

APPROPRIATING HISTORICAL JESUS RESEARCH IN AFRICA

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Abstract

This study starts with a brief overview of the variety of images of Jesus found in African Christianity. African Christianity (like Christianity all over the world) has many ingenious and creative ways of going about the figure of Jesus, of which the quest for what Jesus can do for Africans and the inculturation of Jesus in African images represent the main trends. Although historical Jesus research receives almost no attention in African scholarship, it is argued that a historical understanding of Jesus within his own cultural setting can pick up many clues from the study of religious specialists in African traditional religions (ATRs). From such an approach, Jesus as historical figure can not only be described as similar to typical religious practitioners in many ATRs, but it offers a new avenue for inter-religious dialogue in Africa.

Truth is under all circumstances more valuable than non-truth, and this must apply to truth in the realm of history as to other kinds of truth. Even if it comes in a guise which piety finds strange and at first makes difficulties for her, the final result can never mean injury; it can only mean greater depth. Religion has, therefore, no reason for trying to avoid coming to terms with historical truth (Schweitzer).

1. Introduction

The relationship between (African) Christianity and African traditional religions (ATRs) over the years has been extremely problematic (to say the least). The dominant reaction from the side of Christian theology towards ATRs has either been open hostility or silent superiority; they had to be eradicated or replaced. Recently there have been voices calling for a renewed dialogue or as Maluleke (1998), one of these voices, says, a 'reopening of a debate that never started'. What he does not say is how such a debate can be conducted. The aim of this study is to suggest one possible way of going about that debate. It comes from a very unexpected

place: from research on Jesus as historical figure. Although historical Jesus research receives almost no attention in African scholarship, it will be shown that a historical understanding of Jesus within his own cultural setting can pick up many clues from the study of religious specialists in ATRs. From such an approach Jesus can not only be described as similar to typical religious practitioners in many ATRs but it offers a new avenue for inter-religious dialogue in Africa.

This study, however, is neither an exercise in African christology nor a contribution towards African theology, but an attempt from the side of research on Jesus as historical figure to contribute to inter-religious dialogue in Africa. In doing so, both the nature of African christologies and the images of Jesus in African Christianity will be addressed, together with the existing relationships between African Christianity and ATRs. Some of the existing ways in which the interaction between ATRs and Christian theology has been conducted as well as the images of Jesus adopted by or developed in Africa will therefore be presented. In other words, this study stands on two legs (the images of Jesus in African theology and the interaction between African Christians and ATRs) which at first sight seem to be miles apart. However, in the latter part of the study it will be argued that inter-religious dialogue can move forward on these two legs.

2. *What is African Christianity Doing to Jesus?*

Like elsewhere in the world, Africans do many things to the figure of Jesus and there are many trends in African Christianity. These are not all on the same level and they do not all have the same importance. Nevertheless, at least four trends can be identified in what Africans do to Jesus.

2.1 *The Adoption of Western Images*

The first thing is that African Christianity has adopted and continues to use Western images of Jesus. The Christianity transferred to Africa was mostly that of Western Christianity. According to Nyamiti (1989), African churches are still dominated by white (Western) christologies. Motlhabi (1994) also notes that traditional Western theology has remained a resident alien among most African Christians, but in order to clarify it, people turn towards their traditional beliefs. Therefore, even when images

like 'Jesus the teacher' or 'Jesus the saviour' are still utilised, they are being filled with local cultural contents. In these circles the belief of some kind of 'pure' Christianity (what Maluleke (1996) calls 'an unideological Christianity') that is uncontaminated by ideologies or cultures strongly persists. It, for example, goes under the banner of a 'scripture-based Christianity' (see for example Wendland 1995) or what Musasiwa (1993) calls a 'super-cultural' entity, namely the gospel. As will be seen later, this position often forms the basis of the rejection of both inculturated christologies and ATRs. Western Christianity, according to this position, holds a superior position among the religions.

2.2 *Inculturation*

By far the most advanced and popular style of theological reflection in Africa, according to Nyamiti's (1989) overview, is that of inculturation. Inculturation, in the context of the Christian religion in Africa, refers to the utilisation of African cultures as the medium of communicating the Christian gospel (see Tlhagale 1998; Nyamiti 1994; Tlhagale 1998:1; Nyamiti 1994:64). Such interpretations are consciously informed by the worldview and life-experience of the culture within which the interpreter wishes to be located (see Ukpong 1995:5). This viewpoint is confirmed by the large number of overviews of this field as well as the great variety of inculturated African christologies on the market.

In this study a distinction will be made between three trends in inculturation.¹

The first is that of the hidden Christ. *Hidden Christ* christologies have a variety of formats. Some are based on the biblical notion that Jesus and God are one, and since Africans have always worshipped God, Jesus has actually been worshipped in Africa without a name. The support for this version is the biblical notion that Jesus is the eternal logos (*Logos Spermatikos*) in whom all things are created; Christ thus pervades all cultures, even when not known or identified (see Ukpong 1994:41–43). Others look for a hidden Christian ATR because it is believed that Jesus is a universal principle. Bahemuka (1989:3) clearly demonstrates this trend of inculturation when she argues that since Jesus is true God and true man, 'the 'hidden' Christ, the Jesus of faith, is alive, yesterday, today and forever'. The foreign garb in which Jesus is thus presented to African people should be replaced with the cultural and thought patterns of Africans. In her own words: 'Inculturation is the conviction that Christ

and His good news are ever dynamic and challenging to all times and cultures as they become better understood and lived by each people' (Bahemuka 1989:14). By affirming their belief in God, Africans can discover the hidden Christ. This trend is pointed out by Nyamiti (1992:66–67) as a neglected area of development. He claims that ATRs contain implicit traces of Christian teaching – even of christology. In his words: 'African traditional religions and cultures should be systematically and scientifically examined in order to detect traces of Christian teachings on Christ and how such teachings have been inculturated in African contexts' (Nyamiti 1994:67). An alternative version of this argument emphasises that ATRs are just a vital preparation for the gospel (see Bediako 1993:56). As Maluleke (1998:131) says about Bediako, for him 'ATRs are neither equal nor comparable to the Christian gospel; they are merely a preparation for the Gospel'.

