traditional Religion: A Definition; and Towards an Indigenous Church. Only that African Christian Theology which has deep roots in the Scripture can help the Church in Africa today.*

## INTRODUCTION

That contemporary theological scene has become chaotic. There appears to be no consensus on what the task of theology is or how theology is to be pursued ... Of course there has always been disagreement about the methods and objectives of theological work, but the crisis at this time, is more serious than heretofore.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon D. Kaufman, *An Essay on Theological Method*, (Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press, 1979), p. ix.

MA from Northeastern Illinois University in 1993. His Ph.D. was earned in Historical Theology from Trinity International University in 1994.

The problem is further compounded for the African theologian because many people feel alienated from Christianity. Many an educated African identifies the God of Christianity as "the God of the White man." This, says Professor Bolaji Idowu, poses a challenge to African Christians and theologians as they seek to make the message of Christianity available to their fellow Africans. Theologians must get to know their people thoroughly and approach their people's belief reverently because the Christian possesses that which is the key to the soul of their fellow Africans – their language.<sup>2</sup> Many Africans have heeded Idowu's call.

However, the essential question is, "How many of the current works truly qualify as African Christian Theology?" At the heart of this challenge is the issue of religious language. The purpose of this paper is to critically examine the attempt of Professor Bolaji Idowu, the man who sounded the clarion call for this endeavour.

#### **AFRICAN THEOLOGY: ROLE OF CULTURE AND ATR**

It is necessary to define the major terms used in this paper. African Theology refers to African Christian Theology. It is not a theology built upon African traditional religious concepts. It is rather a theology built on Christian presuppositions. It is a theology trying to make Christian teachings comprehensible to Africans using African concepts as medium of conveying the truths. It is also a theology that seeks to express an African understanding of the Christian message.<sup>3</sup>

It follows necessarily from the above that when we say "African Religious Language", we mean "African Christian Religious Language".

In recent times, there has been a lot of contextualizing of Christianity in Africa and the rest of the world: this has greatly aroused my interest in the subject. I believe that contextualization in Africa

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<sup>2</sup> Kwesi Dickson, and Paul Ellingworth ed., *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs*. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1969), p. 15.

<sup>3</sup> I do not share Idowu's position that the concept "African Theology" applies to any religious formulation. See "Study of Religion" *Orita* 1:1 p.4.

calls for the paying of close attention to the role of African culture in Christianity. Since the wake of contextualization, African Christians have been encouraged to take pride in their cultural heritage. This is good, and it has proved to be beneficial to the survival of African culture.

However, true contextualization will only occur if we discover the locus of Africanity or Africanness. African soul is truly distinguished in its conceptual nature and thought, not in exclusion of the tangible cultural symbols. Observable cultural expressions ought to be the result of the inner guiding principles, that is, the concepts and worldview.<sup>4</sup>

Therefore, the solution to the problem of Christianity and theology in Africa does not lie primarily in the use of vernacular language. It lies in finding how to transmit clearly the concepts and ideas embodied in Christianity to the African mind.<sup>5</sup>

The study of a people's culture is very significant to understanding who they are. Gordon Kaufman says, "every culture known to modern investigators, no matter how primitive, possesses myths which set out pictures of the world within which the life of that people is lived, and which provide fundamental guidance and orientation for that life."<sup>6</sup> Besides, in African societies religion and culture are inseparable.<sup>7</sup> To adequately comprehend one, the study of the other is necessary. We agree with Idowu that there are sufficient similarities between African Traditional Religions to warrant the use of the singular.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> It is also true that the concrete cultural elements influence concepts. That is to say, the relationship between the two is reciprocal. However, the influence of the inner on the outer is stronger. (Kwasi Wiredu, *Philosophy and an African Culture*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1980.)

<sup>5</sup> This does not undermine the efforts of Professors Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message* and Kwame Bediako's emphasis on the "mother tongue" as a language of the heart, thus the language of enduring theology and deep theological reflection. Bediako himself is fluent in his mother tongue and uses a local Ghanaian dialect for devotions at Akrofi-Memorial Centre.

<sup>6</sup> Kaufman, *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>7</sup> Idowu says this is true of all cultures. See "The Study of Religion with special reference to African Traditional Religion," *Orita* 1:1 (June, 1967):3.

<sup>8</sup> The title of his book *African Traditional Religion: A Definition*, (New York: Orbis Books, 1975), suggests this. In all his writings, he consistently

Though Africans have embraced Christianity,<sup>9</sup> they are still Africans; therefore, they have a strong desire to maintain their identity as Africans, though Christians. There is cry for an African theology. Dr. Lugira says that it was Professor Bolaji Idowu who first called African theologians to the serious consideration of making Christian Theology relevant to the African people.<sup>10</sup> Professor Idowu says that

The Church in Africa could only attain selfhood and be adequate for her mission when she possessed a first-hand knowledge of the Lord of the Church and was able to express that knowledge in clear accents made possible through her own original meditation and thinking... The Church has been speaking in Africa and to Africans in strange or partially understood tongues.<sup>11</sup>

African theology emerged out of a complex social, cultural, religious and political matrix. We have briefly addressed the reason why there is a need for an African theology. We discovered that the need arose because Christianity is foreign to the African people. However, this is the first and primary reason that instigated the doing of African theology. A second and more recent reason stated for doing African theology is the desire to protect Christianity in Africa from syncretism. It is more commonly assumed that engaging in African theology would lead to syncretism but Aylward Shorter has argued the reverse. He says that the lack of African theology has led to syncretism because the tension between African culture, African Traditional Religion, and Christianity is inevitable. And without African theology, people

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uses the singular to describe African religions even though he is aware of the differences.

