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Christian Eschatology and Ancestor Christology: How compatible?

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1. Introduction

"African Christological concepts do not exist."¹ This statement was made in 1967 by the Kenyan Anglican and African foremost theologian, John S. Mbiti. Today, 34 years later, it seems urgent to re-examine Mbiti's statement realizing that some progress has been made in this direction but with some difficulties with some of the concepts. Meanwhile one could speak of "the failure to produce a convincing African or Black Christology."² Generally speaking, developments are taking place all the time and one could have simply expected that Christology would have been Africa's most internationally recognized contribution to the Christian faith.

The idea of a continental Christology has been popularized by feats of Latin American theologians. Seen as the fruits of the contemporary hermeneutical approach in theology, such has been attributed to the personalist approach to divine revelation, which found footing in the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, especially in *Dei Verbum*.³ As African theologians rise to the challenge of the faith, to give Christianity an African face, a lot of questions arise as well.

Hence, one finds oneself confronted with the question and problems of language and tradition of the faith with the images, culture and traditions of a particular region. Again, there are the problems of social- political and economic nature when one

¹This was one of the earliest writings on African Christology, "Some African Concepts of Christology," which was later published in *Christ and the Young Churches* (ed.), London: SPCK Press, 1972, pp.51-62, especially p.51.

²A. Shorter, "Folks Christianity and Functional Christology" in *AFER* 24 (1982) 133-137, especially p.134.

³See J. Ukpong's elaborative study "The Emergence of African Theologies" in *Theological Studies* 45 (1984) 501-536.

reflects on the Gospel. This can ultimately lead one back to the sources of faith, with new questions and emphasis, seeing what emerges at such an encounter. This is what confronts us with the Christological image of Christ our Ancestor. Several African theologians have proposed this image. This article will critically re-examine the theological content of this image, intending to examine their suitability. The intention is to see if the ancestor Christologies, here presented, respond to the goal of eschatology as communion with God. Secondly, the essay investigates if the concepts of immortality associated with the ancestor theology agree with the New Testament witness.

2. Ancestor beliefs within Christology

Theologians such as Akrong (1992), Kwame Bediako (1995), Benezet Bujo (1992), Francois Kabasele (1991), Muzorewa (1988), Nkwoka (1991), Charles Nyamiti (1990), and Uchenna Ezech (2005) have argued that reflecting upon ancestral belief from a Christological perspective has contributed to the development of a Christology which articulates with the rich diversity of the African socio-cultural background. This is undoubtedly one of the most controversial topics in African Theology today. The challenge is to portray an image of Christ which resounds in the African cosmology. As a result, modern African theologians have attempted to find a resonance in the identity of Christ within the African realities.⁴

It must be pointed out that the manner in which scholars have treated the subject of the significance of Christ with regard to African religious life has been rather divergent. Interestingly, each of these studies - A. Akrong [1992]; B. Bujo [1992]; C. Nyamiti [1990], Uchenna Ezech [2005] - discusses the doctrine of Christ, understanding Him as an ancestor figure. This is indicative of a trend. Therefore, the assessment of three African

⁴Cf. J.V. Taylor, *The Primal Vision: Christian Presence amid African Religion*, London: SCM Press, 1963, p.16. Cf. also Wanamaker, "Jesus: the Ancestor", *SCRIPTURA* 63 (1997), 291.

theologians who have made significant contributions to the Christology of ancestorship will be vital here.

2.1 Akrong's notion of African Ancestor Christology

A. Akrong⁵ situates his Christology in the Akan people of Ghana's cosmology. Akrong utilizes the Akan notion of ancestors as *Nananom* (singular for *Nana*), which is the term used for grandparents and grandchildren as well as to denote respect when addressing chiefs and God (*Nana Nyame*). His argument is that the ancestral model is the surface structure which supports the underlying structures of Akan culture and religion. He contends that the ancestor belief system entails a theological model which is deeply rooted in the social and religious world of the African.⁶ He then uses this model to portray Jesus as an ancestor who is dead but still present with us and who brings life and offers protection from evil.

Akrong situates his portrayal of Christ firmly in the Akan worldview and therefore identifies him as the chief warrior and hero ancestor who has a mediatory and sacred role. In this regard, he is the mediator of God's power and the chief agent of God's salvation to human beings.⁷ As a hero warrior rescues his people, so Akrong considers Christ to have rescued humanity from the bondages of evil forces and sin. As the hero-Ancestor, Christ becomes the mediator between God and human beings and can therefore also be the subject of worship, owing to his unique relationship with God. This notion of Christ as a warrior is similar to Mbiti's notion.⁸ However, Mbiti does not integrate this with the ancestor model.