It thus happens in the minds of convinced believers that Christian christology is to be identified in ATRs. It is, however, a question whether ATRs should at all be *Christianised* in this way.

The second trend of inculturation is that of Jesus as example. The *Jesus as example* trend in inculturation can be seen in the work of Ukpong (1994), who argues that Jesus proclaimed the good news to the Jewish people from within their own culture. Not only did he use their own cultural resources, but he also challenged that culture. The precondition of this trend is that the interpreter must be committed to the *Christian faith*, which should then be actualised in the contemporary context of the local cultures (see Ukpong 1995). The upshot of this *biblical* approach is that just as Jesus did not destroy the Jewish culture but evangelised it, inculturation should follow that example. In my view this same pattern can be seen in Mugambi's (1989) attempt to find paradigms for christological reflection either in the story of Jesus or in incidents and features attributed to him.

The third trend of inculturation is the description of Christ as some kind of African *religious* figure.²

In this approach Jesus is described by means of well-known African analogues. The following are examples of this kind of inculturation. Nyamiti (1989:26) describes Jesus as our 'Brother-ancestor *par excellence*' while Schoffeleers (1994) sees Christ as *nganga* (or medicine-man) – a collective term for the healer, prophet, diviner. Waruta (1991:53) shows that Christ as mediator, outlined as prophet, priest and potentate, satisfies the need for African people who are looking for a figure who can mediate between the human and the divine worlds, while Kolié (1991)

gives Jesus the face of a healer in Africa. Pobee (see Nyamiti 1989:21) suggests a royal-priestly christology (Jesus as *chief* or *Chief Nana*, the 'Great and greatest ancestor' – see Akinade 1995:186) and Setiloane 1979:64) puts forward the idea of Jesus as an 'African *Bongaka* [sic]' (*ngaka*: a traditional doctor).

Jesus thus becomes the supreme ancestor or chief *nganga* or elder brother par excellence. In these types of christology Jesus is meant to fill these roles in the traditional cultural setting and to replace the traditional specialists.

Jesus as Africa's liberator. The third trend of what Africans do to Jesus is found in christologies of liberation. Christologies of liberation in Africa over a broad spectrum share many traits, Nyamiti (1989:28) states. They are christologies

from below, namely, the states point (sic – *ed*) is the man Jesus of Nazareth. Stress is put on the historical background and biblical texts concerning Him: Jesus lived in a society which was oppressed and exploited by the Romans. He was poor because of Roman exploitation and oppression. Hence, He was 'black.' It was his mission to fight against this poverty, oppression and lack of freedom ... Jesus died in this fight against oppression. But by raising him, God has shown that He was for Him and with Him in His struggle against oppression. The Christians who fight against their oppression participate in Jesus' fight...

The way in which Jesus can be understood as God comes with understanding him as 'very man'. The *very man* is the historical Jesus, the Jesus who is the liberator of the oppressed today because he was in solidarity with the oppressed in his own historical context and time. The historical Jesus fed the poor, healed the sick, acknowledged his own homelessness, and challenged the political and religious authorities of his time, Akinade (1995:192) states. As a prophet who challenged the elite, healed the sick, liberated the poor and died as a political radical, the historical Jesus emerges as the one showing liberation today. Within this approach Jesus as historical figure was the liberator par excellence.

These christologies claim to start from Jesus as historical person and depict him as the oppressed one whose life is similar to that of the oppressed and wretched people on earth. His liberation thus means a liberation from suffering, misery and oppression. Participation in Jesus' liberation often means taking responsibility for one's own liberation.

2.3 *Jesus: Images of Ordinary People*

What ordinary people do to Jesus in Africa has many faces. Therefore, no single picture is available. Some examples from different contexts will give an indication of the variety of things that are going on.

When looking at the ordinary religious practices in congregations, such as the hymns and the preaching, a fascinating picture emerges. It should be realised that, strictly speaking, this is not what ordinary people themselves say, but what they experience and participate in.

Maluleke (1997:192–193) shows that in the hymns and preaching in African churches, ‘Jesus does not seem terribly interested in either the doings or the fate of the sinners or the “goats” of Matthew 25 ... this is a Jesus of the parousia who knows how to sing, clap hands and dance like an African.’ In the preaching, Jesus is an African; often he becomes a character who is acted out in a dramatic and loud sermon. It is as if Jesus and the Holy Spirit take over the voices, bodies and emotions of the preachers and in them one sees a Jesus ‘speaking forcefully, gesturing, crying, jumping up and down and sometimes even fainting in the process’ (Maluleke 1997:198). While this is not necessarily the only portrayal of Jesus in African church life, it cannot be ignored in this overview.

Another picture comes from some practices in independent churches. Waruta (1991:58–59) shows how Christian faith is being made relevant in the daily life of African people in a quite different way.

For the followers of these independent churches, the prophet is their spiritual and political leader and liberator. While the prophet may resist identifications or designations as the Messiah, his followers do not see much of a difference, and such a prophet often gets the kind of reverence and status accorded to Jesus.

