

CONTEMPORARY NEW TESTAMENT SCHOLARSHIP: OUTLINING ITS RELEVANCE FOR AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY

R. F. COLLINS & C. U. MANUS

The recent discussions of N. Onwu and S. O. Abogunrin have certainly distinguished them as pace-makers on the intriguing quest for the state of research in the field of New Testament studies in Africa today. But further exploration on the merits of contemporary New Testament scholarship and especially within the relatively narrow parameters of its relevancy for African Christianity has not been treated by African New Testament scholars whose works we have read on the subject. While we do not however promise to offer exhaustive treatment of a subject as vast as the African continent itself, we recognize that a study of the topic with less than the desired adequacy does injustice to the efforts of a vast number of Africans involved in seeking after the truth in the New Testament and its pertinence to the African situation. Nonetheless, we have, given our positions as those rooted in Euro-American and the African cultural ambience, resolved to pursue the subject further afield and as objectively as possible. And to mark the timely arrival of *Bodija Journal*, in the African theological arena, we wish to present in this maiden issue what may well prove to be no more than a broadened outline of the topic under consideration. By virtue of our professions as New Testament scholars, our exposition will only be devoted to New Testament literature. The paper is structured in a four-part form: the history of New Testament scholarship before the period of the Enlightenment (I), New Testament scholarship today (II), New Testament scholarship at the cross-roads (III) and Conclusions and the values of such scholarship for African Christianity (IV).

I

New Testament Scholarship before the *Aufklärung*

In view of our intention to propose an outline, (this does not however mean that the essay must be sketchy), we will, in this section, provide a panoramic view of the history of New Testament scholarship in four very broad tableaux. (a) The era of the Church Fathers constitutes indeed the first period of biblical scholarship. Patristic exegesis was dominated by two great African luminaries: Origen of Alexandria in Egypt (ca. 185—254) then in the Eastern side of the Empire and Augustine of Hippo (354—430) born at Tagaste in Numidia in present-day Algeria (North Africa) then in the West. Their method of interpreting biblical texts was simply allegorical. What exactly is allegory? According to *Collins English Dictionary*, allegory is "a poem, play, picture, etc in which the apparent meaning of the characters and events are used to

symbolize a deeper moral or spiritual meaning. These early African exegetes used this genre to identify a referent for each reality of the biblical text in some aspect of the church's life. An illuminating example is Augustine's exposition of the Parable of the Good Samaritan in Lk. 10: 30—35. According to Augustine, the wounded traveller is identified as Adam, the sinful man who has been accosted by Satan and his angels. The priest and the Levite represent the insufficiency of the Old dispensation while the Good Samaritan is Christ. The inn is the Church and the inn-keeper Paul. The oil and wine respectively represent hope and the exhortation to work with fervent spirit, although in other patristic exegesis, oil and wine are deemed to represent the sacraments of baptism and eucharist⁷.

Without submitting this analysis to any criticism, one will easily recognize the deductive nature of such an interpretation. In the typical patristic exegesis, the dominant paradigm is a platonic or neo-platonic than African view of reality. According to that *weltanschauung* what is truly real belongs to the world of ideas while earthly and anthropological realities are understood not only to be ephemeral but as mere shadows of the really real. Accordingly, the Fathers of the Church, most of them Africans (Origen, Tertullian, a layman; Clement and Cyprian) distinguished the merely physical; namely the literal interpretation of the scriptures from the psychic spiritual senses of the text⁸. What we discover is that they ultimately studied scripture texts from the vantage point of theological questions, posed within the context of a neo-platonic worldview. Local idioms and *finis et termini* from the African environment were considered probably impious and not assimilable into their exegesis. Such were regarded as pollutants to Christian thought.