⁵ A. Akrong, "Christology from an African Perspective" in: John Pobee (ed.), *Exploring Afro-Christology*, Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1992, pp. 119-129.

⁶ Akrong, "Christology from an African Perspective", p. 127.

⁷ Akron, "Christology from an African Perspective", p. 123.

⁸ J.S. Mbiti, "Some African Concepts of Christology" in G.F. Vicedom (ed.), *Christ and the Young Churches*, London: SPCK Press, 1972, p. 51.

2.2 Bujo's Notion of Christ as Proto-ancestor

Benezet Bujo's Christology aims to integrate a Biblical Christology with the contemporary social problems of Africa.⁹ Consequently, Bujo transposed the Biblical context onto the African context. He suggests that Christ is the "proto-ancestor", a concept more meaningful for Africans. This implies that Christ is the primary ancestor and the one who personifies the model of ancestor. Similarly, he interprets Heb 1:1-2 to imply that God previously communicated with our African Fathers through the ancestors but now communicates to us through Christ.¹⁰ Furthermore, the key concepts in Bujo's theology are the notion of a "life force" which goes back to Placid Tempel's Bantu philosophy's notion of a "life force". According to Bujo, God is the ultimate Supreme Origin of life. This life force is transmitted through the mediation of the ancestors.¹¹ Therefore, the ancestor rituals are an attempt to secure life and abundance from the ancestors. Bujo goes on to extend this notion of life force to Christ. In Christ, this life force is available in its abundance.¹² This resonates with the African notion that this life force is transmitted through the eldest son by various means. Bujo goes on to state that Christ shares his life force with believers in the Eucharist. The bread and wine serves to reinforce the life and vitality among believers who partake in it.¹³

One must understand Bujo from his own theological context. Bujo is essentially a moral theologian who regards Christ as a model and life-giving ancestor to emulate. His notion of Christ as the proto-ancestor is problematic. He uses the term to emphasise the uniqueness of Christ's ancestorship. However, the denotation

⁹B. Bujo, "A Christocentric Ethic for Black Africa" in: *Theology Digest* 30(2) 1982, 143; "The Two Sources of Life: The Eucharist and the Cult of Ancestors" in *African Christian Studies* 2(1) 1986, 67; *African Theology in its Social Context*, Nairobi: St. Paul's Publications, 1992, p.93.

¹⁰Bujo, *African Theology in its Social Context*, p.83.

¹¹Cf. Bujo, "The Two Sources of Life", p.68.

¹²Bujo, *African Theology in its Social Context*, p.93.

¹³Bujo, "The Two Sources of Life", p.78.

of the term "proto" implies "first" of many, as Adam was the first of all men. But could Christ be called really an African Ancestor? He leaves unexplained the sense in which Christ is the first Ancestor. Furthermore, His analogy seems to have avoided history/anthropology and jumped over to theological approximations. This ancestor theology will have limited significance, only among Christians, if at all.

2.3 Nyamiti's paradigm of African Christology and Ancestor Kinship

Charles Nyamiti, a prominent Tanzanian Catholic theologian, provides a significant and extensive exposition of the ancestor analogy with regard to Christ which is firmly rooted in the Trinity. In his study, Nyamiti¹⁴ uses the beliefs and practices of many African traditional societies as his point of departure. These beliefs underscore the primacy of the ancestral relationship between the living and the dead and at times also the relationship between the Supreme Being and humanity. These relationships are seen to comprise of a brother ancestor and humanity with whom the ancestor shares a common parent (God). The ancestor acts as an intercessor between God and the living.¹⁵ This ancestor who has acquired his supernatural status after death is entitled to regular sacred communion. The crux of the matter though is that Nyamiti's definition of brother-ancestralship can be extended to apply to Christ and his relationship with the believers as well as to the African ancestor-brother.

This fundamental understanding of the ancestral relationship, leads Nyamiti to examine the inner life of God (Trinity) and discover that there exists an ancestral kinship among the divine persons: the Father is the Ancestor of the Son, the Son is the

¹⁴C. Nyamiti, *Christ as our Ancestor: Christology from an African*, Gwero-Tanzania: Mambo Press, 1984, p.23.

¹⁵Nyamiti, *Christ our Ancestor*, p.30.

Descendant of the Father.¹⁶ These two persons perpetuate their ancestral kinship through the Spirit. In the Trinitarian notion of God there is a true doxological and Eucharistic ritual. This Trinitarian ritual is considered to be the ultimate basis and model of all other rituals. The intended outcome of this Trinitarian ceremony is to achieve the intimate unification of the Father (Ancestor) and the Son (Descendant) in the Holy Spirit (pneumatic perichoresis). It has to be pointed out that for Nyamiti, the notions of Ancestor and Descendant are essentially doxological, Eucharistic, pneumatic (therefore inseparably intertwined with the Holy Spirit) and ritual categories.