In some extreme cases the religious leader (the mythical *nganga*) is explicitly represented as the Christ or as an alternative Christ (see Schoffeleers 1994:83). The leaders themselves are seen as powerful and they replace Jesus, who is seen as one of the powerful men of all times.³

2.4 *Characteristics of the African Images of Jesus*

From this brief overview of the images of Jesus in African Christianity and scholarship it is clear that christology is alive and well in Africa. From the grassroots level of ordinary believers to that of professional

theologians there is a vibrant and diverse activity of Christological reflection. By way of systematic summary, the following features can be noted with regard to the images of Jesus in African Christianity. The first is that the majority of studies and images of Jesus operate with a christology *from above*. Christology from above refers to the tradition, following the early church practices of the third and fourth centuries, of describing Jesus as some kind of divine figure who descended to earth to act as God's agent. He is usually described in relation to the Trinity and as *true* God and *true* man.

Christology from below refers to the nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholarly descriptions of Jesus in which the focus is squarely on the humanity of Jesus, and in which the theological position of Jesus as both true God and true man is the starting point (see for example Nyamiti 1989:31; Bahemuka 1989:3). A variant of this position is the claim of the universality of Christ that is based on a unified biblical teaching about Jesus; 'Biblical teaching clearly shows that Jesus is who he is (ie Saviour) because of what he has done and can do (ie save), and also that he was able to do what he did on the Cross because of who he is (God the Son)...' (Bediako 1993). In other words, these christologies are not concerned with Jesus as historical figure or human being, but depart from a theological position of Jesus as some kind of divine being or god. They are explicitly confessional in that the identity of Jesus (Christ) is already assumed (see also Wessels 1990:163).

A second feature of African images of Jesus, of both ordinary people and professional theologians, is that they are mainly concerned with a Jesus who can be of help to African people. As LeMarquand (1997:161, 165) remarks:

African biblical scholarship, not content to leave Jesus in a first-century context, is compelled by social, political and religious convictions to demonstrate his relationship to contemporary African life ... Most African biblical scholarship is unabashedly confessional ... Consequently, the Jesus which African scholars find reflected in the pages of the New Testament is a Jesus who helps the church in Africa.

Therefore, the main characteristic of the quest for African christology is to translate Jesus Christ into the tongue, style, genius, character and cultures of African people (see Waruta 1991:56–57). Sugirtharajah (1991:333) complains that the Jesus projected by the missionaries onto Third World people was

... a preacher of timeless truths who conquers and vanquishes the cultures and religious traditions of other peoples, a proclaimer of cosmic catastrophe who was indifferent to the current social issues and a pacifist who was remote from human tensions and turmoils.

That, however, has all changed since Africa needs a Jesus who fits into its setting. Obeng (1992:91) is quite explicit about this: 'Jesus, the one who raises the dead must be portrayed to the African as the effective protection against all mystical forces.'⁴

A third feature is that historical Jesus research or reflection about Jesus as historical figure plays almost no role in these activities. This remark needs some clarification. On the one hand it is true that African liberation christologies do operate with the term *the historical Jesus* but then it does not have the same meaning as in the recent quests for the historical Jesus (an activity that dates from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries).⁵

Situating Jesus in his historical context serves as a powerful tool for empowering people in their present-day settings of oppression and suffering. However, Jesus is simply taken at face value from the New Testament, especially the synoptic gospels (see the evaluations of Smit 1987:6–7; Van Aarde 1994:592; Vorster 1994:628). As has been shown above, liberation christologies basically operate with a picture of Jesus who opposed oppression and brought liberation in his own context and apply that to their own situation of oppression and suffering (see also the discussion in LeMarquand 1997:166–171).

On the other hand, as LeMarquand's overview shows, African New Testament scholars have indeed produced some studies related to issues in historical Jesus research. However, as he remarks (LeMarquand 1997:172), these works

... all make a serious attempt to understand Jesus in his context, but none are content to leave him there; they seek to show some connection with Africa by underlining the links between a text and the church in Africa, or by arguing that the African tradition helps us to understand the meaning of some aspects of Jesus.

It would be fair to say that historical Jesus research up to this day is and basically remains a European and North American scholarly activity with very few contributions from outside that circle (for example from African scholarship; see Abogunrin 1980). Some scholars do their best to find some kind of meaning or message in these studies which can be

applied to African situations.⁶ There are other attempts to argue that this is the road to be taken by African Christianity in their Christological reflection.⁷ It will be argued that it is unlikely that this will happen, because traditional historical Jesus research is a typical Western 'Christological' activity and just as African Christologies are almost totally disregarded in Western Christianity, the same will happen the other way round.

One of the issues of the present study is whether African scholarship can contribute to the historical Jesus research project in a meaningful and important way. It is my contention that it can indeed do that, but then only if historical Jesus research itself is redefined. It should not and it cannot give answers to the existing questions but it can help transform the questions themselves. In this regard ATRs (can) play a major role.

3. A View on the Interaction Between ATRs and Christianity

While this is an issue hotly debated in the literature, my aim here is to point towards the different styles in which this interaction or relationship has been conducted from the side of Christianity. At least three such styles of interaction can be identified: the first is a style of rejection, the second one of transformation and the third of acknowledgement.