(b) In the mediaeval period, theological questions still tended to dominate much of the interpretation of the biblical texts. Heir to the legacy of the Fathers, the schoolmen continued to use the scriptures as means for understanding the church and the life of the believers who comprise it. According to the scholastics, it was possible to distinguish a four-fold sense of the scriptures: the literal, the allegorical, the tropological and the anagogical. Allowed to amplify these we would state the literal sense, for them, meant the historical sense, not of course, according to the criteria of modern historiography, but according to the natural sense of the story, whose characters might be cited for the sake of edification of the faith of believers. The allegorical sense was the doctrinal sense, the interpretation of the scriptures in defense of the church's doctrines. The tropologic sense consisted of a reflection on the scriptures in order that the texts might contribute to the moral and ascetical life of believers. The analogical was, in fact, twofold since the scriptures could be related either to the experience of God in prayer and the mystical life or could be related to the eschatological experience of God. These paradigms suggest that the main business of mediaeval

New Testament theologians was to interpret the scriptures in the service of the Church and that they concerned themselves more with questions that were essentially theological in nature. Though, there was no record of a mediaeval African theologian at that point in time but the influence of the great men of our continent continued to be strongly felt.

(c) The period of the Renaissance, indeed a re-birth in intellectual and artistic cultures, ushered in, among Western Europeans, a fascination for the knowledge of the classical culture of ancient Greece and Rome. The period could be characterized as that of naive nostalgia for the past. The *Zeitgeist* (spirit of the age) with its obsession for the past undoubtedly had its influence on the way in which the scriptures which attracted a lot of admirers were interpreted. The principal manifestation, and one which has made a lasting contribution to biblical scholarship was the fascination with the biblical text itself; namely the text as written and handed down in the ancient Hebrew and Greek languages. This fascination gave impetus to the early development of the science of textual criticism, among whose early proponents were Richard Simon, the sixteenth century French Oratorian and the humanist, Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466—1536)⁹. Concern with the text itself was also manifest in the efforts and works of the great Reformers, chief amongst them, Martin Luther (1483—1546) and John Calvin (1509—1564). These men tried to establish what they called the "plain sense" of the scriptures, that is, the meaning of the biblical text in themselves, devoid of any ecclesiastical bias or theological vantage point¹⁰. Certainly, it was their polemical stance against the church authorities that caused them to produce such independent views concerning the Holy Writ.

(d) The well-known period of *Die Aufklärung* (Enlightenment) re-presents yet another watershed in the history of biblical interpretation. The impact and consequences of ideas during this period in human history were tremendously felt in circles where biblical studies were cultivated. The Enlightenment was characterized by rationalism, skepticism and the taste for empiricism. It sought a rational, virtually scientific explanation of reality. In principle, its methodology was skeptical. The desired results of its empirical investigation were data: the facts of the matter at hand. In the New Testament scholarship, the nineteenth century researchers concentrated their efforts on *Das Leben Jesu Forschung* and sought to explain that the quest for the Historical Jesus whose tale was chronicled by Albert Schweitzer at the beginning of this century, was *Die Hauptsache* in New Testament studies¹¹. Alongside the historical investigation was the emergence of the literary analysis of the biblical texts. It became important for researchers to have a good grasp of the literary relationships among the various biblical texts because the earlier traditions were presumed to be the best source material upon which to base historical investigations. In short, the Enlightenment gave rise to the historical method of biblical scholarship whose questions were essentially of an historical nature.