Nyamiti contends that Christ's ancestorship is rooted in the Trinity. And primarily because of his divine-human status and redemptive function, Christ can be considered our ultimate brother-ancestor.¹⁷ Furthermore, Nyamiti postulates the incarnation and redemptive ministry of Christ which culminates in the paschal mystery to be extensions of the Trinitarian ancestral communication to the man Jesus and thus extending through him to the rest of creation. Thus Christ functions ancestrally towards humanity by means of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, God the Father through Christ becomes our Ancestor. According to Nyamiti, his ancestorship grows and reaches maturity at the Parousia. Consequently, the Eucharistic celebration is essentially a true ancestral ritual, and the tabernacle is the Christian shrine in which Christ the Ancestor's presence is felt and is therefore available for ancestral communication. Similarly, our bodies constitute sacred living shrines or temples which are inhabited by our divine ancestors (God the Father and Christ in the divine Spirit).¹⁸

¹⁶C. Nyamiti C., "The Mass as Divine and Ancestral Encounter between the Living and the Dead" in *African Christian Studies* 1(1) 1985, 32; "The Church as Christ's Ancestral Mediation: An Essay on African Ecclesiology" in J.N. Mugambi and L. Magesa (eds.), *The Church in African Christianity*, Nairobi-Kenya: Initiative Press, 1990, p.139.

¹⁷Cf. J.H. Olsen, "Contextualized Christology in Tropical Africa" in *Swedish Missiological Themes* 85(1997), 261.

¹⁸Cf. Olsen, "Contextualized Christology in Tropical Africa", p.262.

Scholars have criticised Nyamiti for his notion of the Ancestor Christ for numerous reasons. Nyamiti's analogical inculturation method causes key religious concepts from traditional belief systems to be pushed to the point where they obfuscate the uncompromising Christology of the Scriptures.¹⁹ One cannot but see Nyamiti's method as naïve, believing that all that is Christian can be transformed into African concepts. This is the type of inculturation that has failed to produce anything genuinely African.

Having presented the proposals that are relevant to this essay, it is necessary to ask the more basic question if one could really call Christ Ancestor in the real understanding of Africans. The next paragraph investigates this problem.

3. Who are really the ancestors?

In most societies where belief in ancestors is common, a record of people who have lived and have died is kept in the memory of the living members of the community. They have moved into the category of ancestors, or the living dead. The concept of ancestral involvement in everyday life is more than a story or a myth. It is lived by millions in many areas in the world. How would we begin to define this category? "The living dead who hold influence over their living descendents" is a succinct and common way of defining ancestors. Their identity is further explained as transcendental beings representing the religious, ethical and institutional values of society in their community. Their abode and influence range from the physical to the spiritual world.

Ancestors have long held an important position in anthropology. For instance, the definitive mark of "primitive religion" according to Spencer, Tylor, and Frazer was considered to be "ancestor worship."²⁰ Seen by these scholars from the perspective

¹⁹Cf. Olsen, "Contextualized Christology in Tropical Africa", p.262.

²⁰J.C. McCall, "Rethinking Ancestors in Africa" in *Africa* 65 nr. 2 (1995), 256.

of anthropology, the concept of ancestors is closely linked to that of the departed kins. It must be said that Spencer's definition of the religion of the primitive people is riddled with problems. A major problem with Spencer's argument that ancestor worship was the first religion is that many societies at the hunting-and-gathering level did not practise worship. One shortcoming in the study of ancestor worship has been the fact that the term "ancestor worship" is often reserved for those societies where the dead are specifically called by a term that is translated as ancestor. This is problematic as it excludes societies whose religious practices concern ghosts, shades, spirits, souls, totemic plants and animals, or merely the dead.²¹

The differences and links between ancestors and totemic plants and animals is a fine line. Totems (animal or plant) are clearly ancestral in that they link a person with a line of ancestors. Some scholars include it in ancestor worship. The description and study also becomes problematic in the case of religions that are based on more general, and therefore, supposedly non-ancestral, spirits or gods. The roles of ancestors are overlooked. This failure to recognise the connection between ancestors and spirits or gods often results in societies being excluded from the ancestor worship category.

Another complicating factor is that the deceased and ancestors cannot be taken as synonyms. In some cases a minimum requirement for ancestral status would entail to be remembered. Some living dead, whose memory have dropped from the genealogy as a result of the passing of time are believed to be transformed into "nameless spirits", non-ancestors. According to Smith "... the soul of a recent deceased person has to pass through a number of stages until reaching the condition of ancestor."²²

²¹L.B. Steadman - C.T. Palmer, "The universe of Ancestor Worship" in: *Ethnology* 35 (1) 1996, 63.

