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ABSTRACT

The historical narrative of Christianity in Africa has engaged the attention of many African Church historians, leading to the production of a compendium of literature on African Church history. Unarguably, a variety of themes on African Church history has been explored by African church historians from their diverse epistemic contexts. As a result, there seems to be little or no efforts among the scholars with respect to taxonomy of the diverse themes which occupy their reflections on African Church history. Guided by the historical method of data collection, the authors attempt to discuss developments, trends, consensus and disagreements as some of the essential themes which warrant classification among African Church historians. The paper further adopts the purposive sampling technique to select specific examples from the works of Andrew Walls, Kwame Bediako, Lamin Saneh and Ogbu Kalu. It finds out that two of the developments are the emergence of academic interest in African initiatives in Christianity in Africa and development of African theology. It further observes that liberation and integration are trends among African Church historians in the post-missionary era.

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ABSTRACT

The historical narrative of Christianity in Africa has engaged the attention of many African Church historians, leading to the production of a compendium of literature on African Church history. Unarguably, a variety of themes on African Church history has been explored by African church historians from their diverse epistemic contexts. As a result, there seems to be little or no efforts among the scholars with respect to taxonomy of the diverse themes which occupy their reflections on African Church history. Guided by the historical method of data collection, the authors attempt to discuss developments, trends, consensus and disagreements as some of the essential themes which warrant classification among African Church historians. The paper further adopts the purposive sampling technique to select specific examples from the works of Andrew Walls, Kwame Bediako, Lamin Saneh and Ogbu Kalu. It finds out that two of the developments are the emergence of academic interest in African initiatives in Christianity in Africa and development of African theology. It further observes that liberation and integration are trends among African Church historians in the post-missionary era. Again, the issue of identity of the African Christian features prominently in a discourse on consensus among African church historians because the question of the precise identity of the African Christian engages the theological reflection of virtually all African church historians. Last but not least, disagreements among African church historians include a discourse on the continuity of Africans' primal religiosity in Christianity.

Keywords: church, church history, african church history, african theology.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Inasmuch as the discipline of African Church history is dominated by several penetrating voices, there appears to be very little or no efforts at classifying and discussing a variety of themes from the perspectives of African church historians. Within the context of the historical method of data collection, this work attempts taxonomy of some concepts by focusing on developments, trends, consensus and disagreements among African church historians. It adopts the purposive sampling technique to select specific instances from the works of these African Church historians: Andrew Walls, Kwame Bediako, Lamin Saneh and Ogbu Kalu.

It suffices to provide a synopsis of each theme discussed in the paper. It places the whole exercise in its appropriate context by briefly examining the concepts of church history and African church history. The discussion on developments among African church historians hinges on the emergence of scholarly discourse on African initiatives in Christianity in Africa and the development of African theology. Two of the trends which permeate the discourse of African church historians are liberation and integration. On the issue of consensus among African church

theologians, there seems to be a general agreement on the question of the African Christian's exact identity. The discussion on the continuity of the Africans' primal religiosity in Christianity is the pivot around which widespread disagreements among African church historians revolve. In conclusion, the paper underscores, among others, African theology's focus on dealing with culturally-rooted issues within the perspective of African church historians who understand theology as a productive blend of 'old' and 'new' in a quest for a unified framework for dealing with Africans' existential challenges.

II. DEFINITION OF CHURCH HISTORY

In his *Historical Theology: Continuity and Change in Christian Doctrine*, Jaroslav Pelikan maintains that church history... deals with the church's past.¹ To understand this definition, it is imperative to explore the meaning of the church. This is because in the opinion of Ogbu U. Kalu, 'the type of church history which one writes is a function of the definition of the church.'² Kalu explores the meaning of the church as follows:

[E]dha Hebrew and *kuriakon* in Greek refer frequently to the assemblage; that is the institution of assembling. But *gahal* and *ekklesia* move beyond the institutional perception of those who have assembled. It is people-sensitive. The Greek, *ekklesia*, speaks of those who have been called out of the world into the kingdom. The world, *kosmos*, has three meanings including the world order, worldly goods, endowments, riches, pleasures and allurements (*kosmetikos*) which seduce from God. Thus, behind the classical idea of *kosmos* as orderly arrangement, is a mind behind the system, a world system established after the fall by a *kosmokrator*, a world ruler,

¹ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Historical Theology: Continuity and Change in Christian Doctrine* (London and New York: Hutchinson/Corpus, 1971), pp. xiii-xviii. Cited in James E. Bradley and Richard A. Muller, *Church History: An Introduction to Research, Reference Works, and Methods* (United States of America: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), pp.5-6.

