

# The Enigma of the *Semina Verbi* in African Culture and Tradition: A Point of Departure for a Christian Theology of Salvation in Africa

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## Introduction

In his Encyclical Letter, *Redemptoris Missio*, John Paul II accentuates the need for dialogue between the Christian faith and non-Christian religions and religious movements. There he states that “through dialogue, the Church seeks to uncover the ‘seeds of the Word,’ a ‘ray of that Truth which enlightens all men’; these are found in individuals and in the religious traditions of mankind.”<sup>1</sup>

*Semina verbi* is a very ancient expression, coined by Justin Martyr, c. 150 A.D. It found a meaningful place in the documents of the Second Vatican Council to designate whatever is "true and holy" even in the non-Christian religions. According to the early Fathers of the Church, including Augustine, the 'seeds of the Word' do not fecundate the pagan religions, of which the Fathers give an extremely negative judgment as intrinsically infertile; the seeds of the Word are rather to be found in Greek philosophy and in the wisdom of the poets and the sibyls.

But in its modern version, the formula is applied precisely to the non-Christian religions, with two meanings. The first meaning

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<sup>1</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Encyclical Letter “Redemptoris Missio” on the Permanent Validity of the Church’s Missionary Mandate* (07 Dec 1990), Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1990, 56. The Pope was citing the Second Vatican Council documents, *Ad Gentes*, 11, 15; and *Nostra Aetate*, 2. The editor notes that throughout the present essay all fidelity to the prescriptions of *Dominus Iesus*, 9-11, regarding the absolute identity of Jesus with the divine Logos (they are one and the same Person) and, therefore, of the absolute identity of the dispensation of the Logos and the dispensation of Jesus Christ is observed. See also JOHN PAUL II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 6.

is that of the Second Vatican Council, in which the *semina verbi* are the mysterious presence of Christ the Savior in all religions, insofar as these contain what is “true and holy” and thus salvific as well, but always through Christ, in ways that only He knows. The second meaning is the one adopted by some theological currents during the second half of the twentieth century. In the judgment of their adherents, non-Christian religions have their own salvific capacity, not a mediated one; all of them express the manifold experiences of the divine, in an independent and complementary way; and Christ is the symbol of these manifold ways rather than the one necessary way. The oscillation between these two meanings is not only a matter of theological dispute. It influences pastoral practice, the missions, and the public profile of the Church. The second of these meanings, in particular, took shape in a precise religious enterprise on the border between Christianity and Hinduism, created in India in the middle of the twentieth century by three spiritual adepts who came from Europe.

It is true that since Vatican II, which is in many ways a watershed in as much as it presents a more positive and optimistic view of non-Christian religions, indeed of the world, the attitude of the Church towards African culture and religion has changed diametrically from negative to positive. There is a very optimistic attitude towards the true and holy values that are present in African culture and tradition. This change of attitude is attributed to the strong Christian conviction that the action of the Spirit, indeed the *semina verbi* are present and operative everywhere and these seeds of the Word in the Holy Spirit embrace all cultures and peoples. The objective of this article is to relate the theology of *semina verbi* to the ongoing discussions among the theologians in Africa, particularly concerning the role of the African traditional religion in mediating salvation for its adherents.

## **1. The Wisdom of the Ancestors: The Logos Theology of the Early Greek Fathers**

Already in the early Church, some Fathers manifested greater openness towards other religions, especially within the Hellenistic culture in which they lived and moved, by acknowledging the presence of *semina verbi* in non-Christian religions and cultures and

as such perceiving the presence of a seedbed for the dispensation of truth in them. This theology, commonly known as the "logos theology" of the Church Fathers is a helpful stepping stone and great contribution to our discussion of recognizing the seeds of the word in the African Traditional culture and religion today.

Indeed in the Fathers of the Church we find the greatest support for any theological research; they are the real pillars of the articulation of the Christian faith; and, through them, we can shed light on our way of doing theology. Dupuis, however, alerts us to the dangers to which we can expose ourselves: we can lapse into anachronisms, unless we take into account that their context is different from ours.<sup>2</sup> Among all the Fathers of the Church, the ones who can be of more relevance to the task of elaborating a Christian theology of other religions are the Greek Fathers, especially Justin, Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria. They are particularly significant here, according to Saldanha, "because of their nearness to the beginning of Christianity in comparison with most of the Fathers; secondly, because of the greater similarity of the missionary milieu today and their own rather than the Christian environments of the later centuries; and thirdly, because of the greater openness they manifested towards other religions than did most other Fathers."<sup>3</sup>

How were these early Greek Fathers through their theology of the *Logos* able to perceive seeds for the dispensation of the Truth in other cultures, especially the Hellenistic culture in which they lived and moved?

### **1.1 Justin the Martyr and the *Logos Spermatikos***

Justin is the first Church Father who expresses the idea of seeds of the dispensation of the *Logos* in other religious dispensations in

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. J. DUPUIS, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, New York: Orbis Book, 2001, 57.

<sup>3</sup> C. SALDANHA, *Divine Pedagogy: A Patristic View of Non-Christian Religions*, Biblioteca di Scienze Religiose, 57, Rome: LAS 1994, 31. It is to be noted that when we speak of the *Logos*, we are speaking of precisely, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, who became flesh and dwelt among us. Hence the person of the *Logos* and the person of Jesus Christ are always one and the same person. (Editor's Note)

his discussion of the term *Logos Spermatikos*.<sup>4</sup> His expressions coincide with his understanding of the Greek concept of *Logos*.

Before his conversion to Christianity, Justin was a great admirer of philosophy; indeed, he was a philosopher passionate for the truth. The environment in which he lived helped him to make a synthesis of his Christian faith and to express it in philosophical categories so as to present Christianity as something not irrational. Justin's theology is, without doubt, influenced by his understanding of the concept of *Logos*, an understanding that coincides with that of the philosophical schools of his time. One, however, should not overemphasize the influence that these schools may have exerted on Justin as if Justin's notion of *Logos* was a mere holdover from the schools with which he was familiar.

Justin's concept has a deeper meaning than the Neo-platonic one. Danielou identifies an influence of Stoicism upon Justin's way of thinking, at least in the terminology used. The Stoics considered the *logos* as "the immanent fiery principle of all reason, of which the rational faculty in each man is a manifestation. It is the action of this *Logos* which gives to each man the capacity to form certain moral and religious concepts, which are found throughout the human race."<sup>5</sup> Justin also considers that the human mind participates in the truth through the action of the *Logos* which sows seeds of the truth in all humankind (*Second Apology*, 8).

Justin submitted his philosophical/ theological manner of thinking to the Biblical notion of the *Logos*. Indeed even if there was an influence of the philosophical concept of *Logos* on Justin's writings, this influence did not exhaust his profound understanding of this divine reality.