²²R.J. Smith, *Ancestor Worship in Contemporary Japan*, Stanford: University Press, 1974, pp.56-57.

These examples show that in defining ancestors as "the dead" it is important to realise that, even if not evident at first, references to ghosts, spirits, and the dead in a society's religion, mean that ancestors are implied in one way or another.

Differing from the examples cited above, some scholars go for a narrower definition of ancestors, distinguishing the dead (or spirits) from ancestors. They view that all spirits cannot be ancestors; there are conditions necessary for a deceased spirit to become an ancestor.²³ To illustrate this, Hammond-Tooke gives the Dahoenas of West Africa who distinguish clearly between the dead and the ancestors. They have complex ceremonies to transform some dead persons into ancestors, meaning that not everybody who died automatically becomes an ancestor. This means that conditions for ancestorhood are not the same for all the tribes, nations and areas in the world where ancestor worship is practised, and definitely not agreed upon by scholars. In general, however, the following are the most common conditions needed to be an ancestor:

3.1 Qualifications for Ancestorship

In an article "Too Many Ancestors" J. Whitley gives a minimal definition of an ancestor as "someone who has procreated, died, but has descendants who remember him/her."²⁴ In the same vein, M. Fortes agrees with this base requirement by recognizing that "ancestors receive recognition insofar as their descendants exist and are designated as such."²⁵ The notion of having children is self-explanatory, to be invoked a person must have descendants to invoke him, therefore the need for having children.²⁶ Of course, ancestors need not be invoked by their names and remembered as

²³ Hammond-Tooke "Ancestor Religion" in H. Huckertz (ed.), *Ancestor Religion in Southern Africa*, Transkei: Lumko Missiological Institute, 1981, p.23.

²⁴ J. Whitley, "Too Many Ancestors" in *Antiquity* 76 (2002), 121.

²⁵ M. Fortes M. "Introduction" in W.H. Newell (ed.), *Ancestors*, The Hague: Mouton Press, 1976, p.4.

²⁶ See A. Shorter "Eschatology in the Ethnic Religions of Africa" in

individuals. They may be conceived of as part of a "collective", but the important part is that they are remembered. Within this prerequisite, it follows that not all dead are ancestors, and not every monumental grave can be defined as "ancestral". To be an ancestor the deceased must have been an elder, and upon his or her demise become one of the eternal beings. The ancestors are thus a distinct group of eternal saints, apart from other spiritual personalities, who are also endowed with immortality but are not ancestors.²⁷

To be admitted to ancestor status often depends upon certain pre-death prerequisites. These include, among others, to have had a long life, a certain social standing, self-control, morality and integrity. Ancestorhood quite often implies moral superiority, understandable, since it is mainly persons of character and moral who form the "electorate" when an ancestor is to be "elected" to the rank of an ancestor. Ancestors thus become role models to emulate.²⁸ Who is regarded as important will vary between particular societies, and according to patterns of kinship and property holding. Among societies with strong patrilineal principles of descent, those who are regarded as important, and attain ancestor status will be different from societies who have bilateral kinship patterns.²⁹ In other societies, almost all dead people are considered ancestors, even if they have no descendants, or who were of no significant status in life. The only exception to ancestorhood would be notorious people such as witches, those who committed suicide, and murderers, who were considered evil.³⁰

Studia Missionalia 32(1983), 15. Cf. also M. Bloch, "Ancestors" in A. Bernard - A. Spencer (eds.), *Encyclopaedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology*, London: Routledge Press, 1996, p.43.

²⁷Ephirim-Donkor, *African Spirituality: On becoming Ancestors*, Lawrence-Ville: African World Press, 1997, p.129.

²⁸Cf. J.N. Amanze, "Christianity and Ancestor Veneration in Botswana" in *Studies in World Christianity* 9 no.1(2003) 64-65.

²⁹Cf. Whitely "Too Many Ancestors", p.122.

³⁰Cf. Amanze, "Christianity and Ancestor Veneration", pp.64-65.

It is necessary to mention here, though in passing, that the final step for becoming ancestor in many societies is that the dead go through a series of "rites of passage."

When we consider the various options for ancestorhood above, they all seem plausible and logical. The reason ancestors are distinguished from the dead might be due to veneration or reverence toward ancestors that of the dead. When we look at it the other way though, ancestors can be placed in the category of the dead because they are dependent upon the living or their descendants to be ancestors. To explain sacrifices to ancestors who have no emotional ties with the ones offering them and who left no inheritance, Mbiti makes the distinction between the living dead and other spirits. This second group concerns the spirits of those who have disappeared into the world of the unknown. "The living do not know them anymore, they have ceased to be members of the family. Such spirits have no personal communication with human families."³¹ Thus, one can conclude that the ancestors are the deceased. A study of the connection of the foregoing ideas to eschatology is at this point necessary.

