



Are African Traditional Religions Salvific?

Can An African Be Saved?

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Abstract

This paper argues that Christianity, Catholicism especially, still needs to answer the question regarding how salvation is mediated to our African ancestors. Drawing from Karl Rahner's theory and going beyond it, the paper suggests a heuristic: a radically-relativized version of "anonymous Christian." The paper extrapolates from it to demonstrate that the mass movement of contemporary Africans to Christianity is not properly "conversion," but "Christianization" made possible by the supernatural existential element in African Traditional Religions (ATRs).

Keywords: African Traditional Religions (ATRs); Bernard Lonergan; Karl Rahner; Salvation

This paper argues that the Christian expansion into indigenous societies in the Third Millennium necessitates the Church to pay attention to the often-dismissed matter of how salvation is mediated to non-Christians in the period before God offered God's-self "irrevocably" to the world in Jesus Christ (Karl Rahner 1997, 322). Its implication for the wide-world Christian church, particularly Africa, is immense. Although the Second Vatican Council proclaimed that salvation is possible for "those who through no fault of their own do not know the Gospel of Christ or His Church," as well as "those who, without blame on their part, have not arrived at an explicit knowledge of God and with His grace strive to live a good life" (Paul VI 1964), the Council, as Karl Rahner (1904–1984) correctly pointed out, was "extraordinarily reserved when it comes to the question of how such a salvific faith in a real revelation of God in the strict sense can come about outside the realms of the Old and New Testaments" (Rahner 1997, 313). In the light of the ecclesiological vision of Vatican II that

has opened the door for a genuine dialogue through an acknowledgment of “the presence of grace within other Christian communities, other religions communities, and among men and women of good will, to whom the means of salvation (grace), apart from the Church, cannot be denied” (Ormerod 2016), I argue for a framework—a paradigm in the Thomas Kuhn’s (1922-1996) sense of the term—for understanding the Council’s teaching in relation to our African ancestors. A paradigm, according to Kuhn, occurs as a result of “crisis”—when an old and dominant theory becomes difficult to maintain and must be upstaged with a newer and more intellectually sound one (Kuhn 1970). I am aware that the use of the word “framework” or “paradigm” can raise questions about the epistemological basis of my argument. It is my hope that by exposing the African Traditional Religions’ (ATRs) values, like belief in a supreme deity, sense of sacred, sense of community, and respect of life, which in themselves are pristine values that can be characterized as “Christian,” that such questions will be answered, and lingering doubts clarified or eliminated. For the existence of God in Africa is categorically a living reality that is consciously affirmed in daily interactions, including prayers, ceremonies, songs, and proverbs (Michael 2013, 64).

Following his predecessor, John Paul II, who launched a program of re-evangelization that was directed, not to what used to be considered the mission territories in Africa and Asia, but to what was hitherto the Christian Europe, to revive and reinvigorate Catholicism, Pope Benedict XVI launched a similar program of re-evangelization of Europe. “Of particular concern for the Catholic Church,” according to Neil Ormerod, “has been the rapid decline in religious practice and cultural influence in Europe, once the heart of Christendom. Countries once considered Catholic strongholds, such as Belgium, France, Italy, and Ireland, are now adopting social and legal changes which directly challenge Church positions on questions of divorce, abortion, same sex marriage, and euthanasia. Europe as a whole struggled to find a place in its constitution to acknowledge its rich Christian heritage” (Ormerod 2016, 33). Benedict’s major concern, like John Paul II, was that Europe is fast becoming a secular society and both Popes, therefore, understandably want Europe to return to its spiritual foundation (Ratzinger 2005). This is a contrast to Africa where Christian expansion in the continent has been a success in many respects; albeit success largely measured by numbers. The number of African Christians continues to increase at an annual rate of 2.5 percent or more in the last two decades. If the projection is accurate, the continent’s Christian population will double in size by 2030 (Jenkins 2011, xii and 2). In fact, Africa currently has more Christians than Europe today. According to Gordon-Conwell’s Center for the Study of World Christianity, in 2020 Africa had 661,349,000 Christians (compared to Europe, including Russia, which had 573,692,000). By mid-2024 Africa would have had 734,130,000 Christians (compared to Europe, including Russia, which will have 564,737,000). And by the year 2050, Africa will have 1,281,941,000 Christians (compared to Europe, including Russia, which will decrease to 488,979,000). Thus, while Africa is gaining more Christians, Europe is coming out of Christianity (see Gordon Center for World Christianity’s 2024 statistics).