² Ogbu U. Kalu, 'Shape, Flow and Identity in Contemporary African Church Historiography' in *Trinity Journal of Church and Theology* XII, 1&2 (2002), p. 6.

the prince of the world, in rebellion. Friendship with him is enmity Christ. The church, therefore, is a special people of God, a pilgrim people with a mission. Mark 3:13-15 spells out why they were called:

- To be companions of Christ;
- To hear and preach the good news which will be
- Confirmed with signs and wonders, confrontations with the forces of darkness. These could be poverty, corrupt ethics of power, false religiosity, social marginalization or environmental degradation.

The church's task is to bring the gospel to bear on all the things which concern the well-being of the human person and carry a spiritual warfare against forces which deface.³

The human society is therefore the context of the church, understood as God's mission.⁴ James E. Bradley and Richard A. Muller have proposed taxonomy of themes examined in church history. In their scheme, 'the discipline of church history encompasses the practice of the church as well as the thoughts of the church; it studies both dogma and the intersection of the church with society and the larger world... Anything that the church does in the world is arguably a part of church history.⁵

It must however be noted that 'church history', in the thought of Kalu 'is a different genre of history with a prescribed goal, a theological underpinning and people-orientation.'⁶ It interprets facts⁷ from an understanding of what God was doing in Jesus Christ in each peculiar environment or ecosystem.⁸ It is against this backdrop that I examine African church history.

³ Kalu, 'Shape, Flow and Identity', p. 6.

⁴ For details on the church as God's mission, see Emmanuel Asante, *Stewardship: Essays on Ethics of Stewardship* (Ghana: Wilas Press Limited, 1999), pp. 145-146.

⁵ Bradley and. Muller, *Church History*, p. 6.

⁶ Kalu, 'Shape, Flow and Identity', p. 6.

⁷ Facts in this context refer to pieces of information or events which are the same for all historians and which form the backbone history. For a good discussion on 'the historian and his facts', see E.H. Carr, *What is History* (England: Penguin Books, 1983), pp. 7-30.

⁸ Kalu, 'Shape, Flow and Identity', p. 9.

III. A BRIEF EXAMINATION OF AFRICAN CHURCH HISTORY

If Africa⁹ is part of God's created order with peculiar environment, ecosystem and people created in the image of God, then the concept of the church as explored above is not novel among Africans. African church history therefore is the story of God's pilgrim people in Africa and their experiences of God's redeeming grace in the midst of their existence in various cultural and ecological milieu.¹⁰

The primordial orientation of Africa / Africans and the non-novelty of Christian, church or God consciousness among them are forcefully accentuated by Frans J. Verstraelen in his book *History of Christianity in Africa in the context of African History*. He intones that 'Africa and Africans did exist already a long time before historical Christianity came into being, but Christianity, since its beginning, has been present in Africa. Because Christianity has been in Africa for almost two thousand years, its history should therefore be [examined]...'¹¹ Andrew F. Walls, a doyen of African church history, examines the pivotal place and relevance of Christianity in Africa as follows:

It is widely recognized that there has occurred within the present century a demographic shift in the centre of gravity of the Christian world, which means that more than half of the world's Christians live in Africa... and that the proportion doing so grows annually. This means that we have to regard African Christianity as potentially the *representative* Christianity of the twenty-first century...The Christianity typical of the twenty-first

⁹Africa in this context is a geographical entity believed to be the most compact of continents. For details on this, see Mercy Amba Oduyoye, 'African Culture and African Development: A critical Reappraisal' in Gillian Mary Bediako, Benhardt Y. Quarshie and J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu (eds.) *Seeing New Facets of the Diamond, Christianity as a Universal Faith: Essays in Honour of Kwame Bediako* (U.K.: Regnum Africa and Regnum Books International, 2014), pp. 317-318.

¹⁰Kalu, 'Shape, Flow and Identity', p. 14.

¹¹ Frans J. Verstraelen, *History of Christianity in Africa in the context of African History* (Zimbabwe: Mambo Press, 2002), p. viii.

century will be shaped by the events and processes that take place in the southern continents, and above all, by those that take place in Africa.¹²

The implication of the above demographic shift in the centre of gravity of the Christian world is that Africa will significantly influence or determine the 'shape, flow and identity' of global Christianity. Walls underscores this point and asserts that 'the things by which people recognize and judge what Christianity is will (for good or ill) increasingly be determined in Africa. The characteristic doctrines, the liturgy, the ethical codes, the social applications of the faith will increasingly be those prominent in Africa. New agendas for theology will appear in Africa.'¹³

The observation of Walls on the centrality of African Christianity in a global Christian context does not only indicate the vibrant or active involvement of Africans in the growth of Christianity in Africa, but it also underscores calls for a paradigmatic shift in the Eurocentric approach to African church historiography. I want to pursue this argument further in the next segment of the discussion, that is, some developments among African church historians.