4. Ancestrology and Eschatology: Drawing the Difference between Jesus Christ and Ancestors

In *The Living Dead and the Living God: Christ and the Ancestor in a Changing Africa*, Klaus Nurnberger reflected at length on the theology of Paul and its relevance to the difference between the ancestors and the risen Christ.³² While exploring the differences between ancestors and Christ, Nurnberger maintained that one needs to establish the formal similarity and dissimilarity between an ancestor and the risen Christ. He asserts that these fundamental differences are situated in the respective content of what they actually stand for. In other words, the actual differences

³¹J. S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, London: Heinemann Press, 1990, p.26.

³²Klaus Nurnberger, *The Living Dead and the Living God: Christ and the Ancestor in a Changing Africa*, Pietermaritzburg-South Africa: ClusterPublication, 2007, pp.94-96.

do not lie in some ontologically conceived, objective existence or non-existence of the two entities, but in what they actually do for us. One can summarise the essential differences between the ancestors and the risen Christ thus:

Becoming an ancestor is a passage into the past, even though this past has power over the present. On the other hand, the resurrection of Christ is a passage into the future of God, even though this future can gain power over the present. Nürnberger thus states that in Paul's terminology, the ancestor belongs to the genealogy of the first Adam, the genealogy of the "flesh", whereas Christ himself became the second Adam, the "new creation", the spiritual human being (Rom 5:12ff).³³ Surely resurrection is an eschatological concept and African traditional religion has no concept of eschatology in the Biblical sense of the word. This explains why ancestors Christology is only a journey back into the past; while Christ lures us into the future of God, ancestors lure into the past. The power of the ancestors lies in the power of memory. The power of Christ lies in the power of anticipation and hope.

Furthermore, the ancestors are understood to represent ethnic traditions as a legacy from the past whereas Christ represents God's vision of comprehensive and universal well-being. The redemptive power of Christ's sacrifice makes the kingdom of God accessible to humanity as a whole while the ancestors only concern themselves with the salvation and well-being of the clan and community. The power and authority of the ancestors is believed to be confirmed and reinforced by the clans' observance of appropriate rituals. This differs somewhat from the power of Christ's redemptive action which is manifest by believers through the proclamation of the Gospel by means of the Holy Spirit.

³³Cf. Nürnberger, *The Living Dead and the Living*, p.95.

Consequently Bediako believes that African believers have inherited the promise of the Old Testament by virtue of Christ and therefore asserts that the African Christian's ancestors are included in the line of Jewish ancestors through Christ and by implication exist in fellowship with the Old Testament ancestors or saints.³⁴ Turaki's critique of Bediako's theory hinges on the fact that the Abrahamic faith, which is discussed in Rom 4 and Gal 3, transcends biological birth because it is essentially covenantal and spiritual. Turaki thus asserts that the sainthood from the Old Testament which the New Testament saints inherited, was not founded in genealogy but was essentially based on faith, the same faith that Abraham had.³⁵

Consequently, Turaki sees a spiritual link between the Old Testament idea of sainthood, as inherited by the New Testament saints. The link between the Old and New Testament is fundamentally covenantal and this defined the relationship between God and Israel. Turaki highlights that the cross of Christ did not substitute "Abrahamic faith." Abrahamic faith was in fact rooted eschatologically in the cross of Christ (Heb 11; Rom 4).

One of the crucial issues which must be explored fully is the notion of the ancestors who they are and their roles as mediators.³⁶ In his critique of Black and African theologies, T.S. Maluleke questions Bediako's interpretation of the so-called new African Theology.³⁷ According to Maluleke, Bediako tries to solve the disjunction between African traditions and Christianity by establishing continuity between Christianity and traditional African culture. Thus, Bediako attempted to identify Jesus as the supreme ancestor and considers African traditions to be a

³⁴Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture on Christian thought in the Second Century and Modern Africa*, Oxford: Penguin Books, 1992, p.228.

³⁵Cf. Nürnberger, *The Living Dead and the Living*, p.95.

³⁶T.S. Maluleke, "Black and African Theologies in the New World Order" in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 9 (6) 1996, 12.

