

Christology in Contemporary African Christianity: Ontological or Functional?

Babatunde A. Ogunlana and Benjamin I. Akano

ABSTRACT

This article examines the practical nature of Christology in contemporary African Christianity. The writers argue that though the religious mindset of the African people does not allow a dichotomy between ontological and functional Christologies, existential challenges have made many Africans tilt towards the functional end. The method adopted in the article is a descriptive approach. Christology is central to the orthodox Christian faith. It permeates all the pages of the Bible. The Old Testament consistently predicts the coming of the Messiah. The New Testament writers focused on Him in the light of His work on earth and the office he came to occupy concerning the Messianic predictions of the Old Testament. In history, the focus of theology has always been on the person and work of Christ. Contemporary African Christianity is not an exception to this trend. Many controversies have emerged in the process of the discussion on Christology. These Christological controversies surround the Person, picture, and deeds of Christ. A tilt towards functional Christology may cause a down-playing of God's sovereign will to focus on what works. This may lead to syncretic beliefs and practices as people look for what gives a solution. The conclusion is that African Christology should blend ontology and functionality. The Christology that is both contextually relevant and scripturally balanced should be presented to the African people. Therefore, African theologians should make efforts to prepare theology that reflect a balanced Christological presentation intentionally.

Keywords: African Christianity, Christology, Functional, Ontological.

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I. INTRODUCTION

This article examines the practical nature of Christology in contemporary African Christianity. The writers argue that though the religious mindset of the African people does not allow a dichotomy between ontological and functional Christologies, existential challenges have made many Africans tilt towards the functional end. Recognizing the fact that any theology in Africa is a function of the Church and that which is encountered daily on the streets, rather than on pages of books in theological schools (Stinton 2007), the article posits that a balanced Christology can be dynamically developed by intentionally contextual on worldview and inculturation practices of African people. With contextualization as the framework, the writers use primary and secondary sources to consider the nature and practice of Christology in Africa, its challenges, and how it can be better developed and contextual towards enhancing authentic biblical Christianity amid various existential challenges and religious plurality.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Contextualization involves rendering the gospel message clearly and compellingly to engage the target people's worldview and experience. Thus, it guides in making the faith relevant to the ministry context without violating its faithfulness to the biblical truth. The idea is not to make the message of the Scripture comfortable. Instead, it ensures a balance between Biblical integrity and contextual relevance as two essential factors for the effective transmission of the gospel in the target culture (Ott *et al.*, 2010). Contextualization makes people understand Biblical responses to their existential problems in a way they can understand. While the Bible is made relevant to the ministry context, it ensures the host culture does not dilute the gospel message (Wilder 2012). While people may choose to adhere to its principle, it serves as the basis for making an informed decision after understanding the message.

Therefore, contextualization of Christology must consider the biblical teaching on the subject and make it real and make it real and meaningful to the situation in Africa. On the one hand, it must step down the gospel message to that comprehensible in the African cultural and existential milieu.

However, it must uphold the Scriptural integrity of the doctrine, ensuring that the process of stepping

down the truth does not lead to dilution of the same truth to suit the context. This is balanced and critical contextualization.

III. CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS

Christology is central to the orthodox Christian faith (Geisler, 2013). It connects other Christian theological themes, such as anthropology and soteriology (Erickson, 2007), and differentiates it from other religions, stating that Jesus of Nazareth was God in human flesh (Geisler 2013). It is the study of the Person of Christ and his salvific work (Fee, 2007). The New Testament writers focused on Him in the light of His work on earth and the office he came to occupy concerning the Messianic predictions of the Old Testament (Wallace & Green, 2001). This is why Biblical hermeneutics insists on Christo-centric principles for Christian doctrines (Akintola, 2017). The implication of this is that the Christian faith thrives with a proper understanding of Christology; any distortion in Christology affects all other aspects of Christian doctrines. Thus, the essence of a balanced Christology is a sound knowledge of Christ that leads to authentic biblical Christianity (Grudem, 1999). Our understanding of the Person, work, and the office of Christ will guide our decision and response about how to handle theological issues about the man for whom Christ died (Wallace & Green, 2001).

Further, the focus of the first seven Church Councils accepted by the Protestants reflects the centrality of Christology. They were either essentially on or related to Christology (Heinze, 1973). Julius Gathogo (2015, p. 1) asserts that “Christological debate is arguably the most controversial issue in church history.” This may be connected to the fact that early in the life of the Church, “new converts brought with them their backgrounds and worldviews, which led to the character of the church’s Christology taking on a different form, one which more closely resembles” their old religion (McGrath, 2003, p. 4). Contemporary African Christianity is not an exception to this trend.