3.1 Developments among African Church Historians

Several developments among African church historians may be identified. Two of them espoused in this work are the emergence of academic interest in African initiatives in the planting, nursing and growth of churches/ Christianity in Africa and development of African theology.

3.2 Emergence of Scholarly Discourse on African Initiatives in Christianity in Africa

One of the key developments among African church historians is the unfolding of scholarly debates about African initiatives in Christianity in Africa. In his 'African Church Historiography Reconsidered...', Cephas N. Omenyo cites Kalu in these words: 'Early African Christian

¹² Andrew F. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2002), p. 85.

¹³ Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process*, P. 85.

Historiography has consistently been too Eurocentric or has overemphasized the role of Western missionary agents, who are often presented as having preached the gospel to 'passive' receptors.¹⁴ Walls seems to frown on the Eurocentric approach to African church historiography and seeks to highlight the contributions of Africans in African Christianity. His observation is apt: 'Modern African Christianity is not only the result of movements among Africans, but it has been principally sustained by Africans and is to a surprising extent the result of African initiatives.'¹⁵ Walls further underscores that:

The crucial events of Christian history have often taken place through obscure people. The missionary movement itself, in both its Catholic and Protestant phases, has usually been a peripheral activity of the church. It would be hard to guess from the average volume on this history of the church in the nineteenth century that events that were to transform the church altogether were going on in Africa and Asia, for these events are likely to occupy a few pages in the volume at most.¹⁶

An academic discourse that attempts to unravel the efforts, creativity, ambition and self-motivation of Africans in the spread of the gospel in sub Saharan Africa, has not been an effort to impose Christianity on the African. Rather, it is the vivid story of Africans themselves taking the initiative to root God's word on African soil by complimenting the efforts of European missionaries.¹⁷

¹⁴ Cephas N. Omenyo, 'African Church Historiography Reconsidered: Some Manifestations of African Initiatives in the Planting, Nursing and Growth of the Methodist Church Ghana' in Abamfo O. Atiemo, Ben-Willie K. Golo and Lawrence K. Boakye (eds.), *Unpacking the Sense of the Sacred: A Reader in the Study of Religions* (UK: Ayebia Clark Publishing Limited, 2014), p. 147. See also Ogbu U. Kalu, 'Church Presence in Africa: A Historical Analysis of the Evangelisation Process' in *ATER*, 1979, p. 14.

¹⁵ Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2004), p. 86.

¹⁶ Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process*, P. 53.

¹⁷ Omenyo, 'African Church Historiography Reconsidered', p.148.

The upsurge of scholarly debates and interests in African initiatives in the growth of Christianity in Africa, it has been noted already, underscores calls for a paradigmatic shift in the Eurocentric perspective of African church historiography. The paradigmatic shift calls for an African interpretation of the life of the church in Africa that does not gloss over the African agency. Kalu notes that 'The history of Christianity in Africa is not only what missionaries did or did not do, but also what Africans thought about what was going on, and how they responded.'¹⁸

Commenting on Kenneth Scott Latourette's impressive work, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*, Walls corroborates Kalu and further contends that 'since his [Latourette's] time, much fundamental research has been conducted on the primary sources, oral and written, and new perspectives have been taken up in which Africans, Asians and Latin Americans figure as the principal agents of Christian expansion.'¹⁹

It is insightful to note that a call for a paradigmatic shift in the Eurocentric approach to African church historiography – to highlight African initiatives in Christianity in Africa – finds vivid expression within the broader context of the resilience and resurgence of indigenous African religions in a global religious topography. The justification is that African church historiography takes place within the larger academic setting of African historiography.²⁰

In his 'African Humanity Matters: Religious Creativity and Africa's World Encounters', Jacob K. Olupona indicates the primal religious orientation of Africa's primordial era. It was an era when 'various forms of ethnic indigenous religions spread across the African Continent [and provided] cohesive foundations of nations, peoples, and religious worldviews. Based on sacred narratives, these traditions espoused their unique worldviews. They defined cosmology, ritual practices, socio-political framework, and

¹⁸ Kalu, 'Church Presence in Africa', p. 14, see also Omenyo, 'African Church Historiography Reconsidered', p.148.

¹⁹ Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process*, P. 8.