³⁷Maluleke, "Black and African Theologies", p.7.

preparation for the Gospel. In this regard there is the possibility that Jesus may not only become the Supreme Ancestor, but also join the ranks of other ancestors, who are at the service of the Supreme Being in Africa. The question then arises whether they are to be construed as mediators with God and if so, does this make the role of Jesus Christ redundant?³⁸

The African notion of ancestors as intermediaries is diametrically opposed to that of Christian theology which gives primacy to Christ as the mediator between God and man. Although the African concept of ancestor lacks distinction on this and related terms, it has to be pointed out that there appear to be a dangerous confusion on the roles of the Son and the Holy Spirit in relation to that of the ancestors in African theology.³⁹

Louis Berkhof has underlined the role of the Holy Spirit as the "efficient cause of regeneration."⁴⁰ According to him, this regeneration involves a change in the spiritual condition of the individual. This change is effected solely by the work of the Holy Spirit, and is therefore beyond the scope of human beings (Ezek.11:19; John 1:13; Acts 16:14; Rom 9:16; Phil 2:13). Therefore, any form of dependence on the ancestors who are intrinsically unable to play this role is misplaced.⁴¹

Scholars like Yusuf Turaki reject the notion that ancestors are able to act as intermediaries. If ancestors are to be considered familiar spirits who can act as intermediaries, they actually must be able to hear and answer prayers and petitions, which is in direct contrast to Biblical teaching.⁴² He argues that Christ is the only mediator

³⁸Maluleke, "Black and African Theologies, p.16.

³⁹Cf. C.S. Bae, "Ancestor Worship in Korea and Africa: Social function or Religious Phenomenon" in: *Verbum et Ecclesia* 25 (2) 2004, 353.

⁴⁰Cf. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing co., 1941, p.473.

⁴¹Cf. Bae, "Ancestor Worship", p.354.

⁴²Y. Turaki, *Christianity and African Gods: A Method in Theology*, Potchefstroom: University Press, 1999, p.254.

who is entitled to receive prayers and petitions. Therefore, if invocations, prayers or offerings are directed to ancestors, those who perform these acts are committing idolatry because they accord the ancestors a position which rightfully belongs to Christ.⁴³ Does the functions accorded to the ancestors resonate with the Scriptures? Accordingly, the Old Testament traditions did not designate the Israelite fathers (ancestors) (including the patriarchs) as ancestors nor were they designated as mediators in the same manner Africans designate their ancestors. One must at least acknowledge that some of the patriarchs such as Enoch, Elijah and Moses did plead with God on behalf of the people (while living) but never assumed the role of living-dead mediators (after their deaths). This was continued by the religious institution of the priesthood in the Old Testament and a reason perhaps, why Saul offended his people when he invoked the spirit of Samuel.

Finally, another area which some African scholars have attempted to bring to comparison is how the ancestor theory relates to the significance of the resurrection of Jesus. No significant discussion on Christian eschatology can be meaningful without giving consideration to the significance of Christ's resurrection. Some African scholars like Wanamaker assume that Christ's death is similar to that of other ancestors and that Christ's death and afterlife are similar to that of the ancestors.⁴⁴ Some acknowledge that the resurrection and post-resurrection appearances of Jesus Christ do not fit into the African cosmology although an African would be comfortable understanding the post-resurrection appearances as visional visitations of an ancestor. The crucial question which needs to be addressed is: what is the actual significance of Christ's death and resurrection for Christians?

⁴³B. Afeke - P. Verster, "Christianization of Ancestor within African Traditional Religions", *Die Skriflig* 38 (1) 2004, 56.

⁴⁴C.A. Wanamaker, "Jesus the Ancestor: Reading the story of Jesus from an African Christian Perspective" in *Scriptura* 63 (1997), 293.

An important distinction between Christ and the ancestors lie in the fact that Christ emerged as victor over the powers of darkness and evil. It is in this connection that one questions⁴⁵ the solution given by Gates⁴⁶ to the question which considers the core of ancestor worship to be rooted in the "Powers" which were overthrown in the death and resurrection of Christ. These powers have already been defeated in the resurrection of Christ and they are thus in his dominion. As a result of Christ's victory over these powers, Christians today are able to deny any hold these powers may have on their lives (2 Cor 2:14-17). Theologically speaking, the role of the ancestors becomes obsolete in the Christian paradigm of salvation. This has been challenged in the New Testament by Christ's resurrection and triumph over these powers (Col 2:15). Consequently, the victory of Christ is an ontological reality for "all who are indwelt by the Spirit of Christ."

Accordingly, the New Testament is clear in its assertion that Christ has defeated death through his resurrection and that death no longer holds sway over mankind. By his death on the cross and eventual resurrection Christ took the sins and death of mankind upon himself, he abolished death and brought life and immortality to mankind through the Gospel (2 Tim 1:10).