<sup>9</sup> Africans have also embraced Islam since the seventh century. The Islamic religion has penetrated large zones of north and west Africa, just as somewhat earlier Coptic Christianity had spread into limited areas, as in Egypt and Ethiopia. However, our concern in this paper is with Christianity alone.

<sup>10</sup> David Niringiye, "Prolegomena to an African Theology: An Examination of the Sources and Methodology of Mbiti's Theology," (M.A. Thesis, Wheaton Graduate School, 1987), p. 15 quoting Aloysius M. Lugira, "African Christian Theology," *African Theological Journal* 8:1, 1971, p. 56.

<sup>11</sup> Dickson & Ellingworth, ed., p. 9.

unconsciously syncretize Christianity.<sup>12</sup> The question that we are now confronted with is this: "Is it possible to adapt Christianity to a culture so that it maintains its identity while being understandable to the people?"

Shorter noted that the way Christianity is presented fails to take into consideration the African traditional thought system. Thus many African Christians operate with an overlay of a Christian thought system on the old.<sup>13</sup> Christianity needs to interrelate with African culture and African Traditional Religion if Christianity is to survive in Africa, and if a truly African theology is to be formulated. Africans cannot exist apart from their cultural heritage. The influence of their traditional religion is an imminent threat to orthodox Christianity. Therefore, a thorough study of African Traditional Religion and culture are necessary for African theology to avoid the unconscious syncretism which abounds. Also, since the African cultural and religious heritage is part of the African's identity, African Traditional Religion is necessarily a source of African theology. "In speaking, therefore, of African Traditional Religion, we are speaking of a complex developing phenomenon, and one which, though visibly changing, is far from moribund."<sup>14</sup>

#### SOURCES OF AFRICAN THEOLOGY

There are as many sources of African theology as there are theologians. The Pan-African conference of Third World theologians identified five sources: (1) the Bible and Christian heritage, (2) African anthropology, (3) African Traditional Religion, (4) African Independent Churches, and (5) African realities.<sup>15</sup> Muzorewa and Fashole-Luke identify four sources: (1) African Traditional Religion, (2) the Bible, (3) African Independent Churches, and (4) Christian tradition. For Pobee, the sources are slightly different; they are the

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<sup>12</sup> Aylward Shorter, *African Christian Theology: Adaptation or Incarnation?* (New York: Orbis Books, 1986), pp. 14-15.

<sup>13</sup> Shorter, p. 10.

<sup>14</sup> Shorter, p. 2.

<sup>15</sup> It is not clear what this refers to. Probably, it is a reference to African cultural distinctions.

**Bible, the tradition of the church, and revelation in African theology.** The main elements of his theology are experience, revelation, Scriptures, tradition, culture and reason.<sup>16</sup> Niringiye says that "of all the sources of African theology, African Traditional Religion has received the greatest attention."<sup>17</sup>

When the interpretation of African religious experience is given a Christian formulation, African traditional theology could become Christian theology. The latter is interpreted in the light of Christ's teachings, the former in the light of what God has revealed to the African religious consciousness. The two are not necessarily exclusive of one another. In each case, it is God who chooses to be revealed, whether through the Son or through a bush without a name.<sup>18</sup>

Muzorewa and other African theologians like him see the African Traditional Religion as a source of African theology just as Christian theology is. Mbiti's approach assumes that "Christianity comes to enhance African traditional religions." This implies that there is no tension between the major elements of African Traditional Religions and the major claims of Christianity."<sup>19</sup>

Down through the history of the church, the church fathers used the reflection of the non-Christians in their theologising as it illuminates and more powerfully presents what the Scripture teaches. I should also seek to use the categories of African Traditional Religion – in African theology – that powerfully explains the teaching of the gospel just like the early fathers used concepts of *logos*, *substance*, *persona* and many others. This is the position that I hold. With this background discussion, we are now ready to examine Bolaji Idowu's theology.

### **BOLAJI IDOWU'S THEOLOGY**

**The Man:** Professor E. Bolaji Idowu, "the learned President of the Methodist Church of Nigeria,"<sup>20</sup> as Kato called him, has had profound

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<sup>16</sup> Niringiye, p. 44-45.

<sup>17</sup> Niringiye, p. 50.

<sup>18</sup> Muzorewa, p. 83.

<sup>19</sup> Niringiye, p. 149.

<sup>20</sup> Byang Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*, (Kisumu, Kenya: Evangel

influence on Christian theology in Nigeria and Africa.

He is one of the pioneers of African theology. Dr. Lugira claims that it was Professor E. Bolaji Idowu who first seriously challenged Africans to produce theologies that would meet the spiritual needs of the Africans. Since his call, numerous books have been written and many conferences and consultations have been held on the subject of African theology.<sup>21</sup> He is one of the leading African Christian theologians.<sup>22</sup>

Professor Idowu concentrates his efforts on the study of the Yoruba religion. He says that a meaningful and profitable study in African theology can only be done by concentrating on only one culture. The smaller the area covered the better and deeper the study. This is because African cultures and societies are vast and diverse.