²⁰ For details, see Verstraelen, *History of Christianity in Africa*, pp. 1-6.

ethical standards, as well as social and personal identity.²¹

Despite this primal religious orientation of Africa's primordial era, scholarship in the history of religion indicates that indigenous African religions were never considered a substantive part of world religious tradition because they did not satisfy certain criteria defined by the axial age of 'civilization'.²² Some privileged European scholars, imbued with Eurocentric mindset, denied the agency of African religions. For instance, James George Frazer (1854-1941) and Edward B. Tylor (1832-1927) classified indigenous religious practices of 'natives' not as universally religious or generative of religious cultures, but as forms of 'primitive' religion or magic emanating from the 'lower' of three stages of human progress. These stages were features of European perceptions of human evolution. By this ideological framework, such European scholars labeled indigenous African religions – and Africans themselves as primitive social forms, part of a lower social order.²³

In the light of this blatant disregard for African indigenous religion as a productive and generative practice, African scholars such as Bolaji Idowu, John Mbiti, Kwame Bediako, Kofi Asare Opoku and many others, rallied in opposition and attempted to re-write and re-interpret African traditions. By so doing, they attempted to extract the real identity of African traditions from the dross of Eurocentric historiography, and reposition it with the vitality and status now recognized.²⁴ The outcome of this engagement is rewarding. Olupona asserts that 'African religions command their own cultural ingenuity, integral logic and authoritative force. This corrective scholarship and critical intervention helped to redefine African worldview and spirituality and, as such, showed how African primal religion is

²¹ Jacob K. Olupona, 'African Humanity Matters: Religious Creativity and Africa's World Encounters', in Gordon S.K. Adika, George Ossom- Batsa and Hellen Yitah (eds.), *New Perspectives on African Humanity: Beliefs, Values, and Artistic Expression* (Ghana: Adwinsa Publications (Gh) Ltd., 2014), p. 4.

²² Olupona, 'African Humanity Matters', p. 4.

²³ Olupona, 'African Humanity Matters', p. 4.

²⁴ Olupona, 'African Humanity Matters', p. 4.

pivotal to the individuals and communal existence of the people'.²⁵

IV. DEVELOPMENT OF AFRICAN THEOLOGY

In the light of the resilience and resurgence of African traditional religion, it is not surprising to discuss the unfolding of African theology. African theology, in simple terms, may be described as Africans' understanding of God in the light of their primal religious traditions. In their introduction to Kwame Bediako's *Jesus in Africa: The Christian Gospel in African History and Experience*, Hans Visser and Gillian Bediako shed light on the nature of African theology. They maintain that 'African theology charts its own distinctive course, because African religious experience and heritage, referred to by the generic term 'primal religion', provide the substratum'.²⁶ Even though Africa and Africans have had their own knowledge of God, the post-missionary church, following Western missionary attitudes, did not pay much attention to this initially.²⁷ Bediako succinctly expresses this deficiency as the backdrop against which African theology emerged:

[African theology arose from] the need to respond to the sense of a theological *problematik* in African Christianity produced by the widespread perception that the Western value-setting for the Christian faith in the missionary era had entailed a far-reaching underestimation of the African knowledge and sense of God; the unavoidable element of Africa's continuing primal religions, not as the remnants of an outworn 'primitive mentality', but in terms of their worldview, as living realities in the experience of vast numbers of African Christians in all the churches, and not only in the so-called Independent Churches; and the intellectual struggle for, and 'feeling after' a theological method in a field of enquiry that had hitherto been charted largely by

²⁵ Olupona, 'African Humanity Matters', pp. 4-5.

²⁶ Kwame Bediako, *Jesus in Africa: The Christian Gospel in African History and Experience* (U.K.; Editions Cle and Regnum Africa, 2000), p xi.

²⁷ Bediako, *Jesus in Africa*, p. xi.

Western anthropological scholarship in terminology relating to Africa that would often be ‘unacceptable’ to Africans. Terms like ‘fetish’, ‘animist’, ‘polytheistic’, ‘primitive’, ‘uncivilised’, and ‘lower’ – the Western intellectual categories devised to describe and interpret African religious tradition. Each of these, African theology would reject.²⁸

At the heart of African theology is the African Christian’s understanding and sense of God expressed in their primal religious traditions. It partly emerged from African church historians’ quest to respond to Western missionaries’ blatant disregard for African traditions. By this response, it may be inferred that African theology, to some extent, sought to establish the relevance of African primal religious worldview in the African Christians’ understanding and sense of God. I will pursue this discussion later, when I am examining trends and consensus among African church historians.