However, this essay is not about detailed projection of numbers or statistics of Christian revolution occurring in Africa and elsewhere in Latin America and Asia. Rather, this paper seeks to show why the Christian revolution in Africa need not be understood as an isolated incident, but as part and parcel of the supernatural salvific will of God already operative in ATRs. In so doing, I put forward a challenge: that if salvation history is a “history of God’s

transcendental self-communication” to the human person in time and space (Rahner 1997, 323), then why should our African ancestors who responded to God’s-self offer mediated to them through ATRs not be considered “saved” or “saintly,” regardless of whether official Catholicism is ready to recognize ATRs as a saving ancestral testaments, the same way the Old Testament is regarded as a saving testament to Abraham and his descendants?

I write mainly to address the issue of “salvation” of our African ancestors in the light of Rahner’s “anonymous Christian” theory. By “ancestor” here I mean our African forebears (mothers and fathers) who accepted God’s gift of love in its radicalness and died in fellowship with God. The limitations of this paper do not permit me to advance an argument on why ATRs could themselves be considered “anonymous Christianities.” Although Rahner’s “anonymous Christian” and “anonymous Christianities” theories are related, they are also somewhat different. That said, I must admit that there is a lot in ATRs that can be instructive for Western Christians whose secular context Thomas Hughson has described as presenting both a challenge and access to belief in God as Creator through the “green” experience of physical nature. That experience, according to Hughson, “understood in light of Bernard Lonergan’s faith/belief distinction and a principle in the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola, can be conceived as “primordial faith” open to belief in God as Creator and the world as creation” (Hughson 2014, 818).

Unless otherwise stated, I speak of “church” in this paper, not just as the Roman Catholic communion, but generically as “the historical continuation of Christ in and through the community of those who believe in him, and who recognize him explicitly as the mediator of salvation in a profession of faith” (Rahner 1997, 322). Reference to Africa here is also mainly to Africa south of the Sahara (sub-Saharan Africa). I am under no illusion to think that Africa can be easily defined. As a geographical space, Africa is complex. But by Africa here I mean the Black peoples of sub-Saharan Africa. Unless where context dictates otherwise, the related term “African” is also a reference to the pre-Christian African, i.e., the African who never experienced the Christian faith on the categorical level. As the Nigerian ethnographer and expert in ATRs, Bolaji Idowu (1913–93), correctly observed, “we have in Africa a continent of multitude of nations, myriads of peoples, countless languages or dialects, and peoples of various levels of culture” (Idowu 1973, 82). Granted that one cannot in fairness speak of Africa as if it were a homogenous whole, there remains some discernible common features among traditional Africans, particularly in their religiosity. Therefore, there is justification for holding, as I do here, “that there exists an underlying basic similarity or sameness of spirit and intention in the different cultural-religious expressions in Africa and among Africans” (Magesa 2013, 4). This also means that I speak of African religions, not in a homogenous singular form, but in their plural form, as the “s” in the acronym ATRs indicates, but still cognizant that there are discernible common features among them.

I have refrained from offering a conceptual definition of religion for two reasons. First, such attempt is usually fraught with problems. Second, African religions are inseparable from their cultural moorings. This means that to offer a definition of religion (in the Western understanding that separates the realm of the sacred from the profane) will do violence to the African for whom a people’s life is identifiable with a spirituality that does not separate religion from the ordinary life. Vatican II, understandably, attempted a descriptive definition of religion in *Nostra Aetate*, perhaps because it wants Christians to pay attention to “what men have in