3.1 Rejection of ATRs

Many evangelical missionary strategies were based on the assumption of the inferior nature of ATRs and the explicit claim that light has been brought to dark continents. For many of them the choice was clear: 'heathenism' or 'Christianity' (Tlhagale 1998:16). As Tienou (1992:259) comments: 'Like a bulldozer, missions tend to level other traditions, so that the construction workers may erect buildings in "international style" on the new sites.' Despite this rather on-the-spot description of what has been going on in many instances, his own plea for rejecting traditional cultures comes very close to this practice. In his own words:

When African Christians exert their right to be different, they should also have the courage to stand firmly for the fact that their allegiance to 'God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ' also means the rejection of some aspects of indigenous cultures ... Rather choosing to become a

Christian necessarily involves distancing oneself somewhat from one's traditional and/or former culture and religion. Otherwise, why bother to change at all? (Tienou 1992:261–262).

Traditional Christian theology therefore has a tendency to look down upon ATRs and to belittle the 'false' beliefs and 'false' gods of African (and other) cultures (see discussions in Motlhabi 1994:126–127 and Bediako 1993:54–55). And, as can be seen in the previous quote, this is not only the attitude of white missionaries. A further examples of this kind of approach is the book by Nyirongo (1997:9), which has the explicit aim of showing that those viewpoints that ask for a recognition or dialogue with ATRs are 'a scheme of Satan, aimed at hindering many Africans from obeying the true Gospel'. For Musasiwa (1993:68) it is imperative that the gospel be presented in such a way that it 'roots out ATR from the African believer but still leaves him an African'. According to him, this can be done in the following way:

The Christ who became incarnate among Jews in Palestine nearly 2000 years ago wants to be incarnated in all cultures where he is preached. He does not come to destroy the beauty in culture but only its evil aspects. He transcends culture but he comes through culture (Musasiwa 1993:68).

It should be obvious that from this point of view there is no room for dialogue and definitely no interaction with the 'false' religion. From the perspective of a 'pure', 'unideological' gospel (or picture of Jesus) it is to be expected that the 'superior gospel' will have to replace the traditional religions.

3.2 *Transformation of ATRs*

The basic assumption of inculturation christologies is that Africans, like any other group, have every right to formulate their own christologies that will reflect their cultural responses to who Jesus is to them. This is exactly what is going on in inculturation christologies where images of Jesus are drawn from the pool of African religions. Jesus as *chief*, *elder brother*, *ancestor*, *head of initiation*, to mention only a few instances, are all examples of the acknowledgement of the value of African cultural values and practices.

Behind this discussion is the acknowledgement that traditional Africa has essentially shaped African Christianity in that Africa's religious,

ethical and cultural heritage are the essential building blocks of African Christianity (see for example Mtetwa 1998:73). For that reason it is emphasised that a constructed dialogue between the two belief systems is essential. To be sure, what is meant by dialogue in many circles is a soft conversion of African cultural elements in order to be acceptable to the Christian church. This can be seen in the description of inculturation in the work of Tlhagale (1998:11): 'Enculturation is thus a process that identifies, purifies and translates concepts of African culture that are best suited to communicate the Christian experience.'

The interaction in these instances is done on the conditions of Christian theology: elements of ATRs can be adopted but they must be *purified*, so to speak. As far as I can see, there is very little of taking ATRs seriously as a full discussion partner since ATR is to be transformed.

3.3 *Acknowledgement of ATRs*

A third style of interaction between African Christianity and ATRs can be identified as that of the acknowledgement of ATRs as an equal partner in religious dialogue. On the basis of the existing influence of ATRs on the formulation of images of Jesus in African Christianity, Maluleke pleads for a re-opening of the debate between ATRs and African Christianity (which never started). As he says

African theology has therefore never been 'pure' Christian theology. The ancestors and African spirits of the ATRs have always been lurking and hovering on the horizon — sometimes they have even invaded the secluded space of Christian theologising. There is therefore a sense in which African theology has always been a dialogical theology — at least a dialogue between Christianity and the ATRs (Maluleke 1998:132–133).

In an earlier study he (Maluleke 1996:45) argues that African theology will have to show more respect for African culture and ATRs. These should not merely be seen as preparations or vehicles for the Christian gospel and, I would add, a site for fulfilment and replacement. It should be emphasised that this is very different from the well-known strategy of arguing that since similarities have been identified between the original Christian and primal religions, African religion has been a vital preparation for the gospel (see for example Bediako 1993:56). Maluleke (1996:45) asks that African Christianity should go further than merely

identifying Jesus as the Supreme Ancestor (and, one can add, Supreme Healer, Chief Nana, Nganga, etc). What is not clear from his plea is how such an acknowledgement should take shape. How can this debate be re-opened?

3.4 *Summary Remarks*

The basic attitude of Christianity towards ATRs is probably still that of dismissal. With a few exceptions (such as Maluleke, who challenges African Christianity to reopen the dialogue with ATRs and Setiloane, see 1979:64) the majority of voices from African Christianity remain hostile towards ATRs. Implicitly in the discussion of many (such as Oduyoye 1995) the question is whether African Christianity is the true heir of African traditions.

The dilemma should clearly be noted. While it is widely accepted that African cultures can be used as vehicles for the Christian gospel, the question is whether ATRs should also be replaced or transformed by it. The aim of the present study is to protest against that in taking up the challenge of a dialogue between Christianity and ATRs.

4. *Jesus as Historical Figure and Religious Specialist* *Within ATRs*

Up to this point it has been shown that almost no attention is given in African reflection about Jesus as historical person and that the dominant attitude of (African) Christians towards ATRs is rejection, transformation or replacement. The suggestion of a dialogue with ATRs will come for most from a rather unexpected side: that of research on the life of Jesus.