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<sup>4</sup> Like many Christians who carried Neo-Platonic convictions, St. Justin believed that human nature is tripartite, body (σῶμα), soul (ψυχή) and spirit (πνεῦμα). St. Justin conceived of the pneuma as a vital spirit (ζωτικὸν πνεῦμα), a divine principle in the human being, the distinguishing feature of his nature, a participation in the very life of the divine Logos. The term *spermatikos logos* (σπερματικός λογος; Latin: *ratio seminalis*) accentuated the fact that the divine Logos never became an integral part of the soul, but rather imparted life and true reason to it. Hence the vital spirit was a "seed of divine reason." (Editor's Note)

<sup>5</sup> J. DANIELOU, *Gospel Message and Hellenistic Culture*, London: Westminster Press, 1973, 43.

Justin wrote primarily from a Christian perspective. Hence he was greatly influenced by the concept of *Logos* presented in the Gospel according to St. John. The prologue of John's gospel describes the Logos in this way:

In the beginning was the Word: the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things came into being, not one thing came into being except through him[...] the Word became flesh, he lived among us and we saw his glory, the glory he has from the Father as only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:1-3.14).

Contrary to what Greek philosophy was able to affirm, the *Logos* as described in the prologue of John is the One who became flesh (*sarx*). The dualistic mentality of the Greeks could not imagine how a spiritual being could become matter, which was primarily evil. This eternal Logos is also the Incarnate Logos, Jesus Christ. In his *First Apology*, 46, Justin affirms, "He is the Word of whom every race of men were partakers." In his *Second Apology*, 13, Justin says that "next to God, we worship and love the Word, who is from the unbegotten and ineffable God, since also he became man for our sakes."<sup>6</sup>

The idea that the *Logos* is the Truth is also from Jesus in the Johannine literature. There are two passages of the Gospel which show this: the first one is John 14:6 in which Jesus says, "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life." The second one is in the so-called priestly prayer of Jesus in chapter 17 in which Jesus declares, "[...] your word is truth" (v. 17).

According to Saldanha, who is against any interpretation of the *Logos* in Justin as having any philosophical influence, even the idea of the *Logos Spermaticos* emerges directly from the Gospel. Again in the prologue John affirms that "the Word was the true light that enlightens every man" (John 1:9). Another Gospel text that Saldanha perceives as an influential one for St. Justin is the parable of the sower in Matt 13:3-9.<sup>7</sup> Indeed in his *Second Apology*, 13, Justin makes the comment that "all the writers were able to see realities darkly through the sowing of the implanted word that was in them."

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<sup>6</sup> See also J. DANIELOU, *Gospel Message*, 42.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. C. SALDANHA, *Divine Pedagogy*, 62.

### 1.1.1 Justin Martyr and the Mediation of the Logos in Other Cultures and Religions

First of all it is important to give a thoughtful consideration to the concept of the *logos spermatikos* according to Justin. Justin tries to show how the Greek Philosophers – and all human beings – could have access to the truth and thus utilizes the term *Logos Spermatikos* (ratio seminalis) to explain it. Throughout his Apologies, he uses indistinctively four terms to express the same reality. The first one, which has been already mentioned is *Logos Spermatikos*, the second one is *meros tau Logou*, the third *spora tou Logou* and finally the word *metechein*.<sup>8</sup> All these expressions have in Justin the same meaning, i.e., the participation in the Truth of all human beings who speak rightly.<sup>9</sup> Yet, the intention of Justin in using the expression *Logos Spermatikos* goes beyond the participation in the Truth. According to Saldanha the expression means that the Logos, God himself, was already active in a seminal, inchoate manner in the Greeks before His Incarnation.<sup>10</sup>

According to Justin, the cosmic Logos-Christ's activity in the human being is the seed of the Father's life-giving revelation that is intended not only for Christians but indeed for all cultures and religions.<sup>11</sup> This cosmic Christ was already acting in the human race before the full revelation of the Logos in the Incarnate Son. Dupuis expresses it this way:

The cosmological function of the Logos is, in effect, the foundation for Justin's theology of revelation. The Father acts through the Son; all divine manifestation in the world takes place

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Justin sees a difference, however, between those who are truly Christian, and those who are acting reasonably by the seeds of the Logos within them. This is clear from his *Second Apology*, 13 where St. Justin refers to the non-Christian philosophers as those who act according to their own capacity but with the seed of the divine Logos within them; the Christians, on the other hand, are acting within the parameters of the fullness of what God has revealed in the Logos-Christ according to the measure of the divine grace that is within them. The author discusses this point below. (Editor's Note)

through him ... Such manifestation of God ... took place before the incarnation of the Word.<sup>12</sup>

### 1.1.2 Mediation in Greek Philosophy

According to D.C. Trakatellis, “Justin is the first Christian author to express in elaborate statements the belief that the pre-existing Christ had been at work within the pagan world.”<sup>13</sup> In fact, Justin was very critical of the Greek cults and myths, and had his own unique perception of Philosophy, which he saw not so much as a mere intellectual work, but as a search for truth. “The seeds of truth are the formative principle of right knowledge and right living.” (*First Apology*, 44) For him, “Philosophy is a very great possession and very precious in the eyes of God. Those who have applied their mind to philosophy are truly sacred.” (*Dialogue with Trypho*, 11, 1-2)

Because the Logos has sown seeds of truth in the human race, all those who engage themselves in searching for the truth participate in the Logos. This idea of the *pneuma*, as Dupuis says, is very constitutive in Justin’s theology of revelation. This cosmological function of the eternal Logos relates to the very nature of the human being and so was operative before the incarnation; and the seeds of his dispensation are present wherever people live in accordance with the Logos.<sup>14</sup>

We have already pointed out that it is in this context that Justin introduces the notion of *Logos Spermatikos*. This notion explains how the Greek philosophers – and all others – had seminal access to the truth. Justin perceives that the Logos acted as a sower of truth before his Incarnation. In the *Second Apology*, 13, referring to Greek writers, Justin says that “these writers were able to perceive the Truth obscurely thanks to the sowing of the word which had been implanted within them.”

In another part of the *Second Apology* (10), Justin affirms again that “all the right principles that philosophers and lawgivers have

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<sup>12</sup> J. DUPUIS, *Toward a Christian Theology*, 57.

<sup>13</sup> D.C. TRAKATELLIS, *The Pre-existence of Christ in Justin Martyr: An Exegetical Study with Reference to the Humiliation and Exaltation Christology*, Harvard: Theological Review Scholars Press, 1976, 93.3

<sup>14</sup> Cf. J. DUPUIS, *Toward a Christian Theology*, 57.

discovered and expressed they owe to whatever of the Word they have found and contemplated in part (*karta meros*)”.