**Idowu's Perception of ATR:** In order to avoid the pitfalls of prejudice and preconceived notions which inhibit learning, Idowu said, he adopted an objective attitude in the study of the Yoruba religion. The book, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*, his doctoral dissertation published in 1962, is basically a description of the Yoruba concept of God. In it, Idowu sought to understand the religion of the Yoruba 'from the inside' and so learn from them what they know and believe with regards to the supreme matter of religion.<sup>23</sup>

Idowu has written two other books and many articles on the relationship between Christianity and African traditional religion. His second book, *Towards an Indigenous Church*, published in 1965, was the outcome of a series of talks given on radio in Nigeria. It was basically a challenge to the Nigerian Church to become independent of Western influence. *African Traditional Religion: A Definition*, his third and last book, was published in 1973. In this book he argues that the African's experience of the reality of God is, most faithfully

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Publishing House, 1975), p. 27.

<sup>21</sup> Niringiye, p. 15.

<sup>22</sup> Bruce Demarest, *General Revelation: Historical Views and Contemporary Issues*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1982), p. 202.

<sup>23</sup> E. Bolaji Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*, (London: Longmans, Green and Co. Ltd., 1962), p. 5.

mediated by the various forms of the traditional religion native to the African cultural situation. Besides these books, he has written scores of articles and contributed chapters to many books.

Demarest says that Idowu's earlier outlook could be broadly considered as evangelical. During this period, 1950s and 1960s, Idowu insisted that Christianity was the definitive religion. Idowu's overriding concern during these earlier years was to create an indigenous African Church that would be truly free to acknowledge the Lordship of the eternal Christ, who alone is preeminent."<sup>24</sup> He says, during this period, Idowu believed that the Church ought to bear the unmistakable stamp of the fact that she is the church of God in Nigeria. Idowu also believed that Christian teachings need to be supplemented with traditional religious beliefs. We will examine if this is a correct reading of Idowu.

Idowu strongly believes that religion evolved. He says that the supersensible world is beyond our full comprehension. God is understood by each culture according to its own abilities. Therefore, every culture has some contributions to make. Thus, we must accept what the Yoruba has to contribute to the larger realm of apprehension of spiritual things. This was his opinion in his third book, *African Traditional Religion*. He more clearly states it when he says,

To the reflective, contemplative or speculative, the method of abstraction may lead to the goal of spiritual satisfaction. But they are a minority. To the remaining majority, fundamental truths can only be grasped when they are presented in descriptive patterns – in pictures, in something concrete, at least – in the form of a modelled figure.<sup>25</sup>

He says, whether we try to articulate God abstractly or through concrete images the goal is the same. He states his belief that the Yoruba religion would evolve to a point where it would no longer need to use images in worship. However, because a people uses images, he says, does not mean that they have nothing to contribute to the knowledge of God.

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<sup>24</sup> Demarest, p. 203.

<sup>25</sup> E. Bolaji Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*, (London: Longmans, Green and Co. Ltd., 1962), p. 65.

Here Idowu tries to analyse how each culture or religion comprehends or articulates spiritual realities. The full implication of Idowu's position is more clearly seen when he says that every religion goes through the "crude form" of using images. As "man advances in knowledge and attains clearer spiritual vision, he could grow above this kind of material aid to his beliefs. Among the Yoruba, the crude or absurd emblems will certainly pass away with the passage of time."<sup>26</sup> In this way Idowu states quite clearly his commitment to an evolutionary concept of religion. If the argument is valid, and if the reality we are talking about is the same and if the premises are open to human scrutiny, we will then be forced to agree with his position. However, we believe that Christianity is qualitatively different from other religions in its claims and assertions. The major issue at stake is not the process of the development of religion as much as the content.

Revelation or theophany is evidenced, says Idowu, through the created order and man's inner link with deity. He is, however, very clear that God chooses to reveal himself to us through his creatures and without this there would be no revelation. "Revelation is basically a matter of divine initiative."<sup>27</sup> On this he is right. He quotes Paul Tillich's *Systematic Theology* to support his position: "Natural knowledge about self and world... can lead to the question of the ground of being ... the question asked by reason, but reason cannot answer it. Revelation can answer it."<sup>28</sup>

The probable reason why Idowu sees all religions as leading us to God is that he does not differentiate between general revelation and special revelation. In fact, created order and man's inner link could all be seen as general revelation in which case he does not have a special revelation – the redemptive history of Israel and the supreme revelation in Jesus Christ.

It is no surprise when Idowu says all men are trying to apprehend the same God, bearing in mind his concept of the evolution of religion without content. Furthermore, he asserts that we cannot talk about 'the God of Africa' since there is only one God. He calls the use of the phrase, 'the God of Africa', a political invention that springs from the

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<sup>26</sup> Idowu, *Olodumare*, p. 66.

<sup>27</sup> E. Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion*, p. 57.

<sup>28</sup> Idowu, *ATR*, p. 56, and Tillich, p. 133.

European's racio-centric concept of God. The closest he comes to putting all of his ideas together is when he says:

We find that in every age and generation, there is a direct contact of God with the human soul, the personal awareness of God on the part of man through God's own initiative. What man knows of God, what he discovers about God, comes as a result of this self-disclosure.<sup>29</sup>

We agree with Idowu that the initiative in revelation is with God. If he does not reveal himself to us, there is no way we can know anything about him. But we profoundly disagree with him when he says that there is a direct contact between God and all men. By this he implies a contact that guarantees a genuine knowledge of God. In all of his assertions, Idowu does not state his source or the basis of his argument. Idowu says,

There is no place, age, or generation, which did not receive at some point in its history some form of revelation, and that to deny this fact is either to be deliberately blind to facts or to betray a gross ignorance of facts.<sup>30</sup>

Therefore, theologians cannot afford to be narrow-minded. Though he strongly affirms that God has revealed himself to all people, he does not tell us how we can be sure that the revelation is actually of God himself and not merely human formulations.

