

WHO DO YOU SAY, I AM? THE JESUS OF HISTORY, THE BIBLE AND MODERN AFRICA¹

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Abstract: This article is, first of all, a Christology. The writer uses a combined approach of historical study predominantly used by biblical scholars and contextualization which pay attention to the reception of the living readers. By doing that, the writer wants to make a balance between critical enterprise typical of academic world and the world of the believers. Rather than separating the two, the writer shows the advantage of including them in Christology. The central question posed by the writer is the question of Jesus about whom the disciples think he is. The question is seen relevant not only to the first disciples but also to the present Christians. African context is mostly but not exclusively highlighted, through the study of several titles of Jesus popular among the Africans.

Key words: Christology, Historical Jesus, Intercultural, Africa.

Abstrak: Tulisan ini pertama-tama merupakan ulasan Kristologi. Metode yang digunakan adalah kombinasi antara studi sejarah (Yesus sejarah) yang biasanya ditemukan dalam ilmu tafsir dan kontekstualisasi yang lebih memperhatikan konteks hidup pembaca (Alkitab) masa kini. Metode ini sendiri sudah menarik karena memperlihatkan kebutuhan untuk mempertimbangkan kajian sejarah yang seringkali dicap tidak terlalu bermanfaat bagi iman/ gereja, tanpa melupakan keberadaan komunitas beriman yang harus diperlakukan secara seimbang. Pertanyaan sentral yang diajukan adalah pertanyaan Yesus mengenai siapakah diriNya bagi para muridNya, dahulu maupun sekarang. Sebuah pertanyaan eksistensial yang me-

nuntut jawaban yang melibatkan keseluruhan hidup. Tulisan ini juga secara khusus mengangkat konteks Afrika yang nyaris tidak pernah didengar oleh orang-orang (Kristen) di Indonesia. Penulis yang bukan orang Afrika, namun pernah bekerja lama di sana, mencoba memperlihatkan penghayatan orang Afrika akan Kristus (Kristologi Afrika). Usaha itu dilakukan melalui kajian terhadap gelar-gelar yang dikenakan kepada Kristus.

Kata-kata kunci: Kristologi, Yesus Sejarah, Interkultural, Afrika.

Introduction

“Who do you say, I am?” This is the question Jesus asked his disciples almost 2000 years ago (Mk. 8:29). The disciples gave their answer at the time but the question remains. It has been answered by Christians throughout the ages in many different ways and it is still posed to all of us who are reading this article. Every believer has to find his or her own answer and it is not surprising but nevertheless remarkable that all the answers differ from each other in one way or the other as much as our faith is a personal and individual affair.

My own Christology revolves around two angles. One is Jesus himself and the things we can know about him from a historical perspective; and this will be the first part of this article. The second one is my own personal context, which is determined by my language and culture and the social, religious, economic and political conditions I live in. But this I will not present from my own perspective but from an African one thus opening up a wider intercultural perspective. This will be the third part of the article. But apart from that I do not consider it a waste of time to study how other people have answered the above question and in this respect I find it particularly interesting to see how the first followers of Jesus looked at him. Therefore a study of the Christological titles of the New Testament will come in as the second part of the article.

1. The Question of the Historical Jesus

1.1 Introductory Remarks

That Jesus was a historical figure, no reasonable person will doubt. Why then is it necessary to talk about the historical Jesus? And by the way,

does that presume that the Jesus of faith, the Jesus of the Bible, is different from the Jesus of history? Well, at least we cannot exclude this possibility. As much as we have faith, for which we thank God, because it is a gift from him, we also want to know and to understand. We are dealing with “faith seeking understanding”, as already the North African church father Augustine put it. That is why we ask questions, also about the historical Jesus. We want to know what kind of man he was, what his message was and what he did. Of course, whatever result we may reach at, it may still not help us to prove our faith. For instance, we can never prove that Jesus was the Son of God. That remains a statement of faith that can only be made by people whom God has given that faith. But we may be able to discover other historical facts and details about Jesus’ life and teaching that even people who are not Christians can agree to as well.