In the meantime, Bediako corroborates Walls’ observation on the training, academic orientation and theological focus of the pioneer writers of African theology. He (Bediako) writes as follows:

It is significant how virtually all the pioneer writers of this formative period of African theology, though trained in theology on Western models, in their academic and intellectual careers in Africa became engaged in areas of study and writing for which no Western theological syllabus had prepared them, being forced to study and lecture on African Traditional Religion, ... and each one writing on it. It is remarkable that the practitioners of African theology took on the challenge of re-interpreting African primal religions, approaching the subject not as historians of religion do, nor as anthropologists do, but as Christian theologians, and arriving at some startling conclusions.²⁹

An underlying motivation of the quest for an African Christian theology was an attempt ‘to

draw together the various and disparate sources which make up the total religious experience of Christians in Africa into a coherent and meaningful pattern.³⁰ If this thesis is sustainable, then ‘African theology is more accurately judged by its own primary theological purpose than by any extraneous criteria³¹ such as those defined by Western anthropological scholarship.

Once it is established that African theology’s investigations into African primal religions are qualitatively different from the observations of Western anthropologists, it becomes possible to appreciate how, by its fundamental motivation, African theology may have been charting a new trajectory in theological method. It is not that this trajectory is without parallel in the totality of Christian scholarship, rather this new theological approach had no counterpart in the more recent Western anthropological thought forged within the context of Christendom.³²

4.1 Trends among African Church Historians

Related to developments among African church historians is the style or method they adopt in their church historiography. This style is also referred to as trend. African church historians underscore two main trends as having emerged in African Christian thought in the post-missionary era, from the late 1950s to the late 1980s. One of them was the theological interpretation of the struggle for the social and political transformation of the conditions of inequality, injustice and oppression in South Africa. This gave birth to Black Theology, a theology of liberation in the African setting and in response to the particular circumstances of southern Africa. The other trend was the theological enquiry into the indigenous cultures of African peoples, with special emphasis on their pre-Christian (and also pre-Islamic) religious traditions.³³ This trend, according to Bediako:

²⁸ Bediako, *Jesus in Africa*, p. 52. (Emphasis original)

²⁹ Bediako, *Jesus in Africa*, p.52. See also Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, p. 13.

³⁰ Edward Fashole-Luke, ‘The Quest for an African Christian Theology’, in *The Ecumenical Review*, vol.27, no. 3, (1975), pp. 259-269. See also Bediako, *Jesus in Africa*, p. 53.

³¹ Bediako, *Jesus in Africa*, p.53.

³² Bediako, *Jesus in Africa*, p.53.

³³ Bediako, *Jesus in Africa*, p.49.

Was more closely associated with the rest of tropical Africa, where political independence took away a direct experience of the socio-political pressures that produced Black theology in South Africa. Here, the broad aim was to achieve integration between the African pre-Christian religious experience and African Christian commitment in ways that would ensure the integrity of African Christian identity and selfhood.³⁴

In simple terms, liberation and integration were the main trends among African Church historians in the post-missionary era. In this work, I focus on integration, even though the two trends are not mutually exclusive, but ‘a series of concentric circles of which [liberation] is the inner and smaller circle.’³⁵

The crux of integration as a category among African church historians is the theological relevance of African religious past or African primal religious traditions in the thought of African Christians. African church historians such as Kalu, Bediako, Walls and Lamin Sanneh underscore the continuity of African primal religion in African Christianity. For instance, Kalu sees the continuity of African primal religion in African Christianity as one of the key concerns of modern African church historiography.³⁶ In his opinion:

The importance of doing church history which starts with African primal religion and culture is that both the church and her enemies, namely, the politicians and other religious forms, derive their character and source their idiom from the interior of African Worldview. For instance, the dominant political culture is often a deliberate attempt to weave the modern state into traditional ethics of power; however, this is often done in a manner to vitiate the salient aspects of the traditional... Other religious forms, in their symbols and

³⁴ Bediako, *Jesus in Africa*, p.49.

³⁵ Desmond Tutu, ‘Black Theology and African Theology – Soulmates or Antagonists?’ in John Parratt (ed.), *A Reader in African Christian Theology*, (London: SPCK), P. 54. See also Bediako, *Jesus in Africa*, p.49.