These seeds of the Logos are also present in the Stoics' formulations of moral principles. “In moral philosophy the Stoics have established right principles... and the poets too have expounded such, because of the seed of the Word (*sperma tou logou*) implanted (*emphuton*) in the whole human race.” (*Second Apology*, 8)

From the citations already noted, even though the cosmological action of the Logos was at work even before his Incarnation by the sowing of truth in the whole human race, the seminal character of this dispensation means that participation of human beings in the divine Logos remained inchoate, partial and obscure. In the *Second Apology*, 13, Justin affirms that “it is one thing to possess a seed (*sperma*) and a likeness proportioned to one’s capacity and quite another to possess the reality itself.” The fact that they have only partial access to the Truth is what makes the philosophers contradict themselves.<sup>15</sup> But what is most surprising in Justin’s thought is the fact that those who participate in the Truth/*Logos* and have lived according to Him, are also called Christians. “Those who have lived in accordance with the Logos (*meta logou*) are Christians, even though they were called godless, such as among the Greeks, Socrates and Heraclitus and others like them ... those who lived by the Logos and those who live so now, are Christians, fearless and unperturbed.” (*First Apology*, 46)

### 1.1.3 Mediation in Jewish Religion

The key to understand Justin’s conception of the seeds of the dispensation of the *Logos* in the Jewish Religion is found in his *First Apology*, when he says that all men participate in the Logos. He goes on to say, “those who have lived in accordance with the Logos (*meta logou*) are Christians, even though they were called godless... among the barbarians, Abraham, Ananias, Azarias, Misael and Elijah.” (*First Apology*, 46)

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. J. DUPUIS, *Toward a Christian Theology*, 58.



For Justin this mediation comes to the Jews through the Mosaic Law and especially by means of its ethical dimension.<sup>16</sup> In continuity with the principle that the Logos has sown the seeds of reason and of truth in all people, Logos has indeed dispensed seeds of truth in the Jewish Religion. He says, "for he [the *Logos*] exhibits among every race of men the things that are righteous at all times and in all places... it was well said by our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, that all righteousness and piety are fulfilled in two commandments."<sup>17</sup> The commandment of love for God and neighbour constitutes, for Justin, all righteousness and, since it is present in the Mosaic Law, it participates, though in a partial way, in the eternal and universal principles. Nevertheless, according to Justin those who lived before Christ and observed the Law will obtain salvation not through the cultic practices contained in the Law, but in virtue of the eternal and universal principles that are present, even if partially in an inchoate manner, in the Law.

In comparison with the general participation in the Logos proper to all human beings, the presence of the Logos is even more decisive in the Jewish Religion.<sup>18</sup> In the Old Testament, God chooses to reveal himself to Israel and through Israel to all humanity: what God discloses about himself to his Chosen People, therefore, is a more "sophisticated" revelation of the one, true God, who was preparing humanity for the complete revelation of himself in the Incarnate Logos. Justin sees the Old Testament as a theophany of the Incarnate Logos. He applies many passages of the Old Testament to the Incarnate *Logos* and sees in many people and situations (such as God speaking to Moses) a prefiguration of what is to come in the New Testament.<sup>19</sup>

### 1.1.4 Mediation in Christianity

While the dispensation of the *Logos* remains present only in an inchoate and seminal manner in Greek Philosophy and in a prefigurative, partial manner in the Jewish religion, the dispensation that the Paschal Mystery defines in its saving,

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. T. STYLIANOPOULOS, *Justin Martyr and the Mosaic Law*, Missoula: Society of Biblical Literature, 1975, 56.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 58.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. J. DUPUIS, *Toward a Christian Theology*, 59.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. J. DANIELOU, *Gospel Message*, 201.

sanctifying power vis-à-vis Christianity is complete inasmuch as we acknowledge the full revelation of the *Logos* in his Incarnation. Justin sees in this the main difference between the seeds of the dispensation to the Greeks and the completeness of the dispensation to Christians. He affirms that “our doctrines, then, appear to be greater than all human teaching, because the complete truth became Christ, the one who appeared for our sake, both body and reason and soul.”<sup>20</sup> Justin affirms:

All that they have said [the Greek philosophers] belong to us, the Christians ... These writers were able to perceive the Truth obscurely (*amudrés*) thanks to the sowing (*spora*) of the Word which had been implanted within them. But one thing is to possess a seed (*sperma*), and a likeness proportioned to one’s capacity, and quite another to possess the reality itself. (*Second Apology*, 13)

The Greeks have only a partial knowledge of the truth due to the seed that the *Logos* has sown in them, whereas the Christians have received the *Logos* Himself. This full revelation of the Incarnate *Logos* is not a merit that Christians can claim; it is actually a gift, a grace.<sup>21</sup>

What is then the difference between a holy pagan and a holy Christian? Justin seems simply to answer that the latter has come to experience the personal love of God manifested in his Incarnate Son in a manner that is explicitly recognizable as part and parcel of the Paschal Mystery; and he or she has responded to that love in eminently noble fashion – in a way that is analogical to God’s own way of loving (cf. 1 John 3:16) – within the sacramental grace God has given him or her.<sup>22</sup> The holy pagan, on the other hand, is not conscious of this experience nor of his or her participation in the sacramental life that the *Logos* Himself gives.

Yet, according to Justin, these pagans who lived according to the *Logos* are Christians, even though they have not come to a clear profession of their faith in the full revelation of the *Logos*. Even though the seeds of the dispensation in Greek Philosophy are inchoate, obscure and partial, it is not something to be despised. On the contrary, it should be appreciated in as much as even that

<sup>20</sup> C. SALDANHA, *Divine Pedagogy*, 70

<sup>21</sup> Cf. J. DANIELOU, *Gospel Message*, 41.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. C. SALDANHA, *Divine Pedagogy*, 164.

fragmentary revelation of the Truth is a gift of God through the *Logos Spermaticos*. Human reason by itself could not have attained the conclusions to which Greek Philosophy arrived, if it were not by the action of God through his Logos.<sup>23</sup> Indeed it must be mentioned that even the Christian's capacity to experience the full revelation of the Truth in Jesus Christ is not something that human reason can do by itself. The Christian needs the grace that Jesus offers through the sacraments.

Since it is a special gift of grace that Christians receive, it is necessary that God open up our minds, so as to be able to perceive the Truth. Justin exhorts, "Pray then before all things... that the gates of light be open to you. For these things are not seen nor understood by all, but only by those to whom God and his Christ give understanding." (*Dialogue with Trypho*, VII. 1-3)

## 1.2 Irenaeus and the *Logos Emphutos* (λογος εμφυτος)

Like Justin the Martyr, Irenaeus deepens the Logos theology as presented in the prologue of St. John's Gospel. Irenaeus develops the aspect of what he calls the *Logos Emphutos*.