Historical Jesus research, in my definition, is first and foremost concerned with the understanding of Jesus as historical figure within a specific cultural context (what kind of figure or social type he was in his cultural setting) and not what he really said and did. Such research is in the first instance not necessitated by the uncertainty of what he actually said and did because of the differences between the sources (even if they all agreed, the problem would be the same) but because his life and activities as well as the sources and stories about him originated within an alien cultural setting. Some reject the alien elements in the gospels as myths while others take them as mysterious reports with supernatural

elements. In one sentence, historical Jesus research is necessary because Jesus as historical figure, the stories that originated and were told about him, the transmission of the traditions regarding the type of figure that he was, all originated within the pre-industrial, oral culture of the agrarian first-century Mediterranean world. In order to say anything meaningful about this figure and the stories ascribed to him, it is essential to situate them within their own cultural setting. This is where I think ATRs can play a significant role.

LeMarquand (1997:179) makes an important remark in this regard: 'Our angle of vision heightens our awareness of certain realities. A bias may alert an historian to possibilities of reconstructing the past which others without a similar prejudice may not have noticed.' In my view, this is exactly what the study of ATRs offers New Testament scholarship. It opens our eyes to seeing possibilities in the patterns of religious figures that scholars socialised into Western cultures cannot even imagine to be possible. This is the reason that large parts of the gospel traditions are removed as myths or later creations by the first followers of Jesus (they could add supernatural elements which Jesus could not have said or done?). However, if first-century people could imagine such a figure in their own context (contrary to much of historical Jesus research), it might just be that he was indeed such a kind of figure.

4.1 Historical Jesus Research, Christologies and Images of Jesus

Traditional historical Jesus research is a newcomer to reflections about Jesus. Until the seventeenth century, when a distinction was first made by historically minded scholars between the earthly Jesus and the Jesus proclaimed by the church, reflection of who Jesus was coincided with the picture extracted from the Bible and provided by the church (see Dawes 1999:1). Prior to that time, the biblical presentation of Jesus as the Christ was not only taken for granted, but also at face value. This latter practice did not at all come to an end with the emergence of historical pictures of Jesus.⁸ Today, historical Jesus research is a broad field of research where there is no agreement on why it should be done, how it should be done, and what it is about, but with a great number of *historical* images of Jesus to its credit.⁹ Although historical Jesus research consists of many diverse approaches and results, some common trends can be identified.¹⁰

At least two approaches are prominent. One, associated with the Jesus Seminar, is a continuation of the initial quest with its emphasis on the distinction between Jesus as historical person and the church's portrayal of him as the Christ.¹¹

The second kind of approach can be identified with the so-called Third Quest, which basically accepts the authenticity of the synoptic accounts (only minor unauthentic sections are excluded).¹²

Elsewhere I have argued that both these approaches produce modernistic, ethnocentric images of Jesus; in other words, Western academic images (see Craffert 2001a). The scholars of the Third Quest, as Funk (1996:65) quite correctly points out, 'take critical scholarship about as far as it can go without impinging on the fundamentals of the creed or challenging the hegemony of the ecclesiastical bureaucracy'. In the best of the portrayals of the Third Quest, there always remain some inexplicable elements (usually with regard to the birth, miracles and resurrection of Jesus) which are dealt with by means of the supernatural or mysterious category (they supplement their modernistic judgment that certain things could not have happened with the supernatural or mysterious category which salvages them again). The members of the Jesus Seminar, on the other hand, are blatantly ethnocentric in finding a Jesus that perfectly fits their modern worldview stripped of all mythology. Neither of these would have been at home in the first-century Mediterranean world, which obviously took the stories about special births, spirit control and possession, resurrection, control of nature, multiplication of food, etc, as 'natural' (although sometimes as unusual).

To my mind, the same thing happens in (Western) historical Jesus research as in (African) inculturation images of Jesus. In the one instance (African Christianity), some elements from the gospel traditions are highlighted from the perspective of the African cultural heritage and in the other, some elements from the gospel traditions are removed when highlighted by the searchlight of Western cultural scepticism.¹³ In both instances one finds a Jesus at home in the culture of the interpreter but not necessarily in that of the first-century Mediterranean world.¹⁴

4.2 *African Religious Practitioners as Shamanic Type Figures*

Elsewhere I (see Craffert 1999a:324) have described the shamanic complex as a family of traditions that as a regularly occurring pattern in many cultural systems consists of a configuration of certain features (a

variety of altered states of consciousness [ASC] experiences) and certain social functions (such as healing, mediating, prophecy, exorcism and spirit possession) which flow from these experiences. It is not so much the individual elements but the combination of a number of aspects that constitute the shamanic complex as an identifiable phenomenon in many cultural settings. Religious specialists who have unique labels in their own cultures belong to this complex, including the *nganga*, *isangoma*, *angaqoq*, *tietäjä* and *yetamá*.¹⁵

Insight into the dynamics and pattern of religious entrepreneurs in ATRs (such as the Shona *nganga* and the Zulu *isangoma*) contributes to the description of the pattern of the shamanic complex (see also Thorpe 1993). It is with these figures that stories about a variety of visionary and ecstatic experiences coupled with multiple functions become plausible stories within specific cultural settings. To the biographies of these figures belong such things as 'heavenly' (or soul) trips, spirit possession or control of spirits, special births, control of natural elements, provision of food and a variety of mediating, teaching and healing activities. In many instances they are the mediators, prophets, teachers and healers in their communities, and these abilities can all be related to their special ASC experiences.

In the gospels many clues indicate that Jesus in his lifetime could well have been such a figure (see Craffert 1999a). If he was indeed such a figure, it also becomes understandable how and why such stories were circulated about him and why the stories themselves could have had an impact on people in his culture. These stories were miraculous and wonderful but they were not unnatural – that is, unnatural for first-century Mediterranean people.