³⁶ Kalu, ‘Shape, Flow and Identity’, p. 1.

invented histories, goals and demands on the state, radicate themselves in primal culture.³⁷

Bediako endorses the continuity of African primal religion in African Christianity by interrogating the criticisms leveled against African theology. He opines that:

The failure in some criticisms of African theology may be traced to a misconception about what the tasks of these African writers ought to be. When John Mbiti’s *Concepts of God in Africa* is objected to for its ‘primary theological purpose’, as ‘attempting to lay the basis for a distinctively African theology by blending the African past with the Judeo-Christian tradition’(Ray, 1976:15); or when his *The Prayers of African Religion* is judged to be ‘unsatisfactory’ because it tends to blur the distinctiveness of African spirituality by seeking a *Praeparatio evangelica* rather than the integrity of the cult group’ (McKenzie, 1975-76:220-21), such criticisms obscure the contributions that these African theologians could be making towards the understanding of what is, after all, their own religious heritage; which is, indeed, a proper task of theology.³⁸

It can be inferred from the above interrogation that, for Bediako, it is a mark of theological dexterity on the part of African theologians to be able to harness their primal religious resources in their Christian endeavours. Therefore, any criticism leveled against them for integrating their indigenous religious traditions into Christianity would be misplaced. That is why he emphasizes that:

The primal religions of the [African] continent have thus been a significant factor in the immense Christian presence in Africa. While this cannot be taken to mean that there has not been any ‘paradigm-shift’ in African religious consciousness, it does confirm that the African apprehension of the Christian faith has substantial roots in the continent’s primal traditions at the specific level of religious experience. At the least we can say that if it did

³⁷ Kalu, ‘Shape, Flow and Identity’, pp. 1-2.

³⁸ Bediako, *Jesus in Africa*, p. 55.

not have the primal religions as its sub-stratum, the story of Christianity in Africa at the close of the present century would be very different.³⁹

The position of Walls on the debate of the continuity of African primal religion in African Christianity helps to understand why Bediako may be justified for interrogating the critics of African theology. In his (Wall's) opinion, African primal religions and other faiths are inextricably intertwined. He writes: 'For one thing, primal religions underlie all the other faiths, and often exist in symbiosis with them, continuing (sometimes more, sometimes less transformed) to have an active life within and around cultures and communities influenced by those faiths.'⁴⁰

From the foregone discussion, it is obvious that the fortunes of Christianity in Africa cannot be well understood if the impact of the continent's primal religious background is ignored.⁴¹ Lamin Sanneh demonstrates in connection with West Africa that the places showing the most marked accession to the Christian religion are also the areas of the highest concentration of the old traditional religions.⁴²

Thus far, the African religious past has been seen to be a prime theological issue.⁴³ As a result of this, the African theologian should explore how African Christianity is essentially rooted in primal religiosity.⁴⁴

4.2 Consensus among African Church Historians

The issue of how African Christianity is essentially rooted in primal religious tradition raises a theological question of identity. We are pursuing this segment of the discussion under the sub-topic 'consensus among African church historians'

³⁹ Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Ghana: Regnum Africa, 2014), p. 192.

⁴⁰ Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, p. 119.

⁴¹ Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, p. 192

⁴² Lamin Sanneh, *West African Christianity – The Religious Impact* (London: C. Hurst, 1983), pp. 227-241. See also Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, p. 192.

⁴³ Bediako, *Jesus in Africa*, p. 49.

⁴⁴ Kalu, 'Shape, Flow and Identity', p. 2.

because, like the issue of continuity of African primal religiosity in African Christianity, the question of the exact identity of the African Christian engages the theological attention of almost all African church historians. Walls identifies the centrality of the issue of identity among African church historians and underscores that 'All [the African Christian theologians] are wrestling with a theological question, the prime one on the African Christian's intellectual agenda: who am I? What is my relation as an African Christian to Africa's past'⁴⁵ Commenting on the literature of African theology, Andrew F. Walls observes the heart of the theological investigation of the religious past of the African Christian:

No question is more clamant than the African identity crisis. It is not simply an intellectual quest. The massive shift in the centre of gravity of the Christian world which has taken place cannot be separated from the cultural impact of the West in imperial days. Now the Empires are dead and the Western value-setting for the Christian faith largely rejected. Where does this leave the African Christian? Who is he? What is his past? A past is vital for all of us – without it, like the amnesiac man, we cannot know who we are. The prime African theological quest at present is this: what is the past of the African Christian? What is the relationship between Africa's old religions and her new one?⁴⁶

Bediako attempts to respond to the questions raised by Walls. Writing on 'African theology and the shaping of a method – theology as the hermeneutic of identity', he (Bediako) establishes that: 'To the extent that African theology's effort at rehabilitating Africa's cultural heritage and religious consciousness has been pursued as self-consciously *Christian* and *theological*, it may be said to have been an endeavour at demonstrating the true character of African *Christian* identity.'⁴⁷ He further explains that:

⁴⁵ Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, p. 13.

⁴⁶ Andrew F. Walls, 'Africa and Christian Identity', in *Mission Focus*, vol. 6, no. 7, (1978), pp. 11-13. See also Bediako, *Jesus in Africa*, p. 51.