New Testament Scholarship Today

The application of two characteristic methodologies has dominated New Testament scholarship during this century. The first of these methods is that of Form Criticism and the History of Tradition. Form Criticism draws attention to the fact that an identification of the nature of a text is of crucial value to its understanding. Applied to the scriptural text, it reminds us that the bible is not a homogeneous composition. A letter is not a gospel, nor is it an apocalyptic work. The letter, gospel and apocalypse must be recognized as different from the popular genre of history typical of Luke's Acts of the Apostles. Each literary form has moreover, its own flavour and can appeal to different readership. It is a well-known axiom in literary studies that narrative functions by implicitly appealing to the reader to enter into the story itself. Those of us who have read Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* or 'Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel* and have got so involved in the stories, have had to shed tears because of some uncanny episodes in the narratives or had been filled with such a sense of patriotism or had become almost despondent with the superficial concept of progress represented in the school teacher, Lakunle, and thus violently angry with the fate of our Fatherland, Nigeria. Mark's gospel has discipleship as one of its major themes. It subtly evokes in the reader the desire to become a disciple, precisely because it is composed in narrative form. As an *exemplum classicum* of the first Christian narrative art, Mark's gospel invites the reader to enter into the story of Jesus, that is, to become a disciple¹². If Form criticism draws our attention to the possibility of the existence of diverse literary forms utilized by biblical authors, it reminds us that each literary form reflects an expression of a given *Sitz-im-Leben* (setting in life) which in turn, projects a specific cultural situation. Most probably such literary forms in their pre literary stage circulated as traditions we know in our material culture as legends and folklore, *aroso*, as for example, known in Ekitiland of the Yoruba of Nigeria. *Aroso* are of two kinds: etiological and aesthetic. While etiological tales among these Yoruba people explain the *why* and *how* of familiar natural phenomena such as physical characteristics of men and animals; why heaven is far removed from earth, why babies do not talk at birth; aesthetic tales illustrate important morals and build up conventional wisdom¹³. This brief survey on the forms of our oral literature is not without paradigmatic significance for the issue of contextualisation of the gospel message, a task which should be recognized as one of great importance for the young churches in Africa.

The history of traditions also reminds us of the importance of oral traditions in the preservation and shaping of the gospel message. Prior to having been set down in writing, the gospel message had been shaped

in the give—and —take pattern of a living community. Its oral tradition diversified according to the various activities in which the members of the community were involved, gave form to the gospels message as we currently know it. In a similar fashion, the history of traditions reminds us that much of what one reads in Chinua Achebe's third novel, *Arrow of God*, is nothing but the 'written' records of the traditions and legends of an imaginary but representative Igbo community, Umuaro and the effects of colonialism on the people¹⁴. With this local example, we agree that the history of traditions reminds us of the importance of community in shaping and transmitting the message at the oral stage and *vice versa* the traditions themselves forming and shaping the community.

Thus, we can argue that the place of oral traditions in the African culture is extremely important¹⁵. African traditions give Africans a sense of identity and of contact with their African roots. The traditions provide Africans the awareness of belonging to a people. The richness of African oral traditions should confer on African Biblical scholars some particularly insightful glimpses into the way the scriptures were formed. Awareness of those traditions and a willingness to allow them to interact with Africanity is the reality out of which an African form of christian experience can be forged.

In spite of these positive assessments, we must not fail to level some criticisms where necessary. If there was one glaring weakness in the use of form critical method and the history of traditions, it was that practitioners of the method virtually reduced the role of the biblical authors to that of anonymous collectors of biblical traditions. Contemporary critical scholarship has certainly proven that we are unaware of the identity, especially the name of the author of most of the biblical books, but that does not mean that such authors did not bring to their work their own social and theological insights as well as the advantages (or lack thereof) of their personal literary creativity. It is the recently devised Redaction Critical method which focuses upon the personal contribution of each of the biblical authors to the literary formulation of the message as the moon-shine story-tellers in African folkloristic tales reformulate traditional ingredients they had heard/received from elders and sages in the African community. Redaction criticism is double-faceted in its approach, namely emendation criticism and composition criticism. Emendation criticism focuses on the editorial modifications which an author had inserted into or imposed upon his source material. These modifications, certainly, result from the author's personal insights and are, to our mind, a way of responding to the needs of the community for which he wrote his gospel, at least, as far as he perceived the issues. For a concrete example, let us take the case of the first of the Beatitudes in Matt. 5:3