The major source to find out about the historical Jesus is of course the New Testament in general and the gospels in particular. They are describing the life, the words and deeds of Jesus of Nazareth. But the gospels do not simply tell us history. Instead they want to show that Jesus was the Son of God, the promised Messiah, who came to reconcile the whole world with God. They are not interested in historical detail but in creating faith in Jesus among their readers. They are presenting Jesus in a very positive light and I think the reader would agree that if we would have an account of the life of Jesus written by a member of the contemporary Jewish leaders, this would give us a completely different picture of him. We therefore have to study the gospels critically to see what historical information about Jesus they reveal. I can only give a short summary of the results of my own research, based on that of other scholars, at this point.²

1.2 The Life of Jesus

Jesus was a Jew born around the year 6 BCE in Nazareth (Mt. 2:23) in the northern part of Israel in the region of Galilee. His parents were Mary and Joseph, a carpenter who died early, and he had at least several brothers. As a young man he came in contact with John the Baptist, who was preaching his message of repentance. He became his follower and was baptised by him (Mk. 1:9). After the arrest of John, Jesus started his own ministry. He took over John’s eschatological call for repentance and announced the immediate coming of the Kingdom of God (Mk. 1:15), which was open to everybody. But he did not continue with John’s practice of baptism. Soon people began to gather round him and some, with time, became his follow-

ers, moving about together with him. Others he called directly to follow him and work together with him for the preparation of the coming of the Kingdom of God.

He addressed his message only to the Jews (Mt. 15:24), but the message itself bore already the drive to reach out beyond them, a step which was then taken later on by his followers. He showed a special interest in the underprivileged, the oppressed, those at the border and bottom of the society. But he did not only address their situation, assuring them that God had not abandoned them but instead loved them, but he also behaved towards them in a most unusual way, considering the standards of his time, and openly having fellowship with them (Mt. 9:10-13). Similarly he showed a special interest in women, treating them as equals and freely interacted with them (Lk. 7:37-39).

Another aspect of Jesus' ministry was the performance of extraordinary deeds. He had a special gift for healing, most especially of mental, psychological and psychosomatic diseases, which, according to the worldview of the time and of many contemporary communities, were seen as results of demon possessions (Lk. 6:18). These deeds gave his teaching a high degree of authority and made him quite famous.

His lifestyle and teaching aroused opposition, mainly among the Pharisees who insisted in a strict observance of the Jewish law laying special emphasis on the purity laws, which Jesus and his followers regularly transgressed. Still there was no complete breach between them and Jesus as later portrayed in the gospels, and in many respects their teaching was not far from each other (Lk. 14:1-6). More serious was the opposition from the Sadducees, another religious party, which was formed mainly by the priestly aristocracy and members of the wealthy and influential families in Jerusalem. By the time of Jesus they dominated the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Council, and were controlling the temple worship in Jerusalem. As Jesus was obviously very critical concerning the way the temple worship was conducted in his days, he inevitably clashed with the Sadducees (Mk. 11:15-18). They saw him as a threat to their leading role in the public and religious life and at one point started looking for a way to get rid of him.

The Sadducees had come to an arrangement with the Romans and had established more or less peaceful working relationships with them. It was clear that if they wanted to get Jesus out of their way, they needed to employ the agents of the Roman government in the country. In the end they accused him of being a political rebel, posing a serious threat to the

public order and even trying to overthrow the Roman government (Lk. 23:2f). Jesus was most probably aware of the danger, which lay ahead of him, especially if he came closer to the capital Jerusalem. But he was apparently not willing to compromise his message and his criticisms and was willing to face whatever consequence there might be. The Sadducees finally succeeded in convincing the Roman authorities of the seriousness of the situation and instigated them to act. Jesus was arrested in Jerusalem. He was judged and sentenced to death by the Roman Procurator Pontius Pilate probably on the basis of the accusation that he had declared himself to be the king of the Jews. And he was executed by crucifixion around the year 29.

1.3 The Teaching of Jesus

As already indicated, Jesus' teaching had some elements in common with that of John the Baptist. Both were proclaiming the judgement of God to be close at hand. But while John withdrew from the public and considered the present time to be a rather dark age, Jesus saw it as a time of God's nearness. This was a unique perspective in which Jesus differed with the common Jewish apocalyptic teaching. He saw God active in seeking and finding the lost and he invited his contemporaries to rejoice in that together with him (Lk. 15:4-32).

The centre of Jesus' teaching is certainly the announcement of the immediate coming of the Kingdom of God. In his most daring statements he even saw this kingdom already somehow present, even though in a small and hidden way not easily conceivable by everybody (Mt. 13:31-33). His healings are largely to be seen in this context. They manifest the loving kindness of God and are a sign of his kingdom.