Hermeneutically speaking, the death and resurrection of Christ means that death acquired a new meaning and eternal life became more than an idea.⁴⁷ Hence Christ's atoning death and resurrection gave new meaning to the paradigm of sin and judgement. It became possible to understand and death in eschatological terms. Death entered as the common enemy of mankind, but it has been conquered in Christ and has been ultimately destroyed in Christ's death. This is contrary to the eschatological paradigm of religions which adhere to ancestor

⁴⁵Cf. Bac, "Ancestor Worship", p.351.

⁴⁶A.F. Gates, *Christianity and Animism in Taiwan*, San Francisco: Chinese Materials Centre, 1979, p.199.

⁴⁷J.M. Berestein, *Grave and Gospel*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1985, p.197.

warship. These religions have a cyclical notion of eschatology which is juxtaposed to the linear eschatological perspective of Christianity.

There are two elements which are of vital significance when one considers the resurrection of Christ from an eschatological perspective. Firstly, the resurrection is a resurrection of all humans and not only those in Christ as recorded in Dan 12:2; John 5:28-29; Acts 24:15. Furthermore, it is understood to be a bodily resurrection of the total person, a resurrection in glory which Paul describes as "a spiritual body" for those who died in Christ (1 Cor 15:43-44). Thus, there is an upholding of man by God in and through death which encompasses both the righteous and the unrighteous and includes the complete person, body and soul (Acts 24:15).

In other words, ancestor worship testifies to the notion that ancestral spirits exist as immortal beings (although of limited "lifespan"). This is not compatible with Biblical understanding. The Bible understands life and death in terms of the relationship between God and man, because God is Lord over life and death (Ps 139:8; Amos 9:2; Acts 2:24). Since the dead belongs to God, death did not constitute annihilation for the faithful (see the Preface for the Mass of the Dead). Concomitantly, death represents an impenetrable barrier between the living and the dead.

When one considers this, it is evident that African scholars like Nyamiti, Akrong, Bujo, Kabaseele, and Ezech who approach Christ as the great ancestor in an attempt to contextualise Christology in African theology face significant contradictions. When one contextualises theological formulations it is unacceptable to allow ancestors to usurp the intercessory role of Christ (1 Tim 2:5). The intrinsic completeness of God in the Bible

makes the roles assigned to the ancestors in African theology redundant. Christianity affirms and proclaims the uniqueness of Christ. In other words, Christ is the unique Mediator and cannot be moulded to fit into the notion of ancestor worship. The descriptions of Christ in the Bible are not compatible with those of the ancestral beliefs. Consequently, Nyamiti's attempt and consequently those of his followers to Christianise traditional elements of the ancestral beliefs⁴⁸ is unacceptable and amounts to eventual idolization. Irrespective of the continuity or discontinuity which some African scholars perceive between Christianity and African religious tradition, the crux of the matter lies with the notion of salvation. Therefore, the role of the ancestors as supposed mediators with God is unfounded and contrary to biblical faith.

5. The Christian Saints and the Ancestors: any Relation? May be something is being misunderstood about ancestors and their place in Christian eschatology by those who peddle around Ancestor Christology. In "Living together with Ancestors: Ancestor Veneration in Africa as a challenge for Missiology", John Triebel has attempted to establish a link between ancestor veneration and the communion of saints in ecclesiology.⁴⁹ Triebel bases this on some anthropological findings which indicate that ancestor veneration is the expression of the family and tribal solidarity" and continuity. This leads Triebel to suggest that Christians are no longer concerned with invoking the ancestors or praying to them but do invoke Christ and pray to Him. He continues that a prayer for the ancestors may be included. As Triebel maintains, if the ancestors were Christians they then belong to the communion of the believers and in Holy Communion the ancestors are included by implication and are thus considered part of the *fam ilia Dei*.⁵⁰

⁴⁸Nyamiti, *Christ our Ancestor*, p.36.

⁴⁹J. Triebel, "Living Together with Ancestors: Ancestor Veneration in Africa as a challenge for Missiology" in *Missiology* 30(29) 2002, 195.

⁵⁰Triebel, "Living together with Ancestors", pp.195-196.

If one considers these words from Triebel, it appears that he relates the ancestors in African traditional religion to Christian Saints. In a related article "Communio Sanctorum in Africa" Mosothoane asserts that the communion principle (encompassing the living and the dead) underlying the theology of the African church found a related theology, which focused on the Communion of Saints, in the Roman Catholic Church.⁵¹

Scholars such as Gehman, Nürnberger, and Dennis & Robert have rather focused on analysing the dissimilarity between Roman Catholic cults of the saints and the African traditional relationship with the ancestors. Consequently, one finds no theological justification for comparing practices such as ancestor veneration in African traditional religion to the Roman Catholic practice of venerating of the saints. African scholars, notably, Amanze and Mbiti, and Beken are all agreed that it is imperative to distinguish between veneration and worship because according to them there are degrees of worship.⁵² They argue that Africans have traditionally worshipped God but venerated the ancestors in very similar fashion to the manner in which Roman Catholics claim to worship God but venerate the saints.