Dupuis considers Irenaeus the founder of the theology of history for two reasons.<sup>24</sup> The first one is that Irenaeus was able to underline the historical significance of both the Jewish and Christian dispensations. The second one is that, besides the historical significance of the Jewish and Christian dispensations, Irenaeus recognizes also a salvific value of the pre-biblical and extra-biblical religions, thus integrating them into the history of salvation.<sup>25</sup> This is a constellation of the seeds of the Christian dispensation that reaches all religions and cultures through the Logos whom Irenaeus calls the *Logos Emphutos* (Logos Implanted/ Logos Engrafted).

The *logos Emphutos* of Irenaeus served as an answer to the Gnostics of the time. The Gnostics' idea of the divinity was that there were two gods, i.e., one which is incomprehensible and invisible; the other one, who was the creator (demiurge). In this

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. C. SALDANHA, *Divine Pedagogy*, 71.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. J. DUPUIS, *Toward a Christian Theology*, 60.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*

fight against Gnosticism, Irenaeus affirms that the revelation of the Father takes place through the action of the *Logos Emphutos* who in his role as the Word implanted has revealed the Father in specifiable stages even by way of natural revelation in contradistinction to graced revelation.

Irenaeus saw it as his task here to defend the transcendence of God and the capability of the human being to know God as One and Omnipotent.<sup>26</sup> Once he accomplishes this task of guarding by way of an apologetic the transcendence and oneness of God, he proceeds to show how human beings can know the Almighty, Transcendent God. For him, human beings cannot attain to knowledge of God except through an act of God's love. The knowledge of God is made possible to man only through an act of love on the part of God himself; no man or woman has the natural capability to know God. The knowability of God is only possible through the mediation of the Logos. It is the Logos, the Incarnate One, who reveals Himself to be the eternal Son and reveals the Father with whom he has been in communion since before the creation of the world. The Logos makes God knowable to all people and presents all people to God. Consequently, Irenaeus states:

For since the invisible essence is mighty, it confers on all a profound mental intuition and perception of His most powerful, yes, omnipotent greatness. Wherefore, although "no one knows the Father, except the Son, nor the Son except the Father, and those to whom the Son will reveal Him," yet all do know this fact at least, because reason, implanted [*emphutos*] in their minds, moves them, and reveals to them that there is one God, the Lord of all. (*Adversus Haereses*, II, 6.1)

Irenaeus, in other words, was teaching that the Word, in his universal efficacy, manifests the Father according to his creative action on behalf of all human beings. By a way that is eminently wise, and hence rational, in harmony with his identity as the Logos, he makes the Creator known through creation: thus there is a universal knowledge of God that is accessible through the revelatory action of the Logos who implants *ratio* in creation and providence. When all is said and done, however, Irenaeus seems always to carry the conviction that the Word's special illumination is necessary for any revelation to be specific. In rather cryptic

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<sup>26</sup> Cf. C. SALDANHA, *Divine Pedagogy*, 81

fashion, he suggests that people who had never known Jesus, nevertheless, "desired to see Christ and to hear his voice". (*Adversus Haereses*, II, IV, 22.2) If it were not for the mysterious activity of the Holy Spirit who makes grace available to anyone in a manner that is known only to God, it would be difficult to understand how someone who has never heard of Christ might have this desire.

For Irenaeus, because the Maker of the world is truly the Word of God and in an invisible manner gives cohesion to all created things, he has imprinted himself in the form of a cross on the entire creation. (*Adversus Haereses*, V, 18.3) His principal observation that the crucified Word of God has chosen to recapitulate in himself the history of the entire human race leads him to conclude that the Word's incarnate task of recapitulation by means of the cross is by way of implication necessary for the salvation of anyone. The emphasis is on the objective dimension of redemption, on the necessity and efficacy of Jesus' redemptive, recapitulative suffering and death on the cross. Subjectively, how the human person responds to the grace of redemption when the Holy Spirit offers him or her that grace remains within the context of the person's freedom.

Salvific value for any religion is only possible through the activity of Jesus, the Father's eternal Son, who is always in union with his Holy Spirit and with the Church.

### 1.3 Clement of Alexandria

The other Church father I would like to mention here is Clement of Alexandria who contributed enormously to the presence-Logos theology of the early Christian centuries by developing a concept known as *Logos Protrepitkos*.

The word *protrepitkos* signifies exhortation.<sup>27</sup> Clement entertains the notion of the Logos as one who gives melody, harmony, balance, and beauty to the universe just as a song brings beauty, harmony and order into people's lives. This exhortative power of

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<sup>27</sup> For Clement's extensive explanation of God's Word as the new Song and the beautiful, breathing Instrument whose melody can be heard throughout the universe, see CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA, *Protrepitkos [Exhortation] to the Heathen*, chapter one.

the Logos that spreads his song throughout the created universe extends to everyone regardless of his or her religion or culture. The new song has made men out of stones, men out of beasts, has brought the dead back to life. The deathless strain, the harmony of all, the Logos who is Jesus Christ has brought beauty, harmony and order to the universal frame of things. By the Holy Spirit, the Word of God has tuned the universe. The eternal Word is a beautiful, breathing instrument of music and as such has made the human being after His own image. He, the supramundane Wisdom, the Celestial Word, is the all-harmonious, melodious, holy instrument of God. Anyone who pays attention can hear the song of salvation coming forth from the Father. The Word is the *protreptikos* of God: anyone can pay attention to his saving melody.

The major argument of Clement, therefore, is that the range of God's Word is universal. The Christian dispensation is for all. He begins with a theory of a natural notion of God which is common to all people universally, according to which people can know God through the use of human reason, "for there was always a natural manifestation of the one Almighty God, among all right thinkers" (*Stromata*, V, 13). This is a kind of a natural attitude which allows the human mind to acquire knowledge of God and this is itself a gift from him and this is truly knowledge in the real sense of the word.

Then apart from the general and natural notion of God that all people have, Clement observes that there may be found a clearer knowledge of God, philosophical in nature, which may not yet be attuned to the fullness of divine revelation in the Judeo-Christian tradition. This is the knowledge of God provided by Greek Philosophy and the Indian sages which he calls "real masters of Philosophy"<sup>28</sup>. According to Clement, philosophy is a gift from God to the Greeks; and it constitutes an inchoate parallel to the divine economy. Even if it is not equal to that of the Jewish economy of the Law, both have as their purpose to bring people to Christ.<sup>29</sup> He writes: "For, having furnished the one with commandments, and the other with philosophy, He shut up unbelief to the Advent of the perfection which is by faith [...] But as the proclamation of the Gospel has come now at the fit time, so also at the fit time were the

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<sup>28</sup> J. DANIELOU, *Gospel Message*, 56.