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven
parallel Lk. 6:20b

Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God

A careful look at the two sayings reveals three major differences: (a) while Luke has employed the second person plural, Matthew has the third person. (b) While Luke has the expression, 'kingdom of God'; Matthew has his customary 'kingdom of heaven'¹⁶. (c) While Luke has a simple 'poor' *hoiptchoi*, Matthew writes 'poor in spirit' *hoito choito pneumati*. What do we make of these differences? We would suggest that the Lukan version of this *macharism* (beatitude) is more faithful to the Q—source which both Matthew and Luke are believed to have used. It stands to reason therefore to suppose that it is Matthew who is responsible for the modifications in the formulation of the traditional beatitude. But why is it that Matthew writes of the 'poor in spirit'? Why does he not pronounce 'blessed' on those who are materially impoverished? He did not do that probably because the situation of his church was such that some of its members were fairly affluent. As an indication that this was, in fact, the case in the Matthean church, we have only to recollect that of all the Synoptics, Matthew alone includes the injunction to 'take no gold, nor silver, nor copper in your belts' within Jesus' missionary charge to his disciples¹⁷. Since it does not make any sense to exhort a truly impoverished person to leave behind his silver and gold, it is clear that some members of Matthew's community were people of relative means and decent *Ngi-ogaranya*—successful men in good standing in their own society.

On a far larger scale, emendation criticism draws attention to the whole corpus of editorial modifications which Matthew has introduced into his version of the written gospel. Within the context of the Two Source Theory (2DH), namely that Matthew has made use of the gospel of Mark and the Q—source, why has Matthew seen the need to write a new gospel when he had Mark at hand? Was it not because the then extant gospel of Mark was adjudged inadequate for the needs of Matthew's church? Was it not because the same author saw the need to relate the 'gospel message' to the Palestinian—Syrian context in which his church flourished? Does not the fact that Matthew was inspired to write a new gospel because of the different situation of his community, speak of the need to respond to African exegetes' call for contextualisation and inculturation, that is, the adaptability of the gospel message so that it can speak to new and different social and cultural settings? Inculturation in no way implies the formation of a 'fifth gospel'¹⁸. We agree that a fifth gospel will not enjoy canonical status. For us, while the written scriptures continue to be normative the gospel message must be adapted if it is to be alive and relevant to Africans whose worldviews, cosmologies and thought—forms are different from traditional Euro-centric structures in which Christianity had been presented. It appears to us that Pope Paul VI's 1969 injunction:

The expression of the evangelical message that is the language and mode of manifesting this one faith may be manifold. Hence it may be original, suited to the tongue, the style, the character, the genius, and the culture, of the one who professes this one faith. From this point of view, a certain pluralism is not only legitimate but desirable. An adaptation of the Christian life in the fields of pastoral, ritual, didactic and spiritual activity is not only possible, it is even favoured by the Church. . . . And in this sense you may, and you must, have an African Christianity¹⁹ that can be understood in this light.

Composition criticism is another angle of Redaction criticism worth our attention. This approach focuses upon the manner in which a biblical author has composed his text. Using Mark, this time, as a test case, composition criticism directs attention to the fact that Mark has created the *gospel genre*²⁰ and Paul was presumably, the first Christian author to employ the form of the *personal letter* to express his gospel message. Before Paul's arrival to Christianity, the gospel had been proclaimed by word of mouth. Christian converts were essentially 'ocular' people, only seeing, hearing and absorbing the preacher's words as 'good news'. It was Paul's ingenuity and the situation occasioned by his itinerant evangelization from missionary centre to missionary centre in the vast Empire that moved him to use an adapted form of the *personal letter* as the first written expression of the gospel message. His culture situation in an apparent literate world allowed him to adopt that form as a new mode of proclaiming the gospel. Has this inventiveness no bearing on the future work of African exegetes, especially in the new era of evangelization declared by the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria²¹. In somewhat similar fashion, it was due to Mark's own religious genius that he created the written gospel out of the traditional kerygmatic proclamation of the gospel about Jesus. In so doing, Mark put down such traditions within a *meaningful* theological package. Thus, the written *gospel* became certainly a Markan creation even though one might not completely exclude the possibility of the influence of the Hellenistic literary tradition such as the *Yita Biographica*²².

We also want to note here that composition criticism directs attention to the important fact that a new situation of the church calls for the development of a new way of preaching the gospel—one that must be relevant and effective to the local audience. In the situation of African Christians fast marching towards the year 2000, we might, in the face of socio-political upheavals of our times and the trauma caused by the economic depression sweeping through the continent, well ask: what is the mode and strategies of evangelization which will make the proclamation of the good news both relevant and effective to people? Are such slogans as "Explosion '87"; "Escape '88"; "Revival '89" bandied about by several evangelicals and Scripture Unionists offering Africa

the needed solutions? In sum, does Mark's initiative not represent a major challenge for the church in modern Africa?