It is important to note also that many African Christians in the African Independent Churches cling to a sense of fellowship with their departed ancestors based on a premise similar to that of the Catholic notion of Communion of saints. As a result, communion with the deceased and ancestral spirits is accepted. This communion with the ancestors give the ancestors new meaning as intercessors with God for their protection. The sense of a community which encompasses - the living, the unborn and the

⁵¹E.K. Mosothoane, "Communio Sanctorum in Africa in *Missionalia* 2 (1973) 91.

⁵²Cf. J. S. Mbiti, *Prayer and Spirituality in African Religion*, Bedford Park: Australian Association for the Study of Religions, 1978, p.152; also Amanze, "Christianity and Ancestor Veneration" p.2003; H. J. Becken, "Beware of the Ancestor Cult: A Challenge to Missiological Research in South Africa" in *Missionalia* 21 (39) 1993, 335.

dead is an accepted Christian notion, but the notion that the living may communicate with the dead is unknown in the New Testament and may sound syncretistic.

Furthermore if one considers the African notion of the church as a family, non-Christian ancestors can be incorporated into the church and be regarded as saved by implication. Turaki opposes this view which relates kinship in Christology to ecclesiology. As a matter of fact this view can be attributed to the age-mate kinship systems evidenced in the traditions of initiation in Africa. In other words, the essential unity and continuity between people and their ancestors, hinged on the conception of the church as a family can be construed to mean that the ancestors are included in the church. However similar this may seem, the Roman Catholic Church's doctrine on the communion of the saints holds that these saints intercede in heaven for the church on earth. The doctrine does not consider the saints to be omnipresent or omniscient divinities. They are believed to be human beings who lived exemplary Christian life and are therefore heroes of the Christian faith. On the other hand, the Catholic Church does draw a distinction between adoration which should be directed to God alone, and veneration which is accorded the saints. Again, it has to be noted that during the invocation of the saints, it is always God who is addressed.

It has to be noted that there is ontological difference between the ancestors and the saints, namely: the saints are essentially deceased believers in Christ while the ancestors are merely genealogical forebears. The saints are spiritual examples while the ancestors are spiritual authorities. We still argue that saints are considered to be particularly holy persons while the ancestors may have been ordinary persons with their unique strengths and weaknesses. The saints are limited in their movements and cannot exert a direct influence on the lives of the living as the ancestors

are believed to have the ability to do. Surely the power of the ancestors is derived from the social structure rather than from God and that the ancestors are not particularly concerned with the salvation of souls but with the physical well-being of their descendants in this present life. On these levels, the two entities differ. The saints are believed to exist in the presence of God for eternity while the ancestors eventually disappear in oblivion. Because of these essential differences, the ancestors cannot be likened to the saints in the Catholic doctrine.

6. CONCLUSION

It has to be said at the very beginning that ancestor veneration in Africa is a complex and diverse phenomenon, a situation the "ancestor Christologist" have not seriously considered. There is no doubt in any person's mind that our African traditional practices are having some influence in the life of the Church in Africa. It must be said as well that there is a resurgence of African Traditional Religion and that Africans have assimilated ancestor cult as an attempt to meet the needs of African people who wanted to cling to their identity in the face of colonisation and urbanisation. Christian churches have assimilated ancestor rituals in varying degrees. In Catholicism, the cult of saints resembles in some sense the African sense of ancestor cult. Radical Protestantism has rejected it out right as unscriptural.

The important fact is that ancestor veneration cannot be separated from the African cosmology. The African worldview and the African sense of community are powerful cornerstones of ancestor veneration in Africa. As we have indicated Africans are pragmatist and religion must have the potentials of solving the immediate needs of believers. Africans felt that the Church and Christianity have not met the needs of the African people in terms of their cultural identity. This has led to the Christianisation of numerous traditional values but caution must be observed so that

our theologizing does not degenerate into syncretism, an error that is most apparent in some of the ancestor christologies.

Moreover, ancestor Christology runs the risk of becoming a limitation in the African context. Ancestor beliefs are generally considered to be conservative elements in society and may hinder social change and development. The consequence of this is that they may hinder individuals from understanding the true implication of Christ for their lives. There is no exact biblical parallel to the ancestor model. Even the analogy between ancestors and Catholic understanding of the cult of saints fails to do the magic. One can simply conclude that the ancestor model should be understood to constitute a picture rather than a model of Christology to explain the essence of Christ. Moreover, if the ancestor model is used it should be complemented with biblical models.