Since the Yoruba religion affects all of life, it must be personal and pragmatic. If it is none of these, it would not have been able to have the kind of wide and tenacious impact on the Yoruba that it does. Worship in general is an imperative urge in man, says Idowu. When confronted by the "numinous" reality, man responds instinctively with worship. "In the life of the Yoruba, worship as an imperative factor stands out prominently. As a deeply religious people, worship for them begins, controls, and ends all the affairs of life."<sup>31</sup> For the Yoruba, worship is done through rituals and liturgies.

The Yorubas believe that Olodumare, the Deity, is the origin and the

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<sup>29</sup> Idowu, *A T R*, p. 56.

<sup>30</sup> Idowu, *A T R*, p. 140.

<sup>31</sup> Idowu, *Olodumare*, p. 107-108.

ground of all that is.<sup>32</sup> However, questions about the origins of Olodumare himself are considered the dangerous beginning of irreverent inquisitiveness. He is believed to be eternally existent. It is upon this basic fact, says Idowu, that the whole superstructure of Yoruba belief rests.<sup>33</sup> He believes that we can come to a true knowledge of the eternal Godhead and attributes of God as we study a people's concept of God because God has never left himself without a witness anywhere in his world.<sup>34</sup> Idowu more succinctly states his position when he said,

God is one, not many; and that to the one God belongs the earth and all its fullness. It is this God, therefore, who reveals Himself to every people on earth and whom they have apprehended according to the degree of their spiritual perception, expressing their knowledge of Him... It would be looking at facts through the spectacles of cultural pride and affected superiority to deny this; it would be blasphemous to say that while the loving God cared for a particular section of His world, He had nothing in a clear, unmistakable way, to say to, or do with the rest.<sup>35</sup>

These statements, it seems, are addressed against the Christian concept of revelation.<sup>36</sup> Idowu does not seem to show an understanding of the basis on which Christianity claims the unique kind of revelation it does. The claim of Christianity to an exclusive special revelation cannot be appreciated without fully considering the doctrine of creation and the fall. It does not bother him that to append anything to these exclusive claims is to deny the claims themselves or to be syncretistic.

Idowu says that Olodumare is of vital, absolutely indispensable, significance to the Yoruba. "The ultimate origin of such a lofty conception can be none other than the revelation of the living God

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<sup>32</sup> Idowu, *Olodumare*, p. 18.

<sup>33</sup> Idowu, *Olodumare*, p. 18.

<sup>34</sup> Idowu, *Olodumare*, p. 30. This is one of Idowu's favorite statements. He makes this statement more than once in this book and in all of his other books.

<sup>35</sup> Idowu, *Olodumare*, p. 31.

<sup>36</sup> Idowu had elsewhere expressed his displeasure with the Christian monopoly of the name "Theology", a claim to the exclusive knowledge of God. See "Faiths in Interaction" *Orita* 4:2 (December 1970):100 for his discussion on exclusivist claims by various religions.

Himself Who has never left Himself without a witness in any generation."<sup>37</sup>

It is appropriate to probe Idowu's concept of revelation deeper because all of his work is built on the assumption that God has revealed Himself to every group of people in the world. We should ask Idowu, did God reveal himself to every tribe or do tribes perceive him themselves in nature? Idowu's position on this question is not clear. He said, "what man knows of God, what he discovers about God, comes as a result of this self-disclosure."<sup>38</sup> He thus places the initiative with God. Is it right to conclude that what the Yorubas say about God is God's perfect revelation? Idowu would appear to say yes to this. I agree that God has revealed himself if this is a reference to general revelation. But as we noted earlier, Idowu collapses the distinction between general and special revelation. For him there is only one revelation.

We should further ask, 'Is Idowu's assumption right or do the Yoruba have a knowledge of God because they are made in his image?' If God gave special revelation of himself to the Yoruba, then it must necessarily be a complete or adequate revelation to lead to salvation because of God's nature. This brings out the reason why Idowu is considered a universalist by Byang Kato in the book, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*.

We agree with Idowu that the revelation of God is given to men by God himself. The priority is with God. However, we disagree with Idowu that God has given special revelation of Himself to the Yoruba. He quotes the Bible passage that says that God has not left himself without a witness. The problems with his position are at least two. First, he quotes this passage out of context as he does many others. Second, if God truly revealed Himself to the Yoruba with special revelation, then God is establishing different ways of being reconciled to Himself. This being the case, Christianity automatically becomes falsified because of Jesus' claims of being the only way to God in John 14:6 and 1 Timothy 2:3-6.

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<sup>37</sup> Idowu, *Olodumare*, p. 204.

<sup>38</sup> Idowu, *ATR*, p. 56.

**Intermediaries:**

Intermediaries are an indispensable aspect of Yoruba religion and indeed ATR. Idowu accepts Rudolf Otto's description of man's religious situation as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* – that which bewilders, terrifies, frightens, spells danger, but yet attracts and invites with a "beckoning" which is tantamount to absolute demand.<sup>39</sup> The need for a mediator arises out of this unique experience of the Holy. It also arises because the reality that man has to deal with is not a vague abstraction but a reality with the attributes of a person. Therefore, man needs something to mediate between them. This led to the ideas of the divinities which in the Yoruba religion number anywhere from 201 to 1700.<sup>40</sup> Due to the reality of the divinities in Yoruba religion, many of the worshippers have considered them as ends in themselves instead of means to an end – which they technically are in Yoruba theology.<sup>41</sup> Idowu clearly shows that the Yoruba religion worships only God while the divinities are merely venerated. He claims that the Yoruba religion should be properly referred to as "diffused monotheism" and not idol worship or polytheism. Polytheism, especially "proper polytheism", does not apply to the religion of the Yoruba, he adds.<sup>42</sup> These divinities, he says, serve the will of Olodumare in the creation and theocratic government of the world.