There are not only many agreements between Jesus and these type of figures, but the worldview of African religious practitioners has so many similarities with that of first-century Mediterranean people. One example will suffice. The following description is about the use of charms in an African culture.

People wear charms on their bodies or eat 'medicines' or get them rubbed into their bodies to ward off disease, misfortune or even death that might come upon them through the evil use of the mystical forces. Charms are used to protect houses, shops, compounds, fields and villages. It is frowned upon in the Akan society, for example, to praise somebody else's child or property for such may attract a destroying evil power. In modern Africa mystical power is no fiction; it is a reality (Obeng 1992:92).

These words about charms could have been taken from any description of the use of magic and amulets in the Greco-Roman world, while the fear of harmful practices against children parallels that of fear of evil-eye practices (see Craffert 1999b:83-126, 135). As Abogunrin (1980:26) says, '... the thought-world of Africa and that of the Bible are very much identical. Therefore, African Christians have no difficulty in relating the Gospel stories to their own situation.'

These comparable figures in ATRs and the worldview similarities highlight the cultural reality of the kinds of tradition ascribed to Jesus. The suggestion is that historical Jesus research could turn towards ATRs in order to learn how to talk about Jesus as historical figure within a cultural setting in a way which does not first remove all the 'myths' or stumble over all the 'supernatural' aspects ascribed to him.¹⁶ It is a way of appreciating the existence of a specific pattern (a specific social type) within a particular cultural setting.

If Jesus was indeed a shamanic holy man (comparable with religious entrepreneurs in ATRs), it is not necessary to try to improve Western understandings of him by borrowing from African cultural patterns or by improving African christologies by adopting the Western distinction between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith (as for example Van Aarde 1994b:362 suggests).

Maluleke shows some of the dangers that accompany the identification of the Bible with the Word of God. He states (Maluleke 1996:12): 'It is the uncritical equation of human views on the Bible to the Word of God that has been used to legitimate the demonisation of African traditional culture and religions.' While this is indeed true, it is also a specific way of appropriating Jesus that contributes to that situation. A view on Jesus as historical figure in his time could long ago have watered down the claims of the 'superiority' or the 'uniqueness' encountered in Christianity and reflections about its origins. This study can therefore be seen as some kind of *epistemological privileging of African traditional religion* in understanding Jesus as historical figure. In such a case historical contextualisation of Jesus has already drunk from the African wells and this opens new possibilities for the way ATRs can be treated in Christianity.

4.3 *Drinking From the African Wells — What Does It Imply?*

What does this drinking from the African wells imply?

- It constitutes a dialogue between Christianity and ATRs

The first implication is that it necessarily constitutes a dialogue between (African) Christianity and ATRs. This is a dialogue where ATRs are not evaluated or judged, but accepted as equal partners in inter-religious dialogue. It is not a case of ATRs learning from or being subject to Christianity's missionary activities either, but almost a turning of the tables, in that Christianity and Christian scholarship can learn something about their forgotten origin from the study of ATRs. What the comparison of Jesus with religious entrepreneurs in ATRs offers is an understanding of the dynamics of his earthly life and how the different components hung together. When the movement around Jesus developed into a religion in which Jesus was the object of veneration and worship, a new dimension entered into an existing situation: Christology (what Jesus as 'divine' being can mean to humans) suddenly started to dominate. What has been lost in the process is an appreciation of the dynamics of the Jesus figure when he was on earth. That a religious entrepreneur can himself (all examples I have are of men) become the object of veneration is well attested in some African Initiated Churches (AICs).

Taking ATRs seriously as discussion partners and by showing the similarities between Jesus as historical figure and some religious specialist in ATRs can only foster respect for ATRs that have suffered severely from Christian denigration.

But this is no general amnesty for ATRs (or for Christianity, for that matter) in that every belief and practice should be endorsed. It is rather contributing to the rehabilitation of ATRs as some of the main religions of the world and because criticism of some of their practices is as necessary as in other religious traditions. Such criticism is much easier when the basic pattern is respected.

- It challenges the ethnocentrism of historical Jesus research

The second implication is that the tables are turned on historical Jesus research in that both traditional approaches are challenged to rethink the ethnocentric ways in which Jesus as historical figure is dealt with. Like many African christologies, both traditional approaches take the gospels at face value – one rejects most of the traditions as myths and the other agrees that they are unnatural (do not comply with the modernistic project) but save them by declaring them mysterious or supernatural. Imagine for a moment that the same kind of ethnocentric

method is used today to deal with the stories about African religious figures. Unlike present-day New Testament research, it belongs to the nineteenth-century heritage of anthropology to disregard these phenomena and stories as myths, fictions or unreal. No native and hardly any anthropologist today will treat such stories about African religious specialists as anything other than the expression of true events, phenomena or stories within the local cultures.

The interpretive approach suggested in this study treats the Jesus traditions as culturally embedded sources that were communicated in an alien worldview and cultural system. In the African worldview many things that do not fit a Western worldview are accepted as natural and real. They are real within that system where the elements hang together and people act on the basis of what they take to be real to them.

Implicit in this argument is an assumption *about reality*. I take reality to consist of a hierarchy of complex systems and that what is experienced as *real* is defined within such a system. While there are obvious similarities between elements from different systems, each receives its meaning from the whole. Something as tangible and material as the human body (consisting of a hierarchy of different subsystems) is *real* only in terms of the totality of the specific system. The fact that serious illness conditions, for example, can originate due to the cultural system within which that body is culturally constructed confirms this point.

Besides looking at Jesus as a comparable figure to African religious entrepreneurs, this approach has the potential of looking at the way in which stories and traditions about such figures originate, how they are transmitted in oral cultures, and the role they play in shaping the figure as historical person and creating a biography. Instead of trying to take over the categories of historical Jesus research, African scholars can take the lead in challenging and changing traditional historical Jesus research.