⁴⁷ Bediako, *Jesus in Africa*, p. 51.

From the standpoint of the context of the writers themselves, the primal religions of Africa belong to the African religious past. Yet this is not so much a chronological past as an ontological past. The theological importance of such an ontological past consists in the fact that it belongs together with the profession of the Christian faith in giving account of the same entity, namely, the history of the religious consciousness of the African Christian. In this sense, the theological concern with the African pre-Christian religious heritage becomes an effort to clarify the nature and meaning of African Christian identity and a quest for ... integrity in conversion, a unity of self in which one's past is genuinely integrated into present commitment so that the crisis of repentance and faith that makes us Christian truly integrates what we have been in what we become.⁴⁸

The implication of Bediako's explanation, he points out, is contained in Edward W. Fashole-Luke's idea that 'the quest for African Christian theologies... amounts to attempting to make clear the fact that conversion to Christianity must be coupled with cultural continuity'.⁴⁹ If the African Christian's identity is defined and informed by a creative and conscious integration of their primal religiosity into their Christian experience, then the African Christian is a product of multiple religio-cultural encounters. Any attempt to divorce the African Christian off their pre- Christian religious tradition would therefore be tantamount to plunging them into a quagmire of identity crisis. Bediako's assertion on this discussion is revealing:

From the perspective of African Christian identity, the missionary presumption of European value-setting for the Christian faith, that led to the exclusion of any 'preparation for Christianity' in African primal religions, could only produce the *problematic* John Mbiti described when he wrote of the post-missionary church in Africa as a 'Church without theology and without theological

⁴⁸ Bediako, *Jesus in Africa*, p. 51.

⁴⁹ Fashole-Luke, 'The Quest for an African Christian Theology', p. 267. See also Bediako, *Jesus in Africa*, p. 51.

consciousness'....This was the result of not allowing for the existence of a pre-Christian memory in African Christian consciousness. For theological consciousness presupposes religious tradition, and tradition requires memory, and memory is integral to identity: without memory, we have no past, and if we have no past, we lose our identity.⁵⁰

Thus, 'the nature of traditional religion of Africa and its relationship of continuity rather than discontinuity with African belief' and identity construction is an enduring theme among African church historians.

Central to identity construction of the African Christian, that is, what it means to be 'African and Christian'⁵¹ is language which is a potent tool for the expression of culture.⁵² Lamin Sanneh explores how the Western missionaries appropriated the language and culture of the African Christians in translating the gospel to the people, thereby facilitating the spread of the gospel and, indirectly, contributing to the shaping of African Christians' identity as Africans and instruments of the propagation of the gospel. He indicates that: '[Western] missionary adoption of the vernacular... was tantamount to adopting indigenous cultural criteria for the message, a piece of radical indigenization far greater than the standard portrayal of mission as Western cultural imperialism'.⁵³ Commenting on Sanneh's monumental work, Kalu maintains that:

'Lamin Sanneh's seminal contribution explored the irony that the missionaries were forced by the logic or exigencies of the mission field to realize the debilitating effect of iconoclasm and turn to translating the message. Translation de-stigmatized indigenous languages and cultures as proper vehicles for conveying the gospel, opened the innards of cultures, preserved them from

⁵⁰ Bediako, *Jesus in Africa*, p. 51.

⁵¹ Bediako, *Jesus in Africa*, p. 53. Emphasis original.

⁵² Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1989), p. 3.

⁵³ Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, p. 3.

extinction and became an instrument for uplifting many peoples.⁵⁴

The above consensus among African church historians does not mean that certain disagreements do not prevail among them.

4.3 Disagreements among African Church Historians

Discussion on the continuity of the African's primal religiosity in Christianity produced widespread disagreements among African church historians. At the extreme end of the spectrum were those who maintained radical continuity of Africans' primal religious tradition in Christianity. At the other extreme end were those who contended for radical discontinuity. In the middle of the continuum were those who operated between the two radical positions. The debates among the scholars in these divergent positions are summarized. The leader of the argument for a radical continuity, according to Bediako, was Bolaji Idowu. Couching his argument on the continuity and unity of God, Idowu further made an insistent call for 'a radical indigenisation of the church, on the grounds that:

The church in Africa, as a result of its peculiar historical connection with Western cultural dominance, was failing to develop its own theology, churchmanship, liturgy, or even discipline. In order to remedy this 'predicament' of dependence' (Idowu, 1968) the African church needs to build its bridges to the 'revelation' given to Africans in their pre-Christian and pre-missionary religious traditions of the past (Idowu, 1965:26). Ostensibly intended to connect the 'old' and the 'new' in African religious experience, the fundamental postulate of the 'foreignness of Christianity' which underlies this position, tended towards a minimalist reading of the newness of Christianity in Africa at the specific level of religious apprehension. African Christian experience emerged as not much more than a refinement of the experience of the 'old' religion (Idowu, 1962: 202; 1973: 209) The vindication and the