Though the Yoruba bow down before the emblems of their divinities, which may be things made of wood and stone, yet they do not bow down to wood and stone.<sup>43</sup> This is the means by which the Yoruba make the spiritual perceptible – through the material or the symbol, says Idowu. It is their attempt to give a visible and tangible evidence of that which is invisible, intangible and spiritual entity.

There is some inconsistency in Idowu's ideas. In pages 63 and 64 of *Olodumare* as quoted above, he tells us clearly that in Yoruba theology, "technically" the divinities are not worshipped but later in page 68, he says that they are worshipped under several names. It is

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<sup>39</sup> Idowu, *Olodumare*, p. 129. See Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of The Holy*, (London: O.U.P., 1943), chapters 4-6.

<sup>40</sup> Idowu, *ATR*, p. 172.

<sup>41</sup> Idowu, *ATR*, p. 63.

<sup>42</sup> Idowu, *ATR*, p. 58.

<sup>43</sup> Idowu, *ATR*, p. 64.

very difficult to understand the way in which he is using the word 'worship'. Furthermore, he admits himself that it is difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish between worship and veneration.

Idowu advised us to approach the study of the Yoruba religion and every other African religion with him objectively without any presuppositions. He also stated that the Yoruba have a concept of God and divinities but that the former is the object of worship. We noted that his description of the Yoruba religion is faulty because the claim on which it rests – God has revealed himself to every people – cannot be substantiated.<sup>44</sup>

**The Enigma of *Towards an Indigenous Church*:**

The book, *Towards an Indigenous Church*, was the outcome of a series of three broadcast talks that Idowu gave on radio in Nigeria. This book is very difficult to fit into all of Idowu's ideas, as we have discovered in his first and third book. The ideas are totally alien and would have been termed apocryphal had they been published posthumously. The reason for this is evident.

Idowu says, "Christianity is the means by which the living, loving Father seeks to save His world and give His children true life, life truly more abundant."<sup>45</sup> By indigenization Idowu meant simply that,

The Church should bear the unmistakable stamp of the fact that she is the church of God in Nigeria. It should be no longer an out-reach or a colony of Rome, Canterbury, Westminster Central Hall in London, or the vested interest of some European or American Missionary Board. No longer should it be an institution acknowledging a human overlord elsewhere outside Nigeria; no longer a marionette with its strings in the hands of some foreign manipulators.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> We want to point out that we define revelation the way Idowu defines it. Idowu equates revelation with salvation. Therefore, when we say God did not reveal Himself to the Yoruba, we speak of revelation *ala* Idowu. For Idowu, there is no distinction between general and special revelation.

<sup>45</sup> Idowu, *Towards an Indigenous Church*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1965) p. 8.

<sup>46</sup> Idowu, *TIC*, p. 11.

Idowu's talks at length about what he means by indigenization because it is a word used by different people. By indigenization he does not mean, either, that there should be a change in the staffing of the church in such a way that all her European or American staff should be automatically replaced with Nigerians nor quit their posts. He thinks it is necessary to emphasize this point, especially as the feeling is growing among Europeans and American ministers and many church workers that since Nigeria is now independent she may no longer want them. Idowu strongly asserts that,

May the day never come when the Church in Nigeria would say that she does not want pastors and teachers from other countries as co-workers with Nigerian colleagues. It should be the earnest longing of the church that the church of God throughout the world may so realize her one-ness that there shall be a reciprocal interchange of workers everywhere.<sup>47</sup>

Idowu says that if the Church attempts to eliminate all foreign elements it will cease to be a living cell within the whole body of Jesus, the Universal Church. The Church must stress the absolute Lordship of Jesus Christ. Total and undivided allegiance must be paid him no matter what the cost. The main point Idowu is making is that "the only authority which should have the pre-eminence over and govern the life of the church in Nigeria is Jesus Christ; and it is time Christian Nigerians were allowed to hear his voice and interpret his will for themselves."<sup>48</sup> Idowu says that indigenization in the church is not to be seen as Nigerianization of the civil service. We feel that Idowu clearly communicates what he means by an indigenous church. There is nothing to add except to point out that it is very evident that Idowu sees an African Church structure as a must for an indigenous Church.

The indigenous Church must be a Church whose life is the Lordship of Jesus Christ. "An indigenous Church in Nigeria must know and live in the watchful consciousness that she is part of as well as the 'presence' of the 'One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church'"<sup>49</sup> says

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<sup>47</sup> Idowu, *TIC*, p. 10.

<sup>48</sup> Idowu, *TIC*, p. 14.

<sup>49</sup> Idowu, *TIC*, p. 11.

Idowu. Idowu has a very organic view of the Church. He says that the Nigerian Church as an organic cell belonging to the whole body partakes of certain characteristics which belong to that Body. It shares in various forms as common heredity with other cognate cells. Thus she maintains not only the 'faith once delivered to the saints' but also certain inevitable elements which have become in various forms integral marks of the life of the visible church.<sup>50</sup>

He does not refer to the content of the gospel as being offensive. He is only concerned with the context and method of presentation of the gospel. He also does not blame the missionaries as having consciously engaged themselves in enslaving the African minds. He says that they used the only method known to them and that from this there was a 'miscarriage of purpose'. So it was not a deliberate mistake.