This kingdom can only be received as a gift. There is nothing people can do in order to earn it. One just has to receive it like a child (Mk. 10:15). This is one of the major reasons why the outcasts and marginalised, in short all those who were despised by the religious leaders, as well as the poor and simple minded people gratefully accepted Jesus' message. They were not able to fulfil all the religious duties and obligations requested by the teachers of the Jewish law. But they were able to have that simple faith, the only thing, which Jesus taught to be necessary to enter the kingdom. On the other hand, as a consequence of Jesus' attachment with the just mentioned group of people, the rich and pious, those who thought to be sure to enter the kingdom, became objects of Jesus' criticisms (Lk.

6:24f). To rely on riches and pious works was, according to Jesus, deceiving. Everybody depended entirely on God's love, grace and mercy.

The fact that Jesus saw God's judgement and the dawn of his kingdom close at hand, gave his teaching a note of urgency. He confronted the people with the necessity to make a decision. Now were the time and the chance to repent and accept God's unique and unconditional offer. There could be a time when it would be too late. Either they decided to be on God's side or they would be cast away from the presence of God.

Concerning the ethical teaching of Jesus, he did not introduce anything new but only insisted that the will of God, as he understood it, would be followed. In the centre of his ethics was the commandment to love God and one's neighbour (Mk. 12:30f). What, however, was new, was that Jesus radically extended the commandment to love to everybody, including even one's enemies. He stressed as well the need to forgive one another, which he considered to be more important than fulfilling one's religious duties (Mt. 5:23f). Finally, he declared humility to be of primary importance and requested that the poor and lowly should be protected.

A question, which is difficult to answer, is how did Jesus see himself? As it looks like, all the Christological titles attached to him in the New Testament were only transferred upon him by others and not applied to him by himself. Most of them were even only transferred upon him by his followers after the Easter experience. In addition, if compared with the respective concepts as presented in the Old Testament and the Jewish intertestamental writings, one must admit that none of the titles found in the New Testament is really fitting for the historical Jesus. The closest is certainly Son of Man, but Jesus seems to clearly distinguish himself from this apocalyptic figure (Mk. 8:38). Nevertheless, as already indicated, it is at least obvious that Jesus understood his own words and actions in an eschatological sense.

So far a short abstract about what I consider the central aspects of what we can know about the historical Jesus. Many more details could be added to it but I do not have the space here. You may think that this is scanty, but for me it is sufficient as a historical basis for the development of my personal, individual faith and it portrays Jesus in a way that even non-Christians would have to admit that he was a unique figure within human history. But of course for us Christians he is more than that and therefore our study has to continue and we have to conduct a further, certainly also critical, analysis of how the Christians of the first century understood and interpreted Jesus' life and death in the light of their own religious

and philosophical traditions. With this analysis we are leaving the purely historical level and see what faith has added to the picture of Jesus of Nazareth.

2. The Christological Titles of the New Testament

Some of you will probably be surprised to be reminded of the plurality of titles that have been transferred upon Jesus in the New Testament. Some are almost forgotten or at least of no major relevance these days while others are still very popular and widely used. We will conduct a brief survey, looking at the original meaning and concept of the most prominent titles and seeing how they have been used to describe the person and the life and work of Jesus.³

2.1 Important Titles for Early Christianity

We are here looking at a group of three titles that were very important for the early Christians, particularly the Jewish Christians, but that have almost lost their relevance completely for contemporary Christianity. The first one of these is Jesus as the Suffering Servant. The title is based on passages from Deutero-Isaiah (42, 49, 50, 52) and describes a person who vicariously suffers for the people in order to restore them to God. The gospels and other New Testament texts show various references to this tradition, identifying Jesus as the Suffering Servant (Mk. 14:22-25, Act 8:26-35, Phil 2:7-8).

The second one in this group is Son of Man. This is indeed one of the most prominent New Testament titles for Jesus particularly in the gospels and the one which probably comes closest to his own self-understanding. The Son of Man is an eschatological figure that first appears in Daniel (Dan. 7:13ff) and then in the intertestamental writing Ethiopian Enoch. He can represent all humans or can be understood individually. He is a supernatural, heavenly being that existed from the beginning of creation, is hidden until he comes to judge the world at the end of time and will establish his rule.

The third title is the most important one for the Jewish context, Jesus as the Messiah, in Hebrew, or Christ, in Greek. You might be surprised when I say that this is a title that has lost its meaning almost altogether. Are we not constantly talking about Jesus Christ? Yes, but no longer in its original sense. The idea of a Messiah, of an anointed one, according to the English translation, who would appear at the end of time to

liberate the people of Israel from foreign rule and re-establish the Israelite kingdom, was developed in the Jewish intertestamental literature and had become one of the dominant eschatological concepts during the time of the New Testament. Literally everybody was waiting for him.