<sup>29</sup> J. DUPUIS, *Toward a Christian Theology*, 64.

Law and the Prophets given to the Barbarians, and Philosophy to the Greeks, to fit their ears for the Gospel." (*Stromata*, VI, 6)

For him philosophy is a "covenant" as it is "a providential arrangement for salvation, or, more specifically, a God-given means to enable the Greeks to work towards their salvation". Hence it is propaedeutic because it is a means of salvation and a preparatory training, a stepping stone to the greater revelation that comes with the Incarnation of the Logos which would seal a new and everlasting covenant. "Accordingly, before the Advent of the Lord, Philosophy was necessary to the Greeks for righteousness. And now it becomes conducive to piety; being a kind of preparatory training [...] Perchance, too, philosophy was given to the Greeks primarily and directly, till the Lord should call the Greeks." (*Stromata*, I, 5)

According to Clement, there are many "paving ways", all directed to the same goal, i.e., the recognition of the Logos in Christ: "The way of Truth is therefore one. But into it, as into a perennial river, streams flow from all sides [...] the commandments and the modes of preparatory training are to be regarded as the way and the appliances of life." (*Stromata*, I, 5) However, these "paving ways" or rather streams, as he would call them, through which the *Logos* dispenses salvation, are valid until "the Lord should call the Greeks". The implication here is that although we believe that in Jesus the revelation of God has reached its fulfilment, Clement insists that the dispensation that the Logos has given to other religious traditions and cultures prior to the Incarnation retains its preparatory value even after the full accomplishment of the Paschal Mystery.

For Clement, Philosophy is not an end in itself, but plays a role of propaedeutic to the full manifestation of the *Logos Protreptikos* – the new divine harmony that resounds throughout the universe – in Jesus Christ. The Logos active in preparatory fashion among the Greeks through Greek Philosophy has served as a background, intellectual and moral, for receiving the fullness of that dispensation in the advent of Christ, the Logos Incarnate.

In a nutshell, the contribution of the *Logos* theology of the Greek fathers is indeed of great importance in our effort to articulate a Christian theology of religious pluralism in an African

context. From what we have seen, there is a positive and inclusivist approach to other religions, since God the Word did not neglect them. Hence we can perceive a clearer way how the Logos, Jesus Christ, exercises a mediating presence in African traditional religions. At the same time, it helps us to recognize the fact that this mediation remains inchoate and obscure since these religions may contain anti-Logos elements due to beliefs and practices that do not cohere with what God, in Jesus, has revealed.

## **2. The Voice of a Contemporary Theologian: Karl Rahner's Theology of Grace as "Supernatural Existential"**

The 20<sup>th</sup> Century Theologian Karl Rahner becomes relevant in our discussions especially in reference to his theory of the "anonymous Christian" which is based on what the early Greek Fathers had already speculated about the presence of God's revelation and saving Grace outside Christian tradition, but also, and essentially, on the new insights in the understanding of grace and human nature from a perspective of Christian anthropology. Indeed if Justin talks of "the seed of the Logos" to explain how the Greeks could feel such a deep passion for the truth, Rahner talks of the "supernatural existential" to explain the inner tendency of human beings to their Creator. What does Rahner mean by "Supernatural existential"?

In Rahner's anthropology, supernatural existential means "graced from the moment of existence." This grace that God implants when he creates the human soul is an inner determination towards God. Hence this determination also may be called the supernatural existential. Even after the fall of Adam and Eve, human beings are by nature "good," and hence are conditionally yet constitutively oriented towards God, for human beings possess unlimited transcendence of knowledge and freedom, accruing from the transcendental relation between God and man. According to Rahner, human existence from its very beginning has had one single goal, i.e. eternal life in the immediate possession of God.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> K. RAHNER, "Original Justice", in K. RAHNER – H. VORGRIMLER, eds., *Theological Dictionary*, New York: Herder and Herder, 1965, 328.



Men and women are always and everywhere oriented, by nature, to definitive communion and intimacy with God; and God has rendered human nature capable of receiving such an orientation. The inner determination of the human being towards God has been posited by God Himself, so that His free self-communication to man and woman can be accepted in a dialogical partnership, to the point that this posited condition of the human spirit appears as a condition for this self-communication of God to take place.<sup>31</sup> That is, because God wanted to communicate himself to human beings, He must have created them in such a way that they could respond to that invitation of sharing in God's divine life. This inner determination is of a permanent character and not something that appears sporadically in the human person. According to Rahner, "In virtue of this self-communication, the transcendence of man is permanently and necessarily ordered to the direct presence of God."<sup>32</sup> Even prior to the justification that becomes possible by means of Jesus Christ, the Redeemer, the human person stands under God's universal plan of salvation, to the point of finding himself and understanding his very nature only in reference to this supernatural call.<sup>33</sup>

It is from this perspective of the hidden and inner condition and human orientation towards God, that Karl Rahner considers incorporating even non-Christians into the Christian dispensation by calling them anonymous Christians.<sup>34</sup>

According to this theory, by the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus is present and active in a hidden, unknown manner even outside the

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<sup>31</sup> E. RAHNER, ed., *Encyclopedia of Theology: A Concise Sacramentum Mundi*, London: Burns & Oates, 1975, 590.

<sup>32</sup> K. RAHNER, *Theological Investigations*, XVI, London: Darton, Longman & Todd 1969, 40.

<sup>33</sup> K. K. RAHNER, "Original Justice", 328.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, chapter 2, n. 16. This paragraph elucidates the fact that because God's plan of salvation is universal, those who have had no exposure to the Gospel, those who sincerely seek the God they do not yet know, and those who try to live a good life by following the dictates of their conscience are related not only to Jesus but to his Bride, the Catholic Church whom Jesus has instituted as a universal agent of his own divine plan of salvation. The Council, however, did not speak of these as anonymous Christians. (Editor's Note)

boundaries of the Christian dispensation, in nature, in other religious traditions and cultures, indeed in each and every human being. All non-Christians who attain salvation must have received the grace of Christ, just as Christians do, without realizing it; and this is exactly the anonymous character of their condition. Even though these anonymous Christians stand outside the visible, social body of the Church, they nevertheless stand in a salvific relationship with God, and so are related to the Church; this is because in their freedom they have accepted God's call to supernatural communion with Him. Vatican two reiterates this in its optimistic approach towards salvation outside the visible boundaries of the Church. Vatican II sees salvation as an offer open to everybody, even to non-Christians, and in ways known only to God. The only two conditions to receive this salvation are faithfulness and obedience to one's conscience.<sup>35</sup>

By way of summarizing, we can glean from Rahner's theory of "anonymous Christian" three principles that are of vital importance in a Christian reflection on religious pluralism: 1) God has a salvific plan that is universal for all humanity. 2) All peoples are invited to be partakers in this plan. 3) Finally, all human beings stand in need of Christ from whom all, explicit Christians and anonymous Christians, obtain salvation.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> K. RAHNER, *Theological Investigations*, XVI, London: Darton, Longman & Todd 1976, 284.