⁵⁴ Kalu, 'Shape, Flow and Identity', p. 4.

affirmation of African selfhood, which, at the start, had been conceived as the task of the church, later came to be entrusted to the revitalisation of the 'old' religions, with their God-given heritage of indigenous spiritual and cultural treasures (Idowu: 1968; 1969; 1977).⁵⁵

This argument was maintained by other African scholars such as Gabriel Setiloane, Samuel Kibicho and Christian Gaba.

At the other end of the continuum was the radical discontinuity strongly advocated by Byang Kato, representing the thought of those Christian churches and groups linked with the Association of Evangelicals of Africa, who trace their spiritual heritage to the missionary work of western faith missions in Africa. As a radical Biblicalist, Kato emphasized the distinctiveness of the experience of the Christian gospel to such an extent that he vehemently objected to the positive evaluation of any pre-Christian religious tradition as a distraction from the necessary 'emphasis on Bible truth'.⁵⁶

Kato must be commended for insisting on the centrality of the Bible for theological exploits in Africa. 'Yet' according to Bediako, 'his outright rejection of the understanding of theology as a synthesis of 'old' and 'new' in a quest for a unified framework for dealing with culturally-rooted questions, meant that Kato's perspective could not provide a sufficient foundation for the tradition of creative theological engagement that the African context seemed to be requiring'.⁵⁷

In the middle position of the continuum were those African theologians who acted between the two extreme positions. In addition to the widespread agreement on the prevalence of an African pre-Christian religious heritage to be taken seriously, they maintained that there has been also the realization that it is important to recognize the integrity of African Christian experience as a religious reality in its own right, and that Christianity as a religious faith is not

⁵⁵ Bediako, *Jesus in Africa*, p. 54.

⁵⁶ Bediako, *Jesus in Africa*, p. 55.

⁵⁷ Bediako, *Jesus in Africa*, p. 55.

inherently novel to Africa or Africans.⁵⁸ A theological underpinning of this school of thought was that 'The eternal gospel has already found a local home within the African response to it, showing that Christ has become the integrating reality and power linking 'old' and 'new' in the African experience.'⁵⁹

Since African theology sought to deal with culturally-rooted issues, among others, this perspective, comparatively, was deemed hopeful to Africans because it emphasized the understanding of theology as a creative synthesis of 'old' and 'new' in a quest for a unified framework for dealing with Africans' culturally-rooted questions. Moreover, it underscored the idea that 'the Christian faith is capable of 'translation' into African terms without injury to its essential content.'⁶⁰ African theologians who belonged to this school of thought included Harry Sawyerr, John Mbiti and Kwesi Dickson.

V. CONCLUSION

The scope of African church historiography is broad and indeed, demanding. It entails many essential components which warrant thoughtful and scholarly attention of the African church historian. In this work, we have attempted to classify and discuss developments, trends, consensus and disagreements among African church historians. Two of the developments which have engaged our reflection are the emergence of academic interest in African initiatives in Christianity in Africa and development of African theology. Moreover, we have tried to show that liberation and integration were trends among African Church historians in the post-missionary era. This work has essentially focused on integration. Discussion of 'consensus among African church historians' has taken cognizance of the issue of identity of the African Christian because, like the issue of continuity of African primal religiosity in African Christianity, the question of the precise identity of the African Christian engages the theological enterprise of almost all African church historians.

⁵⁸ Bediako, *Jesus in Africa*, p. 55

⁵⁹ Bediako, *Jesus in Africa*, p. 55

⁶⁰ Bediako, *Jesus in Africa*, p. 55

Widespread disagreements among African church theologians have fundamentally centered on the discourse on the continuity of Africans' primal religiosity in Christianity. At the extreme end of the spectrum were those who maintained radical continuity of Africans' primal religious tradition in Christianity. At the other extreme end were those who contended for radical discontinuity. In the middle of the continuum were those who operated between the two radical positions. In the light of African theology's focus on dealing with culturally-rooted issues, among others, the perspective of those African theologians in the middle of the spectrum, comparatively, was deemed hopeful to Africans because of its emphasis on the understanding of theology as a productive blend of 'old' and 'new' in a quest for a unified framework for dealing with Africans' existential challenges. Furthermore, it underscored the notion of translatability of the Christian faith into African terms without any damage to its essential content.

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