Looking at Jesus it seems that though the disciples and other followers may have hoped that he was the awaited Messiah, not even the gospel authors were very sure about it. Still, for the majority of Jewish Christians it was true, though admittedly Jesus had not chased away the Romans and re-established the Davidic kingdom. By the way, this is the reason why the great majority of Jews never accepted Jesus as the promised Messiah and refused to become his followers. On the other hand, for non-Jews the title Messiah didn't mean anything. They had not awaited him and had little idea of what the Jewish Christians were talking about. Therefore the Greek translation, Christ, soon became a proper name and was no longer understood as a title. And this holds true for our today's use of it as well. By the way, the foreignness of the three titles described in this group is exactly the reason why they have all lost their relevance. They were tied to a rather narrow Jewish background and could not be understood in a non-Jewish environment. This reminds us of the fact that whatever title we want to use for Jesus, it has to be meaningful to our context.

2.2 Titles of Minor Importance for Early and Contemporary Christianity

The second group of three titles which we will look at were neither very prominent within early Christianity nor are they very widely used in contemporary Christianity. One is Jesus as the Word, or Logos, in Greek. Even in the New Testament this title is explicitly only found in the prologue of John's gospel (Jn. 1:1-14) and two other passages of the Johannine writings. However, it was important in the early church for the development of the dogma of the pre-existence of Jesus and lays emphasis to Jesus' words expressing the identity of the message with the messenger.

Next we have Jesus as High Priest, which is also a rather singular title, actually only found in Hebrews (Heb. 2, 4-5, 7-9). Nevertheless, it did have some influence particularly on shaping the Christology of the reformers and their follower as they developed the teaching of the so-called threefold office of Jesus as prophet, priest and king. In addition, it seems that in modern inculturation approaches to Christology the idea of Jesus as priest has found renewed interest.⁴

Finally we have Jesus as a Prophet according to the Old Testament tradition of prophets or Jesus as the special Prophet who would prepare the people for the coming of God's judgement and his kingdom. It seems many of his contemporaries considered Jesus as a prophet (Mt. 21:46, Mk. 6:14-15) and indeed his ministry surely had many things in common as compared to the ministry of the Old Testament prophets. As concerns the special Prophet to prepare the people for the coming of God's judgement and his kingdom, Jesus rather held John the Baptist to be the one (Mt. 11:13-14). Still, as we have just heard about the three-fold office of Jesus, the title Prophet could have some relevance. An interesting question is whether in Islamic contexts Christians make more use of this title as it is accepted by Muslims as well.⁵

2.3 Titles of Major Importance for Contemporary Christianity

This third group comprises six titles which I think are still more widely used today. One is closely related with his earthly ministry while the others relate to his saving work and his present and eternal reign. The title linked with Jesus' earthly ministry is Teacher, or Rabbi, in Aramaic. Rabbi is not very prominent in the New Testament and mainly found in the Gospel of John (13:13) whereas Teacher is commonly found in the Gospels of Mark and Matthew (Mk. 4:38, Mt. 12:38). It seems Jesus was considered a teacher of the word and will of God, not only by his disciples but also by others. In European Christianity where the earthly ministry of Jesus has received a lot of attention during the past decades, the title Teacher has become very meaningful (Perkins, 1990; Köstenberger, 1998: 97-128; Robins, 2009).

Coming to the group of five prominent titles linked with Jesus' divine and saving ministry, these are often particularly important in conservative, pietistic or evangelical circles. One of them is Jesus as Lord (See for example Walvoord, 1980). This was particularly developed in Greek speaking Christian circles and refers to Jesus as being glorified and exalted at God's right hand, as interceding for his people and intervening in their lives and in earthly events and as being prayed to by individuals and in collective worship. The title may have its roots in the earthly ministry of Jesus (Mt. 7:21) but acquired its full meaning only after Easter and Jesus' exaltation (Act. 2:25). Secular and religious connotations seemingly merged in the understanding and use of the title.

Related to Lord and sometimes even subsumed under it is the title King. As the Jews could refer to God both as their Lord and King it acquired a similar meaning, though originally it had a rather close relationship with Messiah. But Jesus clearly refused to be a political type of king (Jn. 18:33-37). Still, different from the title Messiah, King could be understood perfectly well by non-Jews as well. Instead of an earthly king Jesus was seen to be a heavenly king, though this included his rule over all the earthly kings as expressed in the phrase king of kings as parallel to lord of lords (Rev. 17:14).