<sup>36</sup> We do not subscribe to the doubts that Rahner raised about such creedal statements as "Jesus Christ is God." On more than one occasion, Rahner wondered out loud if the expression of Christian faith, "Jesus is God," is not liable to a monophysite, mythological interpretation when the word "is" is understood in its everyday meaning. See, for example, K. RAHNER, *Corso fondamentale sulla fede*, Paoline, 1977, 374-375; this, in turn, is a translation of the original *Grundkurs des Glaubens. Einführung in den Begriff des Christentums*, Herder, 1976. English translations manifest the same doubt. For us, on the other hand, the incarnation and the language the Church uses to speak of the incarnation do not arouse perplexing doubts about the faith but rather point to the reality of Jesus Christ, God, fully divine and fully human, and hence the divine Logos incarnate. When an African prays, he or she is entering into a friendship that God is offering to him in Jesus Christ. No one needs to dim the light on this fundamental truth: in Jesus, it is God who is seeking friendship with the African – and indeed with all of us. We need Jesus, our Lord and our God, who offers all of us the grace of salvation.

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This theology of Rahner provides a useful orientation to our reflection on the significance of the African Traditional Religions in the salvation of the Africans today.

### **3. African Theologians' Advocacy for an Authentic African Christian Identity**

Because there was an unfortunate series of events that affected European society, such as the Muslim threat, the haphazard and sometimes ill-intentioned organization of the Crusaders, the disappearance or rather weakening of Christian communities in the eastern part of the continent and the establishment of a strong Church in its western sector, Europeans arrived unwittingly at a point of identifying Christianity with their own culture. This line of thinking made the European missionaries of the XIX century "treat everything pre-Christian as either harmful or at best valueless, and to consider the African once converted from paganism as a sort of *tabula rasa* on which a wholly new religious psychology was somehow to be imprinted."<sup>37</sup>

As a result, the European missionary enterprise was not only oriented towards the evangelization of the African peoples, but also seemed to become a way of "civilizing" (i.e., Europeanizing) Africans: "The Christian religion, the school, technical and industrial training, new agricultural skills and commercial enterprises, a whole package which, in the new missionary encounter with Africa, was sincerely believed would cause the dark continent to advance."<sup>38</sup>

In the religious sense, African traditional Religions were classified in the group of animist religions, which were considered to be practiced by people of low category in the scale of humanity and whose practitioners lacked a sense of moral life. As a result Christianity in Africa succumbed to a pattern of alienating. In the process of evangelization, there was no serious theological reflection and encounter between Christianity and African religions and

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<sup>37</sup> A. HASTINGS, *Church and Mission in Modern Africa*, New York: Fordham University Press 1967, 60.

<sup>38</sup> K. BEDIAKO, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and in Modern Africa*, Oxford: Regnum, 1992, 227.

world view. This explains the kind of dichotomy of beliefs that exists among many Christians on the continent. Christian beliefs have not transformed the totality of the African mind and as a result, many Christians continue to practice African traditional religions *vis-à-vis* Christianity. According to the African theologian Bediako, “The theological problem which has arisen from the missionary tie-up between Christianity and ‘civilization’ (that is, European culture), consists therefore in this, that it has threatened to deny African Christians their own past and sought instead to give them a past which could not in any real sense become fully theirs.”<sup>39</sup>

What Bediako is saying is precisely that African theology and African Christianity lack an identity. In order to be authentic, African Christianity has to emerge as a Christianity which is able to reconcile the newness of Christianity with the long standing religious and cultural traditions of Africa. It must be able to remove the dichotomy that exists in African Christians, who identify themselves as absolutely African and at the same time absolutely Christian without compromising the Gospel message.

### 3.1 Bolaji Idowu and Call for an Indigenous African Church

One of the African theologians who has worked commendably in order to articulate Christian identity in Africa is Bolaji Idowu. Appreciating Bolaji Idowu’s contributions, Bediako says that he is “probably the one who has made particularly his own the plea for an authentic theology and churchmanship”<sup>40</sup>.

For Bolaji Idowu, the main problem of African Christianity is a lack of identity, or rather a lack of “loyalty” of Christians who, on the one hand, are active members of a Christianity embodied in European categories and practices; on the other hand, these very Christians consider African traditional religions as the ultimate answer to their existential problems.<sup>41</sup> The cause of this is – according to Idowu – the fact that the Church of the 19<sup>th</sup> century

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, 237.

<sup>40</sup> K. BEDIAKO, *Theology*, 267.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. E.B. IDOWU, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books 1973. 205-206.

lacked that awareness that the divine Logos is present and operative within the African traditional milieu. He observes that missionaries from the very beginning ignored the presence of Jesus Christ, the *Logos*, in African traditional religions. His argument is that Jesus, the Logos, has been active and present all along in the African religions dispensations. African traditional religions enjoy just like all other traditions the gift of divine revelation. Indeed:

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 initiative. What man knows about God what he discovers about God, comes as a result of this self-disclosure [...] if revelation indeed means God's self-disclosure, if he has left his mark upon the created order and his witness within man – every man – then it follows that revelation cannot be limited in scope and that it is meant for all mankind, all rational beings [...] for Africans as part of human race, the self-disclosure of God is evident.<sup>42</sup>

It is evident from the foregoing assertion that God's self-revelation is offered to all humanity as to a family; and, hence, He reveals Himself to Africans, who are a vital part of the human family. The visible manifestation of God's self-revelation to Africans has to be found in the way in which Africans live their religious experience and in the way they express it. The fact that Africans express their awareness and their faith in one God, who is always a "personal" God, who is present and operative among them can be confirmed from the names Africans give to Him. The various names that people from diverse African cultures give to God are "descriptive of his character and emphatic of the fact that he is a reality and that he is not an abstract concept".<sup>43</sup>

It is quite clear that there has been a failure within some Church circles to recognize the reality of the *semina Verbi*, the presence of the eternal Logos, who is Jesus Christ, among Africans even prior to the coming of European missionaries.<sup>44</sup> Missionaries presented to the African peoples an "alien" God who, apart from being

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<sup>42</sup> Cf. *Ibid*, 57.

<sup>43</sup> E.B. IDOWU, *African Traditional Religion*, 150.