Scholars agree that for an authentic appropriation of Jesus into the context of Africa, a shift from universal to contextual Christology becomes paramount for Africans to experience Jesus both from biblical revelation and their contextual realities (Stinton, 2009). This is contextualization, and it is a process of engaging the multi-religious, multi-cultural and multi-ideological human contexts with the changeless truth of the Word of God clearly and compellingly (Ott *et al.*, 2010). In doing so, both Biblical integrity and contextual relevance are essential factors for the effective transmission of the gospel (Ott *et al.*, 2010). The role of the Scripture is to guide the process and the extent to which it must go to ensure that the context does not dominate the message that must transform it (Wilder, 2012). Thus, an authentic African Christology must be relevant to the African context and satisfy biblical integrity.

Christological controversies in church history surround the Person, picture, and deeds of Christ. These have resulted in different models of Christology, which could be classified as ontological and functional (Folarin, 2003). Associated with either of these two major categories are six different trends of the twentieth century named by Gathogo (Gathogo, 2015). According to him, the first trend is concerned with interpreting and adapting Christology to the modern worldview. The second trend focused exclusively on the historical Jesus, questioning the divinity of Christ. H. Kung, E. Kasemann and G. Burnkamm are major proponents. The third trend is a reaction against secular Christologies. It upholds the Trinitarian theology by stressing Christology from above. Karl Barth and H. U. von Balthasar are major scholars of this proposition. The fourth trend centers on the proclaimed Christ and historical Jesus. It presents Jesus of history and Christ of faith as one and same person of mystery. W. Kasper and Jurgen Moltmann belong to this school. Asian Christologies from the fifth trend that presents Christology from Hindu cultural and religious heritage. Raimundo Panikkar, Stanley J. Samartha, Felix Wilfred and Pearl Drego are Asian Christologists of various dimensions. The sixth trend is African Christologies which have two significant categories of liberation and incarnational Christologies.

Functional Christology relates to the redemptive work of Christ (Deem, 2004) and tends toward Christology from the below approach, which emphasizes the historicity of Jesus (Qin, 2015). Folarin (2003, in loc) states that these models present Christ as a key figure of the culture, such as ‘the Warrior,’ ‘the Healer,’ ‘the Chief,’ ‘the Priest,’ ‘the Witch-Doctor,’ and ‘the Aare-Ona-Kakanfo, who delivers His people from oppression and calamities.’ It is also related to the low Christology and emphasizes His humanity (Vorster, 2013).

Ontology (Latin: *ontologia*) is the science or philosophical study of being, which Aristotle called the “first philosophy (Simon, 2019, in loc).” Thus, ontological Christology refers to the being of Christ, which Deem (2004: p. 49-50) regards as “God-man (*Deus-homo*)”. It refers to the relationship of equality between Son and Father (Buzzard, 1995). Qin (2015) states that ontological Christology results from the approach of Christology from above. Though he attributes the ontic statement to the influx of Gentile missions Qin (2015), McGrath (2003) contends that ontological Christology was part of Jewish expression because the Christology of John, a Jew, is fully ontological and considers Jesus from a divine view.

According to Fee (2007, p. 1), though Pauline corpus mostly focuses on soteriology, it premises on the divine identity. He asserts that:

The primary focus in all Pauline Letters is on salvation in Christ, including Spirit-empowered ethical life as the genuine outworking of such salvation. But in the process, Paul regularly speaks of Christ in ways that indicate that ‘the Son of God’ is also included in the divine identity. Before being sent by the Father to be born of a Jewish woman (Gal, 4:4-5), he was himself in *μορφῇ θεοῦ* [the “form” of God],’ having equality with God that he did not exploit; rather, he chose to share our humanity (Phil, 2:6-7).

This implies that Pauline Christology is both ontological and functional, being God and working for our salvation. While he was intentional about the functional part, his ontological dimension is considered a settled proposition on which basis the Jews had a challenge with the Christian faith. Deem (2004: p. 49-50) affirms that “the ontological Christology of Chalcedon is pressed into the service of a functional Christology(...)[since] no other Christ can save humanity from its squalid condition of sin and death than the Christ proclaimed by the Fathers of Chalcedon.” By this, he means that ontological Christology is both foundational to and has a direct implication for functional Christology.