A very prominent title these days seems to be Saviour (See for example Placher, 2001). It was not very common within early Christianity maybe because it was overshadowed by the more prominent titles Lord and King as originally it had strong political connotations as well referring to a political saviour usually identified with the Messiah. In the Greek speaking world a saviour could either be a human or a god and the title could easily be adopted. However, with time it took on the particular meaning of referring to Jesus' saving act as through his death he saved us from our sins and from eternal death which otherwise would have been the fate of all of us.

Another prominent title is Son of God. This denotes the divine majesty of Jesus, his oneness with God and obedience to him. The title was common in both the Hellenistic and Jewish contexts. Kings were thought to be sons of God in the Orient and other people with supposedly divine powers could be called Son of God as well. In the Old Testament the whole nation of Israel could be called Son of God. Jesus is frequently referred to as Son of God in the New Testament (Mt. 3:17, Jn. 3:16-21, Rom. 5:10) as he is close to God, reveals divine knowledge, shows divine powers and seems to have a special, unique relationship with God. He is therefore also Son of God in a unique way, distinguished from us being sons and daughters of God in a different way.

Lastly, Jesus is seen as God. This is clearly a later development but is based on titles like Lord, Logos or Son of God. It is therefore not yet very prominent in the New Testament and mostly seen in John's Gospel and Hebrews (Jn. 20:28, Heb. 1:8-9). It shows the divine attributes and functions of Jesus as revealer, ruler and one with the father. But Jesus is God usually only in revelation of himself, thereby not exhausting the nature of God the Father. Of God we speak in general terms but of Jesus we usually talk in relation to his revelation.

I have thus come to the end of the second chapter of my article and of the survey of the Christological titles of the New Testament. I am

not suggesting that we have to integrate all of them into our own personal faith. It is good to study them and see which ones might still be relevant to and helpful in our present contexts. An interesting exercise in this respect could be to ask yourselves, what titles do I usually use when I talk about Jesus, and what do I really mean by them? In addition, we should study how Jesus is seen in what we may call popular belief in order to be able to make him meaningful to the people we interact with. But the titles of Jesus and the way we look at him or the way we describe him have always been changing and are still changing. This is necessary and it brings us to our third section, how do African Christians look at Jesus these days?

3. Modern Interpretations of Jesus in the African Context

With the coming of Christianity to other parts of the world through the activity of the missionaries, especially from the 19th century onwards, the question of who Jesus is has arisen anew, this time in completely different historical, social, cultural and religious contexts. How do African theologians try to describe Jesus in their own context? How do they answer Jesus' question: "Who do you say, I am?"

3.1 The Inculturation Approach

We have seen in the second part of our study that all the Christological titles of the New Testament have their background in Judaism and partly also in the Hellenistic culture of the time. As these contexts are to a larger extent foreign to the traditional and present African context, we cannot expect Africans to just take over these titles. The inculturation approach rather attempts to formulate Christian beliefs in terms that are familiar to Africans as rooted in their own traditions and culture. Christianity is thus believed to have to find its own home in the particular African context. This is meant by saying that the Christian faith has to be inculturated in Africa.⁶ Various scholars and ordinary African Christians have tried to find analogies for Jesus in the African context and I am going to present some major ones.⁷

3.1.1 Chief

One prominent title used for Jesus in the African context is chief. This seems indeed suitable since it can be adequately and equally applied to both Jesus' position and his works. Concerning his position, a chief in the traditional understanding is someone holding authority and someone

governing his people. A chief is the head of a community just as Jesus is the head of the church. He is in an exalted position, which could well be applied to the risen Jesus who sits at God's right hand and rules over his people. As concerns the expected characteristics of a chief, they might be summarised as strong, wise, impartial, caring, generous and courageous.⁸

Talking about the characteristics already leads us to reflecting on the works, the activities or the roles of the chief. The aim of the traditional chief as well as that of Jesus is to act for the welfare of the community they are governing. The chief protects his people against dangers and enemies. The chief judges his people wisely and impartially, as Jesus is the ultimate judge in the Christian context. The chief cares for and provides for his people. In some cases chiefs may also die in an attempt to save their people or may have to give up their lives. From this angle one may be able to explain certain aspects of Jesus' death.

There are of course also limitations if Africans want to use the title chief to state their faith in Jesus in their context. Among some people there were no strong chiefs as rulers of the community but rather a council of elders. Even where traditional chiefs existed they were often controlled by councils and their power was not absolute but limited. On the other hand, where chiefs had indeed a very powerful position and especially if religious functions were attached to them, they were often removed from the people and not to be approached by ordinary people. All this is different in the case of Jesus. In addition, it happens now and then that African chiefs misuse their position and authority and become autocratic dictators. Jesus explicitly criticises this kind of rule in Mk. 10:42f and sets a different pattern.