common and what draws them together in fellowship” (Paul VI 1965c, 1) with non-Christian religions like ATRs. *Dignitatis Humanae* followed up on this descriptive definition by decreeing “that no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his own beliefs, whether privately or publicly, whether alone or in association with others, within due limits (Paul VI 1965b, 2). However, we know from the scientific study of religion that religion is not a word with a fixed meaning, but a word that conveys different meanings and realities to different people. Rather than offer a definition, I have found it more helpful to go with the distinction made by the Asian Catholic theologian Anthony Fernando between religion as a clan-solidarity and religion as a life-vision. Most people are born into a particular religion (religion by birth), like ATRs. Religion for these people becomes a form of clan-solidarity—a constituent element of culture that fulfils a vital sociological function, which is vital for their human existence (Fernando 2007, 70). But there are also many others who (regardless of whether or not they are born into a particular religion) embrace a particular religion by sheer conviction—as in the example of Jesus’ statement to Nicodemus that no one can see the kingdom of heaven unless he or she is “born again” (John 3:3). Moving from one religion to another, i.e., a “re-birth,” is what Fernando calls religion as life-vision. It is beyond the scope of this paper to itemize the various characteristics of these two different approaches to religion, as well as their essential differences. But as helpful as Fernando’s distinction may be, his assertion that it is only religion as life-vision “that is religion proper” (Fernando 2007, 70) seems naïve and difficult to maintain. His proposition is capable of stifling inter-religious dialogue because it relativizes the truth-claims of religions like ATRs. But to stick with Fernando’s term, ATRs are good examples of religion as clan-solidarity. In so far as religion deals with what is “inner and vital” in human life (Lonergan 1974, 149), ATRs are “religion proper.” As religions of clan-solidarity, admittedly ATRs may be provincial in their concerns and may also be culturally conditioned, but like other religions of the World, ATRs still serve as “God’s means of revelation to and point of contact with a different stream of human life” (Hick 1985, 182). ATRs, like any religions of the world, make sense of their circumstances. Their people come together, the way Christians do, “to open their minds to a higher reality, which is thought of as the personal creator Lord of the universe” (Hick 1985, 174). Even if “anonymously,” ATRs prefigure, express, and make, the same vital moral demands that Christianity makes of Christian men and women.

The “Anonymous Christian” Theory

I want to lead off with the nuts and bolts of Rahner’s theory, including the arguments of some his critics, before discussing how traditional Africans lived out the exigencies of their lives in the particularities of their cultures (in the next section). That way the weaknesses of the arguments of the critics will become more self-evident. What is termed “anonymous Christian” is a useful but nonetheless a difficult concept, especially in dialogue with non-Christian religions, like ATRs. The German philosopher, phenomenologist, and teacher of Rahner, Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) coined the term *dasein* (translated into English as “presence,” “being there,” and “existential”). Heidegger used *dasein* to capture the experience of being, which according to Heidegger, is peculiar to all human beings irrespective of time, place, and culture (Heidegger 2010). Rahner appropriated Heidegger’s *dasein* to explicate a finite person’s being and existence. Rahner also saw Heidegger’s idea as a useful tool for illuminating an integral concept of his Christology—the supernatural existential. What Rahner

calls supernatural existential is his way of bringing together the three essential dimensions of Christology: first, the idea that God's self-communication to the creature is not just an information about God from God to creature, but God's gift of God's-self to creature; second, this self-communication of God's-self to creature is utterly gratuitous—an unmerited grace; third, God respects the capacities of the human addressee of communication by revealing only what the human addressee can hear (Robinson 2010, 138–39). Since God reveals only what the human person can hear, the supernatural existential is both “supernatural” and “existential” because humans are constituted in such a way that they are open to the self-communication of God (Robinson 2010, 139). The supernatural existential accounts for how a human person exists in a real world of God's gratuitous self-communication. Since human beings are graced (in the sense that it is available at least as an offer), their existence is supernatural (in the sense that they tend to and are attuned towards the transcendent). Rahner expresses a deep conviction that what Christians call (created) grace is in fact a modification given by God (uncreated grace) in a free and dynamic relationship and that this grace is always present to qualify the center of human existence, at least as an offer. Grace is existentially present to the human person who cannot abandon this transcendent peculiarity of his or her being. In the *Hearer of the Word*, Rahner (1969) expounds this idea that it belongs to the fundamental make-up of the human person to be the absolute openness for being as such (God) and that through the *Vorgriff* a person transcends everything towards pure being.

Rahner shows how, in the light of what was disclosed in Jesus' life, death and resurrection, God created human beings to share God's-self with created creatures and since humans are created for the life of grace the offer of this grace is an intrinsic component of human existence.