On the basis of the Bible taken as a whole, however, there can be only one answer. There is only one God, the Creator of heaven and earth and all that is in them; the God who has never left Himself without witness in any nation, age, or generation; whose creative purpose has ever been at work in this world; Who by one stupendous act of climactic self-revelation in Christ Jesus came to redeem a fallen world.<sup>51</sup>

He also says that though God may be known imperfectly, we can assert that he is known in Nigerian religions. This is what makes possible a point of contact whereby Nigerians can talk about God.

There is some truth to this statement. We also assert that we cannot avoid some carry over into Christianity from African Traditional Religion since the traditional name for God is used in the Church. Definitely, concepts of God are transferred from African Traditional Religion to Christianity by the converts. There must be some commonality between the two concepts of God. We believe that the reason why there is the knowledge of God in African Traditional Religion, however, is not due to a revelation given by God. It is, rather, due to the fact that He is the Creator. As men look at creation and the order in the world, coupled with the fact that they are made in the image of God, they arrive at a concept of God.

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<sup>50</sup> Idowu, *TIC*, pp. 11-12.

<sup>51</sup> Idowu, *TIC*, p. 25.

Idowu says that the Church in Nigeria, and indeed Africa, will die if it does not become indigenous. This was the reason why the Church in North Africa failed to survive. That also was the reason why the first attempt in the fifteenth century to Christianize Africa failed.

In order for a truly indigenous theology to be done in Africa, Idowu says, African theologians must apprehend African spiritual values with the African mind. They must also possess the requisite knowledge of the fundamental facts of the faith which they are seeking to express and disseminate in indigenous idioms.<sup>52</sup> By this he means African theologians must be Christians and then truly sympathetic to their culture in order to do a genuinely African theology. It is evident why we consider this work enigmatic.

### EVALUATION OF BOLAJI IDOWU

The one major concern with Idowu's works is that he begins with presuppositions which he did not substantiate in any way. Idowu has been acclaimed as an African theologian. But his position, as we have seen so far, does not accept the presupposition upon which Christianity is built.<sup>53</sup> Therefore, we cannot say that he is a Christian theologian. Since his theology is built on some different presuppositions, it is mandatory for him to substantiate them. Idowu makes two major claims which he did not substantiate. First, he says that there is only one God and not different Gods for different peoples. Secondly, he says that the revelation of the Yoruba has been vouchsafed to them by God.

In his work, *Olodumare* for example, Idowu says that his purpose is "to begin to look more closely at the ways in which the Yoruba have obtained and interpreted the revelation which has been vouchsafed to them by the Deity Himself."<sup>54</sup> Nowhere does he attempt to state why he believes there is only one God and how he arrived at the fact that God has revealed himself to the Yoruba and that the revelation that the Yoruba has comes from God. If Idowu's two claims are true, then the

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<sup>52</sup> Idowu, *TIC*, p. xi.

<sup>53</sup> Christianity states that Christian revelation – God's acts in Jesus Christ – is God's definitive and final revelation to the world. Idowu does not accept this. This is just one instance but the most significant.

<sup>54</sup> Idowu, *Olodumare*, p. 32.

Yoruba religion or African Traditional Religion in general has a valid and legitimate way back to God. This implication of Idowu's position is crucial and makes it necessary to discover how it is arrived at.

Idowu's position has far and deep reaching implications for Christianity. In fact, it undercuts Christianity entirely because in John 14:6, Jesus says that no man can come to the Father (God) except through Him (Jesus). In 1 Timothy 2:5,6, Paul says, "For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men – the testimony given in its proper time." These Bible passages are at the heart of the Christian faith. They cannot be eliminated from an orthodox Christian faith. These passages make exclusive claims that cannot be reconciled with Idowu's presuppositions. Either the Biblical claim is right and Idowu is wrong or vice-versa.

Idowu follows "Brunner, Baillie, and De Wolf to argue that revelation, or 'theophany,' consists of a personal encounter between God and the human soul."<sup>55</sup> Idowu says God reveals himself to men in two ways: "first, through the natural phenomena of the visible cosmos; and second, through man's inner link with Deity."<sup>56</sup> He insists that God's revelation entrusted to the African soul is sufficient for the salvation of the Africans. Therefore, the African should not repudiate the rich spiritual heritage that God has granted his ancestors in traditional religion.

Our concern here is dual: the position Idowu holds and his inability to substantiate it. He does not say how God reveals himself through the natural phenomenon nor through this "inner link with the Deity," to make it sufficient for salvation, Idowu probably fails to see the need to substantiate his claims because he does not have an adequate enough distinction between faith and theology. His works (*Olodumare* and *African Traditional Religion*) started out as descriptions of the Yoruba religion and African Traditional Religion. The point of transition in his works from description to a theological formulation is not clearly outlined. On this note there is a similarity between Idowu and his mentor at Cambridge, Dr. E. Geoffrey Parrinder.

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<sup>55</sup> Demarest, p. 204.

<sup>56</sup> Demarest, p. 204.

Another problem with Idowu's works is that his foundational ideas are borrowed Western concepts. This is a problem because for Idowu, one of the requirements of African theology – the African expression of the faith – is that it must be shorn of all traces of Western colonial influence. The tragedy of Africa, as he observed, is that it has sold its soul to alien European traditions. However, in constructing his system of religion, he violates one of his own principles. Idowu's theology is built on the foundation laid by Kant, Schleiermacher, and Tillich. Also, his views on revelation are heavily indebted to insights from Brunner, Baillie, and DeWolf as we have noted earlier. And his conception of religion as ineffable experience has been borrowed point for point from the Europeans Otto and Eliade. There is no doubt that if the European elements were excised from Idowu's theology, it would collapse and come tonought.<sup>57</sup>

One of the foundational ideas in Idowu's work is taken from Acts 14:17. This passage says that God has not left himself without a witness. This passage Idowu uses to back his claim that God has revealed himself to the Yorubas. This biblical passage is very basic to Idowu's theology.