Qin (2015: p. 40) upholds that Christ’s ontological identity and his function cannot be separated. He maintains that “one major objection to the use of the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith is precisely that it can foster the kind of separationism that Chalcedon wants to avoid.” He resolves that one is to the other as ‘incarnation’ and ‘cross’ belong inseparably together in Christ’s events. He further re-iterates that though the early Christian preaching was about the historicity of facts (functional), the New Testament writers had in mind the divinity of Christ, which guarded them against finding historical materials that could demythologize the narratives (Qin, 2015: p. 41-43). Thus, for African Christianity to remain faithful to the New Testament, there should be no attempt to separate the two.

IV. GENERAL VIEW OF CHRISTOLOGY IN AFRICA

Mbiti (1969, p. 15) posits that religion in Africa “is primarily an ontological phenomenon”, and a person’s being and religious membership begins before birth and continues after death. According to him, existence is interpreted religiously but is complexly woven into events of the daily life of belief and action (Mbiti, 1969, p. 2-4). Also, because of the existential needs of Africa, ontology is anthropocentric and has a functional dimension. For instance, what may be considered as actual time is that “which is experienced or being experienced” (Mbiti, 1969, p. 16-17). Thus, African theology is an inseparable blend of ontology and function.

Christologically, as stated earlier, there are two major groups in Africa. The first, liberation Christologists, are related to Latin America Christologies of liberation, except for its inclination toward cultural and religious values with less secularism and Marxism. It also considers “Jesus as not just a liberator from oppressive categorization systems, but also from sin—which is arguably the root cause of alienation and oppression. Major proponents of this Christology include Charles Nyamiti and Diane Stinton (Gathogo, 2015). The inculturation christologists are the second group that either presents Christ from an African ancestral worldview or in the non-ancestral but contextually relevant form to their people (Gathogo 2015). While the non-ancestral Christologists like K.A. Kubi, and John Mbiti, emphasize Christ as Liberator, Healer, Power, Redeemer, and Victor, the ancestral incarnational Christologists, such as B. Bujo, J.Mutiso-Mbinda, and John S. Pobee, present Christ as Unique Ancestor or an Ancestor par excellence (Gathogo 2015).

Kwame Bediako (2004, p. 22) asserts that African Christology “blends ontology and functionality”. He adds that, due to the existential challenge of forces and powers that threaten the destiny of people and harmony, the Africans quickly reckon with the works of Christ, hence the prominence of functional Christology. However, they also are not oblivious of his ontological equality with God and the Holy Spirit. Stinton (2009) and Folarin (2003) also affirm the categorization, the inseparability of the two, and the peculiar existential realities that make Africans tilt towards liberation Christologies.

V. CHALLENGES OF CHRISTOLOGICAL PRESENTATION IN AFRICA

Stinton (2009) posits that the tension of a tilt towards functional Christology exposes Africa to Christological dichotomy and the challenges in their religious and daily life endeavors. He notes that most emblems and tags about Jesus that are carried on T-shirts, cars, shops, and local songs sung are titles that point to the functional power of Jesus rather than His incarnational identity (Stinton, 2009). While this may be a good starting point for the knowledge of Christ, there is the challenge of limiting the function of Christ to how they have experienced Him. Bediako (2004, p. 35-37) opines that African Christianity is faced with a serious challenge of adequately presenting the identity of Christ in a religious pluralistic African context. According to him, it is easier to relate to his functional role than his ontological identity as the unique Lord among ‘lords’ (Bediako, 2004: p. 37-38). Consequently, Christ could be equated with other deities who

exercise similar functions in their traditions (Qin, 2015). This is the scenario in Acts 14:8-18, where the function of Christ was imposed on their local gods.

Sequel to the above, there is the danger of importing extra-biblical materials for the historical narratives of the New Testament narratives. This may bring distortion to the text (Erickson, 2007). Thus, people's Christology will often be greatly influenced by their cultural context and existential needs. While this may help them to grow from known to the unknown knowledge of Christ, it may lead to a plurality of Jesus as may be reflected in their prayers. For instance, a Nigerian could see the prosperity of Jesus of Winners Chapel different from the healing Jesus of Christ Apostolic Church. This is the contemporary scenario: people move from place to place, depending on the 'Jesus' that their perception approves to perform such function. A balanced view presents a united Jesus.

Finally, a tilt towards functional Christology may cause a down-playing of God's sovereign will to focus on what works. 'It is working' is a common expression among contemporary Christians. It has led to using physical and material possessions as measures of success. Consequently, people look for a functional solution to their existential needs without considering the principle of the Bible. This may also lead to syncretic beliefs and practices as people look for what gives a solution.