Our nature is never “pure nature.” It is a nature installed in a supernatural order which man can never leave, even as a sinner and unbeliever. It is a nature which is continually being determined (which does not mean justified) by the supernatural grace of salvation offered to it. (Karl Rahner, 1963b, 183)

Rahner also shows that human nature is the *potentia oboedientialis* for hypostatic union—that the Incarnation is the perfect instance of human person's self-actualization and transcendence towards the absolute. For this reason, “the incarnation cannot be understood as the end and the goal of the world's reality without having recourse to the theory that the Incarnation itself is already an intrinsic moment and a condition for the universal bestowal of grace to spiritual creatures” (Rahner 1997, 199). Rahner warns against the danger of conceiving the Incarnation as a higher realization of God's self-communication in such a way that “leaves the rest of the world behind.” Rather, the Incarnation is an intrinsic moment in the divinization of all humanity. It is a unique, supreme case of the total actualization of the human reality (Rahner 1963b, 110). It is God's utterance outside of God's self—that which God becomes other than God's-self. Without changing, God becomes other than God's-self in another by *kenosis*.

Very much in line with Rahner's argument, Bernard Lonergan has helped to clarify that what is specifically Christian in Christianity is Jesus Christ. That is to say, what distinguishes Christianity from other religions is not God's grace, but the mediation of God's grace through Jesus Christ.

At no point within the New Testament is there any evidence that the Christians stood for an original philosophy of life or an original ethic. Their sole function is to bear witness to what they claim as an event—the raising of Jesus from among the dead. (Lonergan 1974, 156)

Christianity needs a new paradigm for conceptualizing the mediation of God's grace in non-Christian religions. Such a paradigm will go a long way towards helping Christians navigate the challenge of relating with non-Christian religions. In the absence of such a paradigm in the meantime, Rahner's theory of "anonymous Christian" serves a purpose. It is hard to refute that the transcendental self-communication of God as an offer to a person's freedom is an existential God makes available to everyone. The difference is that the Christian who explicitly professes faith in Jesus Christ through membership in the Church enjoys a privileged position because the self-communication of God to the world reaches its goal and climax in Jesus Christ (Rahner 1997, 176).

The issue of salvation of non-Christians is connected to Rahner's discussion of the human person's experience of grace (God's self-communication) and the person's acceptance or rejection of faith. Salvation, Rahner contends, is possible for anyone who has come to a free realization of his or her existence.

Theological reflection upon the universal possibility of salvation involves, then, all those who have reached complete self-determination as free persons and have thus explicitly or implicitly taken a free decision for or against God. (Rahner 1979, 201)

Even those who have existed from the beginning of human history, who never had any direct contact with the gospel, can indeed be saved. Rahner's position finds support in the documents of the Second Vatican Council, particularly *Lumen Gentium*, which recognized that it is possible for non-Christians, polytheists, and non-culpable atheists to live in a subjective state of freedom from serious (personal) sin. Rahner feeds on the Council's teaching and interprets its teachings to mean that non-Christians possess God's supernatural self-communication in grace as an offer and that those who accept the offer in the particularities of their own culture and religions have "really accepted what is essential in what Christianity wants to mediate" (Rahner 1979, 176). Let me be clear that when Rahner says everyone stands open to salvation he is not arguing for an *apocatastasis*, but rather that there is no empirically verifiable human situation not of one's own making which can exclude anyone from salvation. Salvation is achieved when a person "acquires faith, hope and love and so overcomes the contrary tendencies in [oneself]" (Rahner 1979, 202). What we call church is, as Neil Ormerod points out, a community grounded in grace and lived out in faith, hope, and charity (Ormerod 2015, 462).