<sup>44</sup> It is noteworthy that the Logos, Jesus Christ, who is the Word made flesh was indeed the first Christian to grace African soil. The Africans gave him hospitality at a time when his own country, Israel, was a lethal threat to him. See Matt 2:13-21. (Editor's Note)

a stranger, was demanding them to abandon their African identity. There was a failure to make a bridge of continuity between the dispensation of the *Christ-Logos* present in the African context and the Christian dispensation. According to Bolaji Idowu,

It was a serious mistake that missionaries took no account of the indigenous beliefs and customs of Africa when they began their work of evangelization. It is now obvious that by a misguided purpose, a completely new face of God that had nothing to do with the past of Africa was introduced to her peoples. Thus there was no proper foundation laid for the Gospel message in the hearts of the people.<sup>45</sup>

The God of the Africans is the true God, the omnipresent God, who is the creator and sustainer of all that exists. He is both transcendent, the absolute other and immanent because he is neither far from us nor disinterested in his creation. In fact, African traditional religions acknowledge that God is in absolute control of the universe because all beings find their source of existence in him. The conception of God as an “absent” God is completely foreign to the African mind, and also far from the truth. “In African thought, Deity is absolute power and cannot be disregarded; the notion of God as so transcendent that he is not immanent is alien to African belief.”<sup>46</sup> This concept resonates with the Christian faith in the God who has revealed himself in the Old Testament, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as well as the God who is Jesus Christ, one with the Father, in the unity of the Holy Spirit. Jesus is the Alpha and the Omega for all times and places.<sup>47</sup>

Since the revelation of God is already present in the traditional beliefs of the Africans then it should not be difficult to see African traditional religions as a primary avenue for an authentic evangelization that makes Africans feel the authentic integration that Jesus intends to accomplish between Christianity and their own religious experience. It is imperative that the Church in Africa accept the arduous task of understanding how the eternal Word

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<sup>45</sup> J. MBITI, “The Ways and Means of Communicating the Gospel”, in C.G. BAËETA, ed., *Christianity in Tropical Africa*, London: Oxford University Press 1968, 433.

<sup>46</sup> E.B. IDOWU, *African Traditional Religion*, 160.

<sup>47</sup> Hebrews 13:8. Jesus is God, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, the Word made flesh.

rendered himself and the grace of the Paschal Mystery present in the pre-Christian era and at the same time how he renders himself sacramentally present within the perennial newness of Christianity. The Church in Africa must begin from the seeds of the Logos already present in the African religions and cultures. According to Idowu, she must keep continuity with the African identity and what God has revealed about himself by means of the African identity.

Whatever theological construction becomes necessary in Africa in the light of Christian revelation, it cannot be done by neglecting this African religio-cultural heritage from the past [...] the material gathered from the study of the indigenous beliefs [...], in order to ascertain what God has done, in what way He has been known and approached in the past and present history [...] is what will form the basic raw material for Christian theology.<sup>48</sup>

It is important, however, that this be a true reconciling, a true integration. As the Church in Africa becomes indigenous by recognizing the presence of Jesus Christ, the eternal Logos, in the African religious traditions and cultures she must also remain faithful to the long standing tradition of the universal Church. She must live in the "watchful consciousness that she is part as well as 'presence' of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church."<sup>49</sup> The Church in Africa is called to be locally incarnated in the life of a given culture but at the same time keeping the unity with the whole body, the Body of Christ.

### **3.2 John Mbiti on African Traditional Religions as *Preparatio Evangelica***

John Mbiti shares Idowu's conviction and, indeed, that of all African theologians that African traditional religions are places that have served as a pre-eminent medium of divine revelation: the eternal Son of God has always been present and operative in African traditional religions. The effort of the Church and any missionary for that matter should be "to discover and set forth the most effective and appropriate ways in which the Gospel of Jesus Christ may find deeper roots in African religious and cultural

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<sup>48</sup> E.B. IDOWU, *Towards an Indigenous Church*, London, Oxford University Press, 1965, 25.

<sup>49</sup> E.B. IDOWU, *Towards an Indigenous Church*, 11.

consciousness.”<sup>50</sup> The Church has the role of becoming the primordial bearer of the Gospel of which it is the embodiment. It is in the Church that all the deeper aspirations of the African peoples must find their fulfilment, not by way of annihilating them, but by showing how all their hopes come to be realized in the message of Jesus Christ. Indeed, “The Church will become for them a community in which the corporate aspirations are not destroyed but fulfilled and intensified, in which tribal foundations are not simply shaken and replaced with a vacuum but are made more secure in Christ.”<sup>51</sup>

For John Mbiti, the Logos, God’s eternal Son, was there even prior to any contact with Christianity and that the dispensation through which he revealed Himself as the divine presence of truth in love is the foundation for any authentic encounter of the Gospel with the African reality. For him “without African religiosity, whatever its defect might be, Christianity would have taken much longer to be understood and accommodated by African peoples.” The question is what is it in African traditional religions and culture that embodies this particular form of the revelation of the Gospel and how can it be identified in order for it to become a foundation for the encounter with the Gospel? The first thing John Mbiti identifies is that deep rooted religiosity of the Africans. For him, “religion is part of the cultural heritage [...]. It is by far the richest part of the African heritage. Religion is found in all areas of human life.”<sup>52</sup> Africans have a profound conception of God: “Expressed ontologically, God is the origin and sustenance of all things. He is “older” than the *zamani* period; He is outside and beyond His creation. On the other hand, He is personally involved in his creation, so that it is not outside of Him or His reach.”<sup>53</sup>

Like Iwodu, Mbiti sees a very close affinity between the African concept of God and the Christian notion. The God the Africans worship is the same God “of our Lord Jesus Christ [...] who for

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<sup>50</sup> K. BEDIAKO, *Theology*, 308.

<sup>51</sup> J. MBITI, “The Ways and Means”, 341.

<sup>52</sup> J. MBITI, *Introduction to African Traditional Religion*, Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1975, 10.