III

New Testament Scholarship at the Crossroads

In this section, we will like to point out the fact that the historical critical method has come under fire from many quarters and, therefore, subjected to serious scrutiny by critical eyes during the past decade, has meant much for its practitioners. The most virulent attackers are the proponents of biblical fundamentalism which is by no means fundamental at all.²³ Some other authors query whether the historical question is the question which ought to be addressed to the biblical texts almost to the exclusion of all others. Are there no other questions which might be posed to the biblical literature with equal legitimacy? One reason why some critics are dissatisfied with the historical critical method comes from the fact that the results of the historical critical method seem to tell us only about the past of a text, but leave the reader in the dark as to the relevance of the biblical text for his contemporary situation.²⁴

The re-action to the dominance of the historical critical method in New Testament interpretation has led to the emergence of, at least, seven different 'readings' of biblical texts; namely structural analysis, sociological reading, psychoanalytic reading, the evolutionist reading, the feminist reading, rhetorical criticism and the canonical criticism. In any case, it is our view that these readings ought not to replace the historical reading as such; but rather each of them can serve as a useful complement to the historical reading of biblical texts; the type most well trained African biblical scholars are doing²⁵. We wish, at this juncture, to devote attention to two of these modes of reading the New Testament texts, viz. the sociological and the feminist. We elect the first for certain obvious reasons. The adoption of the academic discipline of sociology to interpret the literature of the New Testament, though a hagiography, uncovers through social scientific models social patterns, structures, attitudes, dynamic forces as well as the social *realia* operative in the early church which can inform our contemporary praxis, especially the African christian churches²⁶. And because of the interest of the emerging group of African women theologians, we have decided to discuss the feminist reading of scripture²⁷.

(i) A sociological reading of the New Testament text is one in which the reader approaches the text with social, political, economic and religious questions. The adoption of models worked out with the aid of the science of sociology in reading New Testament texts covers, in fact,

a wide gamut of approaches. Typical of this method is the work of Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians The Social World of the Apostle Paul*²⁸, who through sociological analysis seeks to discover the social factors which shaped early Christianity as reflected in the Pauline letters. Adopting the approach of "moderate functionalism" "Meek's major concern is to focus on typical patterns rather than on specific situations, behaviours and relationships in the Pauline churches"²⁹. The Marxist analysis is, of course, not without sociological interest. Along with others Fernando Belo's study,³⁰ *A Materialist Reading of the Gospel of Mark* seeks to discover what Marks' gospel has to say on the issue of class, struggle is a classic representative of the new approach. What these two works share in common is that the questions they raise belong to the sociological language register. Two examples may suffice to clarify one or another perspective of a sociological reading of the biblical texts. One outstanding case is the phenomenon of the house church about which much is being written at the present time³¹. How did the fact that early Christianity which was largely organized on the basis of the household affect early church structure? When, for example, we read Paul's letter *te ekklesia Thessalonikeon en Theo patri* (to the Church of the Thessalonians in God the Father, RSV), should we not have in mind a group of about twenty to thirty people gathered in a living room probably in Jason's house? What does that imply for the celebration of the eucharist? Who presided? Was there not really a single loaf of bread that was shared? Another instance may be given, especially as regards the social situation of the Galileans. In what regard were the Galileans held by the leaders and inhabitants of Jerusalem? Did the question: "Are not all those who are speaking Galileans (Galilaeoi)? Acts 2:7b not point to their region as the hotbed of revolutionary activities³². How did this affect the Jesus movement? Did it not bear upon the estimation of Jesus himself by the Jerusalem authorities? Even though the questions can be multiplied, they are all set within the lens of sociological analysis³³.