- It undermines christological constructs

The third implication is that such research challenges images of Jesus (christologies), both African and Western. It highlights the need for and shows the value of historical thinking about Jesus. In this regard I think Vorster is quite right in arguing for the continued importance of historical pictures of Jesus. Each image of Jesus now, it shows, is based on a 'historical' portrayal of Jesus then. This point was strongly emphasised by Vorster in one of his very last essays (1994:629):

If we wish to say anything about the past, whatever it might be, we are by definition obliged to make historical constructions ... People who reject the search for the historical Jesus nevertheless have their own views on his identity. They are just not willing to put their views on the table for discussion.

In explaining this point, Crossan (1991:423) coined the well-known phrase: 'this is how we see Jesus-then as Christ-now'. By that he expressed the inevitable link between christological constructs and images of Jesus as historical figure. Every christology is based on a picture of Jesus as historical figure.

Historical Jesus research will not afford us answers to all our difficult questions, but it will make us a little more humble in our claims to have answers to difficult questions, Vorster states. He points out: 'If Jesus is the answer, we are obliged to say who he was. To do that in an informed manner makes it necessary to do historical inquiry into the origins of faith as well as the "facts" on which these origins were based' (1994:631). In this way historical Jesus research can help us to evaluate and discard some of the many images in which he is portrayed in the course of the history of the church (both the Western and the African churches).

Historical Jesus research has always challenged christological constructs and that of African Jesus research should be no exception. One question therefore is: what is the real value of historical constructs based on literal readings of the New Testament or simply on theological propositions? By this it is said that the future of christological constructs does not necessarily lie in the hands of ordinary people alone.¹⁷

The study of what ordinary people think and do to Jesus (their images of Jesus) is a legitimate and valuable topic for research. Ordinary readers do not need the sanction from academics for what they have been doing to Jesus and they do not need a licence from academics to continue doing that. In fact they are creatively and surreptitiously engaging the Bible and Christian symbols (see Maluleke 1996:13) or as Oduyoye (1995:77) remarks, 'African Christians are in the process daily of shaping a Christianity that will be at home in Africa and in which Africans will be at home.' This is therefore not an arrogant claim that academics should tell ordinary people what they can and should think or believe. Rather, this is fulfilling the expectations and demands of the general public that academics (professional theologians and exegetes) should do their jobs. They should expose such constructs for what they are.

I came across the following words of wisdom by a certain Bernard Avishai: 'The danger from computers is not that they will eventually get as smart as men, but that we will meanwhile agree to meet them halfway.' The difference in biblical and theological studies is that we want to agree to meet them all the way. The urge to satisfy the ordinary reader and to provide once more a study promoting the viewpoint of the ordinary reader has become so pervasive that one wonders what has happened to the task of scholarship to bring to the front the novel and the unexpected. It is a question whether academics (professional theologians and exegetes) are doing what the public (those ordinary readers) expect them (and pay them) to do. That is, fulfilling one of the tasks of scholarship in coming up with new ideas and formulations, with alternatives which do not exist in society and with critical reflection about what is presented. Scholars have to provide the alternatives and entertain the novelties which ordinary readers, owing to their socialisation and the continued reinforcement from church leaders, will never be able to provide.

Responsible and respectable reflection on and constructed images of Jesus can, for example, no longer avoid the issues that historical Jesus research has highlighted, such as the historical basis of all such images. It will indeed be critical towards what is going on at the so-called grass-roots level which multiplies images of Jesus in order to satisfy the needs of people. These sorts of studies point fingers at all kinds of Christianity that continue as if scholarly research is not taking place and if historical interpretation does not matter.

5. *Concluding Remarks*

In the interaction between Christianity and ATRs it is, generally speaking, acceptable to argue that Christianity can transform Africa and Africans, but not the other way round (see remarks by Oduyoye 1995:78). In this study it has been argued that ATRs have already influenced historical Jesus research in finding models for looking at Jesus as a historical figure in his time. This would open the dialogue that has never really taken place. Historical contextualisation of Jesus can not only benefit from interaction with ATRs but also feed back into the inter-religious dialogue which is called for between (African) Christianity and ATRs.

Contextualising the gospel in Africa along the lines of dialogue with ATRs questions the images of Jesus that ordinary people (both in Africa and elsewhere) spin out in satisfying their everyday needs. It is also

critical of the dominant attitude towards ATRs. It, for example, highlights the question already being asked by African theologians: why continue to convert Africans to Christianity? No new answer to this question has been given, but the continued presence of these kinds of question is important in keeping religious traditions humane. Taking seriously and respecting both ATRs and the origins of Christian religion might contribute to an atmosphere in which it will be possible to also be critical about some practices in these two religions. Where there is respect and honesty it is easier to show up what is inhuman, intolerant and oppressive. Not only Christianity (in all its versions) but ATRs as well continue to support oppression and discrimination of various sorts (such as sexism, racism and tribalism). The acknowledgement of the integrity and equality of the various religious traditions in Africa should not prevent us from pointing at these 'illnesses' which also pervade this continent.¹⁸

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¹ Ukpong (1994:41–43) distinguishes five different approaches to the inculturation of Jesus in African culture. His own approach is a variation of the fifth approach. His five categories can all be subsumed under the three trends to be discussed here.

² Nyamiti (1989) distinguishes two types of African christologies of inculturation. One is christologies that move from the Bible to the African reality, and the other christologies that move from the African reality to christology. This second type consists of those christologies that use either the African or typical African figures such as *chief*, *ancestor* or *elder brother* to describe Jesus as the Christ for Africans (see also Wessels 1990:94–115).