<sup>53</sup> J. MBITI, *African Religions and Philosophy*, Nairobi: Heinemann 1969, 29.



thousands of years has been known and worshipped in various ways within the religious life of African peoples and who was not a stranger in Africa prior to the coming of missionaries."<sup>54</sup> Indeed for Mbiti, it is in Jesus Christ that all the expectations of African traditional religions reach fulfilment. "The Gospel enabled people to utter the name of Jesus Christ [...] that final and completing element that crowns their traditional religiosity and brings its flickering light to full brilliance."<sup>55</sup>

### 3.3 Mulago Gwa Cikala on African Traditional Religions as "Stepping Stones" to Christianity

Arguing in the same line as the theologians we have treated so far, Mulago shows that in the African traditional religions we find rudimentary elements that are in harmony with the Christian dispensation and as such create the basis for understanding how the *Logos*, Jesus Christ, renders himself present and operative in the African reality. Because of this harmony, he regards African traditional religions as "stepping stones" for the Gospel. The task of the missionary work is to purify the *semina verbi* already present so as to present to the African peoples "a Christianity that has been comprehended and lived through, an incarnated and involved Christianity which has become more deeply rooted than the old ancestral beliefs."<sup>56</sup>

Highlighting some of those elements present among the Bantu peoples of Africa, Mulago mentions the concept of 'unity of Life' as the integrating principle. This principle of unity which is drawn from the Bantu world view refers to a "dynamic concept, arising from life-resources (*moyens vitaux*) – ultimately derived from God, *NyamuzindaImana* – and with tremendous implications for relationships and participation within the universe of the living, the deceased, creatures animate and inanimate."<sup>57</sup> Mulago sees in this concept the primordial keyword in which African traditional

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<sup>54</sup> J. MBITI, "On the Article by John W. Kinney: A Comment", *Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research* 3/2 (1979) 68.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> V. MULAGO, *Un Visage Africain du Christianisme: L'Union Vitale Bantu Face is a l'unité lirale Ecclésiale*, Paris: Presence Africaine, 1993, 17.

<sup>57</sup> K. BEDIAKO, *Theology*, 358.

religions become a “stepping stone” to Christianity. In fact, he sees in this concept a reflection of the concept of “unity of the Church” or the more biblical and more theologically elaborated term “Body of Christ”.

The “unity of life” as such flows from God himself who brings about unity in the community. The individual can attain this life by means of participation in the life of the community. Hence, the unity of life is manifested in the community of the Body of Christ, although the life that is shared in this community has a more transcendental character since that life is a sacramental participation in the life of the Trinity. “Since Jesus is in the Trinity, those who are united to Jesus are also in the Trinity, and through the divine grace imparted by the Son believers are brought into the presence of the Father as adopted children.”<sup>58</sup>

It is clear that African theologians would like to see and understand the presence of the divine Logos, Jesus Christ, and his dispensation in African traditional religions and as such consider them as “stepping stones” and as *preparatio evangelica*. As indicated above, the theologians are very positive about the African culture and tradition and their effort to reconstruct a theology that respect these traditions with the conviction that they contain “rays of truth” in themselves and should be considered a valid approach that is to be cherished and celebrated. I see it as an urgent task of the theologians to continue discerning the presence of Jesus Christ, the Logos, who has walked for years with the African peoples in order to lead them to Himself. I would agree with John Mbiti that were it not for this presence of God’s eternal Son in the Pre-Christian heritage of Africa, the Gospel would have taken much longer to be accepted and to take root in African soil.

It should, however, be noted that there is an evident weakness: these theologians seem to put so much stress on the continuity that they blur the discontinuity of the same. The is the impression one gets, that these theologians do not remember that all the “seeds of the Logos” present in other religious dispensations, are hidden within the condition of the unredeemed humanity. Another way of saying this is that in African Traditional religions there is also the

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<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, 364.

presence of evil which obscures the truth hidden within them. The attitude of the African theologians is positive; it challenges the derogatory European evaluation of African tradition by seeking to achieve a genuinely sympathetic interpretation of the religious past.

This critique notwithstanding, the effort of the African theologians is a valid one and represents a more authentically positive attitude towards the pre-Christian heritage of Africa. It is the task of theologians to continue discerning the presence of God's eternal Son, the Logos, who has always remained close to the African peoples in order to lead them to Himself. We are in great debt to these African theologians for making us aware of the presence of God's eternal Son among the African traditional religions. It is God himself, whom Africans know and relate with, that has been leading them to Himself and preparing them for the fullness of divine revelation through the Paschal Mystery in a sacramental encounter with His Son, Jesus Christ, at the time that He Himself had appointed. I agree with Mbiti's affirmation that, without this presence of the Logos within the African religious heritage, Christianity would have taken longer to be accepted and to take root in African soil. It is our responsibility to open the door with wholehearted graciousness to Jesus, the incarnate *Logos*, so that he may continue the saving, sanctifying work of the Paschal Mystery in Africa, not by destroying the seeds of truth in love, but by showing that all the aspirations of the African heart find their fulfilment in him, who is the incarnate Son of God. All the positive elements of divine truth that we find in African Traditional religions have one and only one purpose: to serve as a background both intellectually and morally for the full manifestation of God the Father in his divine Son, Jesus Christ.

## Conclusion

In African Traditional Religion, we find an authentic presence of God's eternal Son, the *Logos*, who sheds forth revelatory rays of divine truth in all that is noble in African traditional religions. What God has done inchoately serves as a *preparatio evangelica*. These resonant harmonies of divine truth represent both a preparation for the sacramental indwelling of the divine *Logos* in the vast religious

and cultural African heritage, and at the same time represent a means of opening the hearts and souls of Africans to the grace of salvation, i.e., to that same redeeming love that Jesus pours forth into the heart with the gift of the Holy Spirit (cf., Rom 5:5). This is the gift that brings forth the personal encounter between the individual followers of the African traditional Religion and the incarnate Logos. It is the task of the Church in Africa, assisted by theologians and by all people of good will, to discern this mysterious presence of the Son of God in the African heritage, to purify this heritage from the stains of human sin, which might have contaminated it, and then incorporate this heritage into our Christian faith, so that we may give witness to the universal character of the Catholic Church of Christ that embraces all peoples and cultures. The Church in Africa will always remain exemplary in her humble profession of faith in the Logos-God who has chosen to save people in ways that no theologian, no pastor, indeed no human being is able to discern because as the Second Vatican Council insisted God does indeed save some in ways that are known only to Himself (cf., *Ad Gentes*, 7).

In his Post-Synodal Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa* Pope (St.) John Paul II marvelled at this rich patrimony when he said that Africa “is endowed with a wealth of cultural values and priceless human qualities which it can offer to the Churches and to humanity as a whole. The Synod Fathers highlighted some of these cultural values, which are truly a providential preparation for the transmission of the Gospel.”<sup>59</sup>

Without doubt, the African traditional culture has much to contribute to Christianity. She offers her singular insight into the Christian faith and expresses it with a beauty, power and grace that are wonderfully and uniquely African. Subsequent to the insight and the cultural expressions that give life to the insight, Africa’s wholehearted commitment to the mission of the Church becomes ever more transparently a sign that the Kingdom of God is at hand.

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<sup>59</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation “Ecclesia in Africa” on the Church in Africa and its Evangelizing Mission Towards the Year 2000* (14 Sep 1995), Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa 1995, 42.