How can a non-Christian or atheist acquire faith, hope and charity? In Rahner's taxonomy, non-Christians can acquire faith, hope, and charity when they freely respond to and become partakers in the divine solution to the problem of evil by mediating the experience of God's love that floods our heart (Rom. 5:5), live a life of self-sacrificial love, and model hope "that the adversities of the present struggle with evil are not the last word, but a hope is given to us that goes beyond the present life" (Ormerod 2015, 462). Rahner is clear that any given human historical situation is in direct openness to God and that the necessary turning to God

can be achieved reflexively or unreflexively. Anyone that is not in a serious sin, irrespective of the person's religion, can categorically respond to God's self-offer. "The world is drawn to its spiritual fulfillment by the spirit of God, who directs the whole history of the world in all its length and breadth towards its proper goal. This means that every man, whatever his situation can be saved" (Rahner 1979, 204). This is consistent with Rahner's analysis of salvation history—the history of revelation did not begin with Abraham or Moses. The history of revelation takes place wherever the individual and collective history of human race is taking place. "Wherever human history is lived and suffered in freedom, the history of salvation and its opposite are also taking place" (Rahner 1997, 144). God's offer of God's-self is always at work in human history. There is no way one can begin to approach God if God had not first offered God's-self. Salvation is not achieved in a passive manner but in total freedom—a possibility that has been established by God through nature and grace.

In the section after next, I will show how the ancient Africans' "struggle to be in touch with the mystery of life," (Magesa 2013, 3) mediated to them through ATRs validate Rahner's claim that God's offer of grace is universal and that its acceptance in faith is a particular event. For,

God was already with our ancestors from the very beginning. Their experience of life is in reality the experience on the way to Emmaus: full revelation occurs, of course, in Christ's breaking of the bread, as he did at the Last Supper, but a real encounter with him already takes place on the way. (Bujo 2013, ix-x)

Christian believers think that the Christian religion has shown that Jesus Christ is the fullness of God's self-revelation—that God's grace is mediated in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. What in Christianity is known as church is "the continuance, the contemporary presence, of the real, eschatological triumphant and irrevocably established presence in the world, in Christ, of God's salvific will" (Rahner 1963a, 18). The rate at which contemporary Africans embrace Christianity seems to suggest awareness of this point. Christianity is not an amorphous collection of believing individuals, but a believing community we call church. It is the community wherein the social dimension of grace becomes visible. Christians also believe that their Christian community is the real symbol of Christ and the embodiment of his grace. In this sense the church is the fundamental sacrament and effective sign of grace for its members. But far from being a vehicle of salvation for its members alone, the church, as Rahner clearly shows, is the basic sacrament of the salvation of the world. As Rahner explains, prior to the church, the entire human family was already existing as the people of God and constituted by God's universal saving will, which became definitive and final in the person and mission of Jesus. The community that bears the name of Jesus must, therefore, manifest that which is true of all peoples. Membership in the church through baptism amounts to an expression of a person's membership in that broad community of God's people. All of God's people who are not members of this sacramental church still have an intrinsic relationship to the church because they are related to Christ. Since this relationship is not expressed, but remains nameless, they are implicit or "anonymous Christians" (Rahner 1983). It makes sense, therefore, to argue, as Bujo does, that from an African perspective, "all our ancestors and ancestresses of goodwill who followed the ideal of their traditions that were/are in accordance with God and the Risen Christ on the way to Emmaus can also be counted among 'the just'" (Bujo 2013, x).

To sum up the argument here before I consider Rahner's critics, I register agreement with Rahner that there is "no religion of any kind in which the grace of God is not present, however suppressed or depraved it may be in its expression" (Weger 1980, 6), except of course misinformed zealots operating under the guise of religion to impose their misguided will on others. Every human being is truly exposed to supernatural grace, which leads to an interior union with God (though not all accept the offer). Non-Christian religions, like ATRs, do have a role in the mediation of grace outside the church.

The Old Testament is aware of holy pagans who are pleasing to God. The New Testament is also aware of a salvific efficacy of the grace of Christ and his Spirit which does not coincide with the initiatives of the visible witness to Christ who were explicitly and historically authorized by Christ. (Rahner 1997, 148)

As a Christian himself, Rahner is convinced that the Cross of Christ is not the cause of the uncaused salvific will of God—that God's universal salvific will has always been there from the beginning of human history. Jesus died because God wills our salvation (not because the crucifixion occurred therefore God wills our salvation). God is not transformed from a God of anger and justice into a God of love and mercy by the Cross. The Cross is not the cause of salvation. It is rather the consequence of the self-giving of God. God brings the event of the Cross to pass because from the beginning God had universal salvific will.