The latter remarks already show us that, similarly to the traditional New Testament titles conferred upon Jesus, also the African titles are perfected and transcended in various ways. Jesus is not just an ordinary chief but the chief, the chief par excellence. He perfects the ideas and ideals of chieftaincy in the traditional African context. He is the perfect chief. On the other hand, he also transcends the concept of chieftaincy. And he does so in a twofold sense. He transcends it in a geographical sense as his reign is not limited to a particular people or country. He rules over the whole world. In analogy with Rev 17:14 one could say he is the chief of chiefs. Secondly, he also transcends the traditional concept of chieftaincy since it is no longer limited to a purely worldly or political understanding. Jesus is chief also in a spiritual sense. He cares for us and provides for us not only in relation to our physical needs but also in relation to our spiritual needs.

This idea can be seen already in the tradition of many African peoples where the chief is not only a political but also a religious leader.

3.1.2 Healer

Another title of importance that is used for Jesus in the African context is healer.⁹ Healing was without doubt one of the principal activities of Jesus during his earthly ministry. The gospel accounts are full of individual stories and summaries to illustrate this fact. We often talk of the healing ministry of Jesus, which he asked his disciples and followers to engage in as well. As we know that healing and traditional healers play an important role in the African context as well, it is probably not very far-fetched to refer to Jesus as the healer in an African Christian setting. But even beyond his earthly ministry, Jesus' healing power is still active among people right now. That means it is also part of his present ministry.

The traditional African healer stands for the forces of life over against the forces of death manifesting themselves in all kinds of diseases. The way sickness is understood especially in the New Testament seems close to the traditional African understanding. Some evil forces are at work, in the New Testament it is Satan or demons or evil spirits that need to be counteracted by the forces of life manifested in the African healer as well as in Jesus. Sickness in the New Testament and in the African tradition is not seen one-dimensional as it has long been the case in the West, that is, only from a physical perspective. The New Testament and the African tradition agree that sickness has, next to the physical, also a spiritual, a psychological and a social dimension and to effect holistic healing all these dimensions need to be taken into consideration and to be taken care of.

As healing is always also a spiritual affair in the African traditional background, healers are supposed and believed to have special spiritual gifts and powers. One may almost say they have supernatural powers or at least have access to them. This is another close parallel to how people understood Jesus during his earthly ministry and how they still understand him today. In addition, at least the respectable traditional healers in Africa are usually said to have received their knowledge from supernatural sources, be it the ancestors, a god or the Supreme Being. Traditional healers are believed to work in close connection with the supernatural. This can once more easily be applied to Jesus as he does everything in close connection with God and has all his powers and knowledge from God. Finally, as Africa is in a situation of crisis and suffering, the image of Jesus as a healer

might be attractive to a larger extent

Of course, in conclusion, Jesus once again perfects and transcends the work and being of the traditional African healer. Sometimes traditional healers could not be consulted by strangers who did not belong to the community. Jesus now still widens this scope in that everybody can have access to him. Also his powers are superior to those of African healers. And finally, he is not only in close contact with God but he is God himself. In a missiological sense and terminology we could probably say that Jesus fulfils the aspirations of the traditional healers.

3.1.3 Ancestor

The third traditional African title conferred upon Jesus, that I want to present here, is that of ancestor.¹⁰ Looking at the ancestors we can also see that there are parallels between them and Jesus as far as their position and their activities are concerned. Their position is an elevated one. They are close to the gods or the Supreme Being and are frequently believed to be the mediators or intermediaries between the people and the gods or the Supreme Being. They have access to and are in position of supernatural powers. They are spiritual beings usually believed to be immortal. All this seems very similar to what Christians say and believe about Jesus.

As concerns the activities of the ancestors, they have left behind a legacy for their descendants, a testament or a will. More particularly they are believed to be the authors of the laws of the land, of the rules and regulations that their descendants are supposed to follow. But they are not only the originators of these rules, they also keep close watch over their descendants in order to make sure that the rules are kept and they react with blessings or curses respectively. Next they are believed to be the providers of all good things that their descendants need in order to have a good life. They fulfil this function either out of their own capacity or as intermediaries with the gods or the Supreme Being. These gifts are possibly primarily material things but spiritual things are surely included too like peace and harmony among the people.