(ii) In the North American theological scene the feminist reading of the biblical text is considerably widespread. Perhaps, the Women's Movement provides the seed-bed for the advancement of such steps in contemporary American feminist theology. The feminist hermeneutic is one which reads biblical texts in the light of the oppressive structures of patriarchal society. The feminist reading of the New Testament texts informs us that the biblical texts are culturally conditioned and pastorally engaged. The cultural condition within which they were composed was, like the African cultural setting, dominated by patriarchy. The pastoral setting from which the texts arose was one, also like that of Africans, in which the older males (Ndi-okenye) transmitted the story of their people from generation to generation or as in the early church the male apostles were virtually canonized by subsequent generations of Christians.

Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza's book, *In Memory of Her*,³⁴ is a classic manifesto of feminist hermeneutics. Nevertheless, some male authors have gone ahead in the attack on male chauvinistic interpretation of New Testament texts³⁵. Beyond drawing attention to the sexism of much of biblical language especially those rendered into the English language, the feminist hermeneutics prompts hitherto unasked questions. What for example, was the real role of the women who were with Jesus³⁶. What is to be said about the testimony of the women at the tomb?³⁷ What was the role of Lydia, Evodia and Syntyche in the church of Philippi? What role did the mother play in the household church? What about the young girls and teenagers? These are but a few of the issues which the method can help practitioners resolve, once the patriarchal bias has been firmly pushed aside.

IV

Conclusions

These various new fashions of readings mentioned in this article and the two treated here because of their pertinency to the African context are, for us, so many spokes which emerge as radii from a biblical text whose principal axis of interpretation has been that of the historical critical method. The readings have emerged from a Western civilization; namely that of Europe and North America. In fact, they reflect a reaction to the dominance of the historical critical method. Surely, they amply indicate that biblical scholarship stands at the cross-roads, even within the context of the so-called Western civilization. Yet the persistence and existence of different cultures into which Christianity has permeated and now living in (the guest-host model) reminds us of the arrival of the New Testament scholarship at other cross-roads. Having discovered this vantage point, we may and should speak of New Testament scholarship at the cross-roads of Southern and Eastern cultures. On this important note, we will now proceed to offer five summary guidelines:

(i) The plethora of methods used in contemporary New Testament scholarship, past and present, draw out attention to the importance, of finding a paradigm of biblical interpretation which is relevant for the present African situation. Each moment in human history has had its culturally conditioned questions as it has wrestled with the meaning of the biblical text. Things are not different at this moment in the history of African peoples as well as in the situation of their culture. Thus, for African Christianity, a pertinent paradigm of biblical interpretation must be found, embraced and cultivated. In-culturation is not an exegetical method but the processing and ingestion of the food of exegetical labour.

(ii) The importance of the oral traditions in transmitting and shaping the biblical message must not be over-looked. A culture as rich in tradition as is the African culture whose traditional and anthropological treasures are now massively unearthed should not hesitate to draw inferences from its own wealth of oral traditions and those which underlie the scriptural texts.

(iii) The significance of an individualized expression of faith is amply attested to in the scriptures. There is a gospel according to Mark, one according to Matthew and another according to Luke and even that of John. These represent four different expressions of the gospel faith. Though this individualized expression of faith is partially determined by personal factors, such as the personal faith and the expressive abilities of each evangelist; it is essentially determined by community needs. These evangelists have tried to express the biblical message in a way that is pertinent to communities with individual histories, cultures and questions such as the Jews, Romans, Greeks and the Asians. Therefore, the communal nature of African societies should provide the work for a meaningful expression of the christian faith. In the light of this, Pope John Paul II's statement on the need of gospel encounter with the *homo Africans* becomes quite pertinent. According to him, "one paramount factor" to recognize is:

the true identity of the African, the African person, the African man and woman, ... If we want to understand the situation in Africa, its past and its future, we must start with the truth of the African person—the truth of every African in his or her concrete and historical setting.³⁸

(iv) The local church was a New Testament reality whose importance still remains invaluable to African christian churches today. The African local churches are important in themselves, at least, for the fact that they replicate in their organisation, African values. Their social profiles are particular because of their historical, cultural and economic situations. Such local churches are especially significant as specific communities. Their faith expression and witness emerge from their particular social situations in a dispossessed and famished world.