According to Idowu, African Traditional Religions are complete, self-sufficient, and adequate for the Africans. Therefore, it ought not to borrow foreign ideas. He discourages Africans from using foreign ideas to explain African realities. Ironically, Idowu's foundational ideas for his theology are borrowed from Christianity and the West. Without these foundational ideas, Idowu's system ceases to be. He builds all of his arguments on these ideas without substantiating them or saying how they apply to African Traditional Religion. He, thus, implies that these sources are authoritative. Therefore, his work fails to meet the standard he himself set.

In addition, the foundational Scripture passages Idowu uses are quoted out of context. For example, one of the recurrent passages in all of his works is Acts 14:17 which says that God has not left himself without a witness. From this passage he argues that God has revealed himself to Africans in as valid a way as he has in the Bible.

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<sup>57</sup> Demarest, p. 208.

Idowu's adoption of this passage lies on faulty exegesis. Acts 14: 16-17 in the New English Bible say, "In past ages he allowed all nations to go their own way: and yet he has not left you without some clue to his nature, in the kindness he shows". The clue of his nature is the kindness he shows. This is not a reference to special revelation, where God communicates with man directly, but to general revelation which comes through nature. He quotes this and many other passages out of context.<sup>58</sup> Even if Idowu believes that his interpretation is correct, he ought to state how he derives it because this verse is the foundation of his position.

We are not the only ones who are perplexed by Idowu's interpretation. Kato critiques that Idowu's use of Scriptures gives the impression that he does not take the context seriously. Kato says, "By what principle of exegesis Idowu arrives at such a conclusion is hard to tell."<sup>59</sup>

He made the fundamental mistake of confusing God's revelation in nature and the conscience with the special and redemptive revelation.<sup>60</sup> Thus, he wrongly assumes that the former has salvific potency. Consequently, Idowu, just like other African theologians,<sup>61</sup> cannot avoid drawing more heavily from African Traditional Religion than from the Bible and the Christian tradition.

Many African theologians pay only lip service to the significance of the Bible for their theology. They hardly ever state how they intend to or by what criteria they will use it. This quotation from Mbiti reveals the general attitude of African theologians. He says, about God's activities in the world that:

He (God) must have been active among African peoples as he was among Jewish people. Did he then reveal himself only in the time of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Samuel and other personalities in the Bible? ... The

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<sup>58</sup> Kato, *Pitfalls*, pp. 113-117.

<sup>59</sup> Kato, p. 97.

<sup>60</sup> See preceding section.

<sup>61</sup> Niringiye says, "Mbiti draws more from African traditional religions than Biblical Theology ... he inappropriately emphasizes the revelation in creation over the special-historical revelation." Niringiye, p. 142.

more I (Mbiti) peeped into African religious insights about God, the more I felt utterly unable to use the word "only" in this case.<sup>62</sup>

Another problem with Idowu's position is his denial or rejection of any kind of normative revelation. Idowu's religious language is basically non-cognitive. He implies that religious language is not a vehicle of truth. It expresses and elicits a people's religious experience. All people have an equally valid experience of God. This is the reason why he clearly states that the Yoruba religion and African Traditional Religions in general are God's vouchsafed revelation to the Africans. Every religion is actually a different cultural expression. Therefore, no religion has an exclusive claim to the truth.

Idowu's position implies that no religion conveys a normative truth. The problem with this view is that in denying that any revelation is normative, it makes a normative and conclusive statement about revelation. The statement that there is no normative revelation is not value-free; it is value-laden.

The similarity between African Traditional Religions and Biblical revelation should not lead to the assumption that both religions are equal. But rather, the similarity helps confirm God's revelation and the Christ-event. African Traditional Religion is a shadow of the Biblical revelation but not a shadow in the way in which the Old Testament is. African Traditional Religion has a valid knowledge of God's creation from general revelation. However, contrary to Idowu's assumption, this is not sufficient for salvation.

Despite the similarity between African Traditional Religion and Biblical revelation, there is a fundamental difference between the two in their conception of sin and salvation.

We agree with Idowu that Christianity should not destroy our Africanness but affirm and fulfill it but only where our Africanness is in continuity with the Scriptures. But we still must say that the Scriptures have supremacy and do judge the African Traditional Religion and culture in the same manner that they judge Western and all world cultures. However, we need to distinguish the relative elements (cultural elements in the Scriptures) from the normative

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<sup>62</sup> Niringiye, p. 145.

elements (God's revelation). This was what the disciples strived to achieve in their efforts to take Christianity to other cultures.

Even if we grant that Idowu's interpretations of the Scriptures are correct, his position is still accompanied by very drastic implications and consequences. Idowu's theology, we believe, does not address man's sin seriously enough. It assumes that man's sin can be easily overlooked, forgiven or settled with God whichever way man chooses. In Idowu's system, it is man who lays down the terms of atonement.