In this context we can again easily see how the traditional concepts relate to Jesus. He is also the author of the rules that his followers have to abide by and to keep. And he takes a keen interest in that they do so. He is also believed to be the provider or at least mediator of all things necessary for a good life, materially and spiritually. He has come that people may have life and have it abundantly. Just as it is expected from anybody who

wants to be accorded the position of ancestor, Jesus also led an exemplary life and showed a character worth emulating.

There are of course aspects in relation to the African ancestors, which Jesus does not fulfil at all. An African ancestor is supposed to have reached old age, have had children and have died a peaceful death. On the other hand, Jesus again surpasses and transcends the traditional concept of the African ancestors. He is again the ancestor par excellence. He fulfils the ideals of the ancestors. He lived a perfect life and he is divine in a sense far beyond the ancestors. He transcends their traditional area of jurisdiction as ancestors are normally only in charge of their own descendants. Jesus is the ancestor of all humanity and everybody has access to God through him.

3.2 The Liberation Approach

Next to the inculturation approach the liberation approach is the second one that is of great importance in the African context.¹¹ The basic biblical assumption of liberation theology right from its beginning was that the God of the Bible is largely a God who liberates people from all sorts of bondages and slaveries. The basic constituent experience of the people of Israel was the exodus, their liberation from slavery in Egypt. God's concern for the weak, the stranger, the poor, the widow and the orphan, the oppressed cannot be overlooked in the Bible. This strong biblical background gives liberation theologians the urge to develop a theology where these principles are applied to our present day situation. Liberation is not considered as one biblical issue among others but seen as the central theme of the Bible itself. Any theology must thus necessarily be liberation theology or it is no theology at all.

3.2.1 African Christology of Liberation

In the person of Jesus Africans see God's concern for the marginalized and his aim to liberate them. Particularly the gospel according to Luke shows these traits in the ministry of Jesus very clearly. Lk. 4:16-21 can be seen as a programmatic text, summarising and outlining the whole ministry of Jesus. Apart from this there are countless stories where Jesus liberated people from various forms of slavery, material and spiritual. Also in his preaching he is very critical about the prevailing conditions of his time. If Africans truly want to be followers of Jesus, they have to engage in liberating their people from their present situation.¹²

The last remark actually already marks the second starting point of an African liberation Christology, the everyday experience of the ordinary African. And this experience is often one of exploitation, oppression and abject poverty. Any meaningful theology must take this situation seriously and must seek to find answers to it. Therefore, liberation Christology tries to apply the basic principles of Jesus' ministry to the present situation of the Africans.

There are external and internal forces at work that oppress and exploit Africans socially, politically and economically. Jesus teaches us to face and confront these forces. He is in solidarity with the marginalized and wants their liberation. He is not neutral but taking sides and he is calling us to join him in the liberation of his people and to take sides as well. The liberation Jesus is talking about is one of concrete actions, changing concrete situations. It is not so much a theological debate or a matter of having the right belief. Orthopraxis is actually considered more important than orthodoxy. That means to do the right thing in following Jesus' example is more important than to believe the right thing, especially if this believing has no practical consequences. Liberation from poverty has become a major concern for African theologians and again they refer to Jesus as having shown a special concern for the poor and as having made strong statements against the rich. These texts have to be interpreted in the present context of Africa.

But all this does not mean that Jesus only came for the poor and oppressed. He came for everybody. He also came for the rich and for the oppressors. Because they need liberation just as the poor and oppressed need it. Jesus calls them to repentance and he urges them to turn away from their evil ways and find the right liberation and freedom in him.

On the other hand, and the last remark already indicates this, it is clear that liberation should not be understood in a purely materialistic or political sense, as important as this is. Jesus also liberated people from sin and this is possibly the most basic and fundamental act of liberation he performed. The liberation from sin is possibly the key to all other forms of liberation because sin underlies all forms of oppression and exploitation and we have to get to the roots of the problem. Without liberating people from sin all other liberation may remain fragmental or may be considered as only curing the symptoms of the disease instead of really effecting holistic and lasting healing.

3.2.2 African Feminist Christology

African feminist theology developed since the 1970s being influenced by Western feminist theology, African theology and Liberation theology. African feminist Christology can thus maybe be seen as a special branch of African liberation Christology.¹³ Jesus clearly came to liberate everybody and he was particularly concerned with the disadvantaged. From the Jewish background it is clear that women clearly belonged to this category. But in the movement of Jesus women obviously occupied a prominent position. They followed him, were present when he taught and became his missionaries and confessed him as Christ. Jesus regularly used images and parables related to the world of women. He healed women, talked to them very freely, showed concern for their particular situation and problems and praised their faith. The Kingdom of God had apparently come for the women as well and Jesus considered and treated them equally with men. Women are particularly associated with Jesus' death and resurrection. They followed him to the cross, were present at his death, saw where he was buried, prepared his anointing and were the first to whom the risen Lord appeared. Finally women were quite involved in the birth of the church as can be seen in Acts and the Pauline letters.