³ For more examples, see Obeng (1992:94).

⁴ The need for such a Jesus is said against the backdrop of the following remark: 'Every African who has grown up in the traditional environment will no doubt have been aware of the harassing reality of these forces. To an outsider, it sounds more like fiction than reality. But, the whole psychic atmosphere of African village life is filled with belief in these mystical powers' (Obeng 1992:91–92).

⁵ What is meant by the 'life' of Jesus in liberation christologies is not the same as what is meant by the terms *earthly* Jesus or *life of Jesus* in historical Jesus research (see also Vorster 1994:627).

⁶ In the following description, the value of Oakman's image of Jesus as

historical figure is, for example, outlined by Sugirtharajah (1991:333-334): 'In the historical Jesus one discovers again what God is like and how his power is being manifested in siding with the marginalized and the oppressed'. Also the value of Borg's picture of Jesus finds such a 'secondary' application: 'This revised picture of Jesus which speaks of the destruction of social and institutional structures gives hope to people today who are burdened by evil edifices such as castle, apartheid, sexism'.

⁷ Of the very few remarks about historical Jesus research in African theological circles that I could find, it is seen as something from which African Christianity and scholarship can learn. Van Aarde (1994b:362), for example, encourages African theologians to adopt the distinction between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith; a distinction employed by Ukpong (1994:44), who claims that his investigation into the biblical version of an inculturation christology is informed by the historical-critical distinction between the earthly Jesus and the Jesus of faith.

⁸ It should be realised that the emergence of historical Jesus research did not change much with regard to the images of Jesus that continued to be produced and maintained in Christian churches. I think Funk (see 1996:5-7) is right in saying that despite large quantities of and great advances in biblical scholarship, religious illiteracy is as high as ever. Scholarship did not make much of an impact on the convictions of ordinary believers (or their spiritual leaders) and historical Jesus research was not seriously considered by most theologians (see for example Vorster 1994:626-627). I hear the same kind of complaint from Nyamiti (1989:34), who says that with the exception of black theology in South Africa, 'none of the existing African Christologies has had any appreciable influence in the life of the African churches'.

⁹ These images vary from Jesus as teacher or cynic and eschatological prophet to Jesus as magician, charismatic saint or social revolutionary. Most of these social types have no parallels in anthropological or religious research. It is also significant that except for the members of the Jesus Seminar, who normally identify a Jesus that conforms to the small amount of authentic material identified by them, most researchers in the Third Quest ascribe to Jesus more than one social type. In other words, they realise that the variety of traditions ascribed to him cannot be captured under a single social type, such as prophet or teacher or healer.

¹⁰ One is the acknowledgement that there is a difference between the earthly Jesus and the specific portrayals of him in the different gospels. A second is the acknowledgement that the pictures in the different gospels (especially between the Gospel of John and the synoptics) create serious problems for any understanding of Jesus as historical figure. A third insight is that historical Jesus research focuses on Jesus as earthly human being and not on Jesus the second person of the Trinity. In one way or another, they all want to protect historical images from domination by theological beliefs (for detail, see Craffert 2001a and 2001b).

¹¹ It is members of the Jesus Seminar in particular who maintain this line of research where it is believed that since the words and deeds of the earthly Jesus

were transformed and altered by Jesus' first followers into a christology, most of the gospel material is not authentic. In other words, most of the words and deeds ascribed to Jesus did not originate with him and should be peeled away in an attempt to reach the historical Jesus underneath the overlay of church belief and mythmaking (see for example Crossan 1991; Funk 1996).

¹² Since the synoptic accounts are accepted in broad terms, the distinction between the earthly Jesus and the Christ of faith either does not exist or plays a very minor part in these constructions. The synoptic gospels, it is maintained, present, broadly speaking, a historically reliable picture of Jesus, and the main task of historical Jesus research is organising this into meaningful christological categories (see for example Theissen and Merz 1998).

¹³ Sugirtharajah (see 1991:336), for example, says that Third World Christians are not interested in explanations about Jesus but in the evidence of his presence; they are not concerned with who he was, but where he is to be found. This echoes the tendency in African christologies too that are concerned with what Jesus can do for Africans. As has been said, this is not different from what has been going on in Western Christianity for centuries.

¹⁴ This is, for example, explicitly stated in Wanamaker's (1997:293) proposal of an ancestor christology: 'From the viewpoint of ancestor religion the life and public activity of Jesus, the prophet of God, are not important ... From an African point of view it is also not the nature of Jesus' death which is important. What matters is the fact of his death since from the African perspective, Jesus' death leads to his life as an ancestor.'

¹⁵ The *nganga* as engaged in a wide range of activities and functions is known in many Bantu languages (see Thorpe 1993:80-101; Schoffeleers 1994:74) while the *izingoma* is known in the Zulu language (see Thorpe 1993:102-125). The Finnish counterpart is called the *tietäjä*, and the Mehinaku Indians call their shaman a *yetamá*, while the word among the Iglulik Eskimo is *angakoq* (see Ripinsky-Naxon 1993:72, 80).

¹⁶ The work of Davies (1996) is another example of this approach.

¹⁷ Akinade (1995:191), for example, writes: 'I do believe that an authentic Christology in Africa will be the product of the peasants, the ordinary men and women, who are committed Christians – 'people with the dirty Bibles,' so-called because of their avid reading of the Bible.'

¹⁸ Criticism of these aspects can be found in several studies by African theologians (see for example Motlhabi 1994:140; Oduyoye 1995:87).

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