VI. CHRISTIAN APOLOGETIC RESPONSE TO A 'TILTED' CHRISTOLOGY

Since any distortion in Christology may result in the corresponding distortion in the authentic Christian faith, it is necessary to have a balanced Christology. Therefore, it is the duty of Christian apologetics to defend the form of Christology that will engender authentic Christian faith. Firstly, Millard Erickson agrees that different Christologies should complement one another to achieve God's full revelation of Himself (Erickson, 2007). According to him, such complementary "Christology from before" starts with the Old Testament Messianic storyline to affirm the incarnational Christology of Chalcedon without neglecting His salvific works (Erickson, 2007, p. 690). This approach requires intercultural hermeneutics which focuses on African experience and backgrounds as an integral part of the exegetical process (Garrett, 2008). This means, that while the African context forms an integral part of their Christological formulation, scriptural integrity must not be sacrificed to avoid syncretism (Manus, 2003).

Secondly, without religious or ideological plurality, Christian apologetics would not have become necessary because, as with second-century Christianity, it is religious plurality that really calls for "affirming the uniqueness of Christ" (Nihinlola, 2018, p. 40-42). Therefore, it is not just adequate to present Christ ontologically alongside his functions, but such identities must be clear enough to represent the biblical person of Christ adequately (Bediako 2004). Christ should be so distinctly presented that He is not confused with the local idols. This means, that while Christ is being expressed according to the experience of the African people, their knowledge of Him should not be limited by such experience. Consequently, as Bediako (2004, p. 36-37) asserts, the "task in Christian apologetics is to demonstrate how the Scriptural witness to the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, illuminated by the Holy Spirit, is the clue to the yearnings and quests in the religious lives of people." This means that as the Africans adapt Christology to their experience, they must always live room for progression of their revelation of Him just as the Old Testament faithful considered God.

Thirdly, three critical areas are of paramount importance in the contemporary Christological presentation in demonstrating Scriptural witness. One, Christ must always be presented from an incarnational viewpoint to reflect His hypostatic union. This is unique as it points to both the purpose of His being and His ontological identity (Bediako, 2004). Two, presenting Christ from the cross perspective emphasizes His role in redemption and presents His ontological qualification for the full liberation function (Bediako, 2004). Finally, through the Lord's Table, the uniqueness of One Body can be demonstrated (Bediako, 2004). This emphasizes the fact that the contextual Christ is both local and universal.

Finally, it is critical to consider biblical Christology according to the Gospels. A thorough examination of Christ's Christology and the Gospel writers presents a balanced view of the Person and works of Christ. The functional Christology of Jesus' response to John's query in Matthew 11:1-6 cannot be treated separately from the ontological knowledge of John the Baptist in John 1:19-37 (emphasis on verses 29, 30). Also, in Matthew 16, the events that led to ontological Christology in Peter's confession may be considered functional, bringing the two together as complementary forms. In addition, Kavin Rowe affirms that Luke's use of *kurios* establishes a unification of the earthly functional Christ and heavenly ontological Lord (Rowe 1974).

VII. PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE CHURCH IN AFRICA

Given the challenges of Christological tilt among African Christians, the following recommendations may be necessary for apologetic Christology;

Firstly, pastors and church leaders should ensure that prayers reflect proper biblical hermeneutics to avoid the unnecessary association of Jesus with traditional idols. For instance, Jesus should not be associated with *Ṣàngó*, the god of thunder among the Yoruba, because an individual wants to revenge.

Secondly, syncretic beliefs should be transformed through sound and consistent Bible studies that inductively reveal the Person of Christ. Thirdly, preachers should make efforts to prepare messages that reflect a balanced Christological presentation intentionally. Finally, the role of theological schools cannot be set aside. Relevant papers, books, conferences, and workshops on Christological issues may be organized to educate people of diverse theological categories on the subject. This includes subjecting our songs to exegetical analysis.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The article considered Christology in African Christianity. It has stated that while their stance favors an inseparability of ontological and functional models, existential needs have forced many to adopt a Christology that tilts towards functionality than ontology. This can be seen in their daily life attitudes and actions as well as various acts of worship. It asserted that unless Africans consciously live with a clear understanding of Jesus Christ as the incarnate God, they may end up with different syncretic 'Jesuses' that only meet up with their experience of Him but who may be less than the Mystical hypostatic Christ they professed. Thus, churches and theological school leaders must guide and guard their members through proper educational ministries to ensure that their ontological and functional Christology conforms to the Chalcedonian Jesus. This is the Christology that is both contextually relevant and scripturally balanced.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

B. A. Ogunlala and B. I. Akano declare that they do not have any conflict of interest.

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