Unfortunately the early church soon started to push the women into the background again. It was not able to maintain the standards set by Jesus but went back to the way women used to be treated in the Jewish culture. Step by step women were eliminated and barred from positions of leadership which they had held earlier. The later texts of the New Testament clearly reflect this development. Therefore, what the women are asking for is to re-discover and go back to Jesus' original teaching, which was of course very revolutionary, and to go back to how the church started.

Like with the general liberation Christology, the second starting point is to look at the present situation of women in Africa. In the African context women do not play any major public role. They are suffering to an even higher degree from exploitation and oppression. They are assigned their traditional tasks as mother, wife, educator and nurturer. They are overworked and overburdened. Even in the churches they are relegated to the background and not considered equal with men. But it seems that women largely accept this situation. Only a few of them have stepped ahead in the face of the many difficulties and obstacles.

Jesus in his incarnation takes on all these situations of weakness and injustice. He bears the condition of the weak and hence that of women.

Jesus has become weak in becoming human, thereby showing his concern for the weak. Therefore the African woman can say: Jesus has been concerned with, and has been touched by, the situation I am living in. He shows a great deal of interest in women and they are very interested in him. He is truly Good News for the women of Africa. He is in solidarity with women and their suffering and he liberates them and entrusts them with his message of life for both, men and women.

Conclusion

Summarising the last part of my presentation I simply say we have to combine the inculturation and the liberation approaches to create a truly contextual approach.¹⁴ To me, such a contextual approach is a must, be we Africans, Indonesians or Europeans. There cannot be any other approach if at all our preaching should make sense to the people we are talking to and should be meaningful to their lives. I would also call this a holistic approach, taking into account all aspects of our human existence. Taking this seriously and strictly it also means that our Christology has to remain flexible. Don't think at one point, "now I've got it". As life keeps changing and the world we live in keeps changing our Christology will need to be ready to change as well, if need be. Therefore, allow yourselves now and then to be asked by Jesus again: "Who do you think, I am?"

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- 1 This article is a revised version of a lecture I delivered at the Theological Faculty of Universitas Kristen Duta Wacana (UKDW) in Yogyakarta on 7 September 2011.
- 2 See for the whole chapter particularly the study of Gerd Theissen, Merz (1998); see also Sanders (1996). More controversial but influential is Crossan (1991).
- 3 See for this chapter for instance the major studies of Hahn (2002) and Cullmann (1959).
- 4 This is usually situated in the context of the discussion on Christ as Healer and to a lesser extent in the context of Christ as Chief; see below 3.1.2 and 3.1.1.
- 5 See already the study of Lawrence (1997). On the internet there seems to be a lively discussion about Jesus as Prophet between Christians and Muslims.
- 6 For a general discussion on the inculturation approach see Shorter (1988), Magesa (2004) and Gifford (2008, :18-34). See for a recent general critical study Arbuckle (2010).
- 7 See as general works for example Schreiter (1991), Domingues (1999), Abogunrin, Akao, and Akintunde (2003), Stinton (2004) and Goergen (2001, :5-51).
- 8 For Jesus as chief see Kabasélé (1991:103-115) and Stinton (2008:253-273). See also Uchukwu (1993).
- 9 A major work in this context is Shorter (1985). See also Kolié (1991:128-150) and Matthew Schoeffeleers (1989:157-183).
- 10 This is without doubt the most prominent analogy used for Jesus in the African context. Among the substantial amount of literature the following major works might be mentioned: Nyamiti (1984), Bujo (1992) and Ezech (2003).
- 11 The liberation approach was first developed in South Africa in the context of the fight against the Apartheid system and was influenced by the Liberation Theology from Latin America and the Black Theology from the USA; see Bosch (1977). For further works on African Liberation Theology see Okolo (1997), Ela (1986) and Magesa (1976).
- 12 For African Liberation Christologies see Mofokeng (1985), Mugambi and Magesa (1998).

13 The most prominent of the African women theologians is certainly Mercy Amba Oduyoye. See for example Oduyoye (1986); see further Hinga (1992:183-94) and Nasimiyu-Wasike (1991:70-81).

14 This is in essence also the perspective of Martey (1993).