(v) Finally, the New Testament bears witness to a creative tension between Peter and Paul, Galatia and Jerusalem. Unity in diversity is a biblical fact. As African exegetes seek to make biblical, especially New Testament scholarship relevant in the African context; they should never forget that New Testament studies will be otherwise relevant in other contexts as Liberation theology which is deep-rooted in the Bible has continued to motivate political thinking among Latin American theologians, among Black theologians in the United States and the Blacks in Southern Africa. This must needs be if the Bible is to be as meaningful for others as Africans would have it be for themselves. On a similar

note, Pope John Paul II's address to a group of Zairean Bishops on the issue of African Theology is adjudged quite *ad rem*. We quote:

. . . one of the criteria of your discernment must be the possibility of communicating with the other local churches. Rightly proud of your African identity, you also have the duty of sharing with other christian communities about the ways you express and live the faith. In doing this, you both guarantee the unity of the Church and you contribute to a mutual enrichment.³⁹

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3. For instance, Dr. Manus has taught, among other courses, Old Testament History and Religion of Israel I and II in Part IV undergraduate programme at the Department of Religious Studies, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife since 1982 to date.
4. P. Hanks (ed.), *Collins Dictionary of the English Language*, Collins, London, 1979, p. 37; For further definitional information see, S. K. Sherwood, "Biblical Criticism and Modern Man,"—The Problem of Inspiration," *Lucerna*, published by the Bigard Memorial Seminary, Enugu, Nigeria, 5(1984) 25—46; p. 28.
5. Augustine, *Questionum Evangeliorum* II, 19; PL 35, 1340—1341; and especially R. F. Collins, "Augustine of Hippo. Precursor of Modern Biblical Scholarship", *Louvain Studies* 12(1987) 131—151; p. 131—132

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17. Matt. 10:9/ Mk. 3:8/ Lk. 9:3.
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Rev. Prof. R. F. Collins is Professor of New Testament exegesis at the Catholic University of Louvain, (K.U. Leuven), Belgium.

Dr. Chris U. Manus is a Senior Lecturer in New Testament Studies and African Christian Theology at the Department of Religious Studies, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria.



FAITH IN ONE GOD:

CHALLENGES FOR INTER-FAITH DIALOGUE

J. K. A. ANIAGWU

Introduction

The Christian profession of faith in one God stands somewhere between the "diffused monotheism" of African Traditional Religion and the radical, uncompromising monotheism of Islam—two religious currents, that, in the view of this writer, will make their impact felt increasingly in Africa during the next few decades. It would seem that some of the challenges to the Christian creed will be forthcoming from precisely these two religious currents.

African Traditional Religion: A new awakening

As is well known, the wind of political independence blew across most of Africa in the 1960's. In black Africa, the need was felt for an independence of the "spirit" as well, primarily through a return to the cultural roots of the African people. Perhaps inevitably, somewhere along the line, the theory was hatched that the authentic religion of Africa and the Africans was the traditional religion of their forefathers—commonly labelled as "African Traditional Religion".¹ This has certainly been the experience in Nigeria. Both Christianity and Islam have, in consequence, come to be categorized as *foreign*, having been introduced into the continent from Euro-American and Middle-Eastern sources.

This has been quite an intriguing turn of events. Until quite recently (up to about only twenty years ago) African traditional religion was on the run and receding before the joint onslaught of Christianity and Islam. It was assumed that it was only a matter of time before what was then known as "animism", "fetishism", or "paganism" would be wiped out, and one or the other of the two great world religions, Christianity and Islam, replace it. It was simply not "civilized" or "modern" at that time to profess traditional religion. Not any more. Now, it is the turn of Christianity and Islam to be on the defensive against the charge of being foreign in origin and content and serving foreign interests, inimical or, at least, unsympathetic to the genuine interests and aspirations of Africa and the Africans.

Today, not a few educated Africans, even intellectuals and academics, openly profess traditional religion.² It is now altogether respectable to do so. Not infrequently, it is considered even more patriotic so to do than if one professed Christianity or Islam.

Somewhat ironically, certainly unintentionally, the enterprise of reviving traditional religion in Africa has been helped not a little by