Idowu says that every religion is always evolving and changing. African Traditional Religion, he believes, would soon evolve a way of atoning for sins similar to that Christianity. On this point, he is of the opinion that the Christian atonement of sins is the result of men's ingenuity. It is not a way ordained by God but by man. Therefore, it cannot be the only way. Though indirectly, Idowu's position assumes that man can atone for his sins. This, of course, is contrary to what the Bible teaches in Ephesians 2:1, 4-6, 8. In these passages we read that we were dead in our transgressions when God sent his Son Jesus to die for our sins.<sup>63</sup>

Idowu does not see the significance of the Christ-event in Christianity. It follows necessarily that the historical dimension is not significant for his theology. Without this dimension, Christianity loses its uniqueness and distinction. It becomes just like one of the many religions that exist.

It is obvious why Idowu neglects the historical dimension. He believes that all religions are equal which seek to explain their experience of "the idea of the holy." He sees Jesus in Christianity as the genius and peak of the development of Christianity. As all religions continue to evolve, they will arrive at such a point. Idowu is, therefore, a universalist because he believes all religions will lead to the same destination. We believe that Idowu's view here results from his failure to distinguish between special and general revelation as we noted in the previous section.

Throughout this paper, one of our emphasis has been that the kind of African theology we advocate or seek to develop is one that is first Christian then African, and not vice-versa. If it is primarily Christian,

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<sup>63</sup> See Romans 5:6 & 8.

then it must agree with Christian orthodox beliefs and have something to contribute to the universal Church.

African Christian Theology is not called to particularize the Christian faith but to adapt it and even go beyond that to incarnate it. The African church is, therefore, to contribute her experience to the universal experience of the Church. Shorter sums it up well when he said:

The most important thing that should be said about African Christianity is that it is Christian. It is not enough to be African, for this is to fall into the pitfall of particularism... either syncretism or a closed system.<sup>64</sup>

This is the error of Idowu's position. If African theology is to be Christian, it must accept all of the orthodox (fundamental and basic) teachings of Christianity, most especially issues like sin, atonement, Trinity, and the historicity of the complete Christ-event.

However, Christianity in Africa must avoid the danger of alienating itself through failing to engage in a conscious dialogue with African Traditional Religion. It is possible to concentrate on the orthodox teachings of the Christian faith to the negligence of the African cultural elements. The African elements would provide the metaphysical structure to organize and present the Christian truth to the African mind.

In order for Christianity to become indigenous, its conceptual framework and world view must be African. This, of course, means hard work for the African theologian. He must engage in constant dialogue because no theology (the formulation and not the basic teachings or beliefs) is normative for all generations. He must, however, remain within the orthodox Christian tradition.

### CONCLUSION

The aim of this article is to show the significance of an African religious language for African theology. The future of African Christianity lies in an African theology that dialogues with other

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<sup>64</sup> Shorter, p. 21.

theologies. It asserts itself and contributes to the universal Christian theology.

But for such a theology to emerge, we must distinguish the gospel from the cultural framework within which it is transmitted. This distinction would help us to know what in Christianity can be replaced with African cultural elements. This is the first step in developing a genuinely African Christian Theology. Secondly and probably more importantly, is the process of making the Christian message comprehensible to the Africans and allowing them to express their experience of it. This is the framework within which the Christian gospel ought to be presented. The significance of an African religious language for African Christian Theology cannot be overemphasized. Herein is the future of African Christian Theology and indeed African Christianity.

Demarest is right to observe two positions in Idowu's thought – one evangelical and the other liberal. However, his explanation that Idowu's writings demonstrated movement from an evangelical to a liberal position is not convincing. It is primarily untenable because the book that is clearly evangelical is his middle book, *Towards an Indigenous Church*. I do not doubt that Idowu began from a clearly evangelical Christian position. But I believe that the shift to a liberal position had already been made in *Olodumare* his first book. The riddle of *Toward an Indigenous Church* is solved, I believe, if one knows that it originated as a series of radio talks. The audience of these lectures would be mostly the laity who are very conservative in their beliefs. Idowu in the lectures spoke in the language they would understand.<sup>65</sup> Elsewhere, I have argued that non-formal theology is more conservative than the formal.

Most definitions by Africans of African Christian Theology and the efforts of theologising attempt to establish continuity between Christianity and African Traditional Religions. These kinds of

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<sup>65</sup> This is not particularly strange because such ambivalence has been noted in scholars like Bultmann whose sermons have been noted as strongly evangelical except for those who know Bultmann's presupposition. His *New Testament Theology* is more evangelical when compared to his other technical works like *Jesus and the World* (1934), *History and Eschatology* (1951) and *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (1958).

approaches and efforts are not true to the scriptures because these attempts presuppose spiritual life, growth and a healthy relationship with God in Africa. This presupposition undercuts the significance of the work of Jesus Christ because the Scriptures say that we were spiritually dead in our sins (Ephesians 2:1-3) when Jesus died for us. Not even one person was seeking God (Romans 3:10). All have sinned says the Scripture.

It is not only the Africans but the whole world that stands before God condemned. Therefore, we would assert that any attempt to establish continuity between African Religions and Christianity is wrong--as long as this continuity equates the revelation of the African Traditional Religions with the revelation we have in Jesus Christ. It is, however, right to point out that there are redeemable aspects in the African culture. These do not presuppose continuity but a point of contact. When the first man fell into sin he would have been totally destroyed except for the grace of God. Leo George Cox says that when man sinned,

the life of God was extinguished in his soul. The glory departed from him. He lost the whole moral image of God-righteousness and true holiness. But the natural image was marred, not destroyed... So in this sense, apart from grace, man's fall was complete and all was lost... Man is totally helpless in himself to do anything for himself. There is no way that he can initiate one move toward God by himself except for grace man would have been left helpless, lost, and forever apart from God.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Leo George Cox. *John Wesley's Concept of Perfection* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1964), pp. 29-30.

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