Relevance of Rahner's Critics for an African Appropriation of His Theory

The theory of "anonymous Christian" may have helped Rahner achieve one goal, i.e., to "reflect upon the simple question: 'What is a Christian, and why can one live this Christian existence today with intellectual honesty?'" (Rahner 1997, 2). But the theory is not iron clad and is fraught with difficulties. One of Rahner's most outspoken critics and who was also a critic of the Church's ancient maxim *Ecclesiam nulla salus* (outside of the Church there is no salvation), which some thought was abandoned at Vatican II, was the Swiss Catholic theologian Hans Kung (Kung 1976, 97).¹ Kung, like Rahner, wanted to find a theologically satisfying way of addressing the fate of countless millions of non-Christians who though may not have practiced the Christian faith, seek God with a sincere conscience. Kung criticizes the Church for not doing much in this regard. Even when the Council proclaimed that salvation was possible for anyone who seeks God with a sincere conscience, Kung was not convinced that the Council has done enough to repeal the ancient dogma. "Rather than question the validity of a dubious negative axiom, the concept of the church was stretched by theological sleight of hand to include not only Christians but also well-meaning pagans" (Kung 1967, 316). Kung thinks *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* is as true as ever "because all are in fact in the Church from the very beginning: not as formal, but as 'anonymous Christians' or, as we ought logically to say, anonymous Roman Catholics" (Kung 1976, 98). Kung reasons that this back door way

¹ Kung traces this maxim to Cyprian and Fulgentius of Ruspe (a disciple of Augustine). He believes the Council of Florence (1442) adopted the maxim in its proclamation that, "the Holy Roman Church firmly believes, professes and proclaims that none of those who are outside the Catholic Church—not only pagans, but Jews also, heretics and schismatics—can have part in eternal life . . . unless they are gathered into that church before the end of life." See Kung 1967, 97.

of making all people “anonymous Roman Catholics” offers no answer to the challenge of World Religions: “It is an evasion of the challenge and we may easily be caught by it from behind. Are we not thus in danger, without noticing it, of diminishing the reality of Christianity merely to save an infallible formula?” (Kung 1976, 98). One of the positives of Kung’s criticism is that he is not opposed to the idea of the possibility of salvation for non-Christians. What he objects to is how the term “anonymous Christian” was being used and interpreted. He thinks Christianity by its very nature cannot be anonymous. It must be anti-anonymous. It is difficult not to concede Kung’s point that Christianity cannot be anonymous. As Ernst Jungel (1893–1982) once remarked, “the Christian faith not only wants to be recognized by the name of him to whom it owes its existence and continued sustenance, it also wants to be recognized by his name and charged with it” (qtd in Pasquini 2000, 52).

The most vociferous objection to Rahner’s theory came from another Swiss theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905–1988). At the fundamental level, Balthasar disagrees with Rahner’s overall approach to theology. In works published before the Second Vatican Council, *Schleifung der Bastionen* especially, Balthasar criticized some neo-scholastics like Rahner for what he thought was undesirable effect of undermining the role of the Church and confusing its mission in the world. In the same work and works written after that, he rejected “anonymous Christianity” on the ground that it stands the risk of relativizing the objective revelation of God in the biblical event. Balthasar’s trilogy: *Herrlichkeit*, *Theodramatik*, and *Theologie* is also implicitly a critique of an anthropological starting point for theology associated with Rahner. Before the Second Vatican Council, when he began his criticism of the “emerging trend” in theology, Balthasar had argued that there can be no separation of the transcendent God and the God of Jesus Christ. He saw parallels between what was symbolized on Good Friday by the stripping of church altars and the events taking place in the church at the time. The Church, for him, was being stripped to its bare essentials and he warned against the development of the transcendent notion of God divorced from the event of the Cross. After the Council, when he began commenting on the Council documents, he singled out Rahner’s “anonymous Christian” as a clear example of how the Church was adapting itself to the world and becoming “modern” in the worse sense of the term. This criticism follows his earlier criticism in *The Moment of Christian Witness* where Balthasar took issue with Rahner on the same subject. For Balthasar, “the church can be described morphologically only when she is at the same time seen from a genetic point of view. Only her growth and development out of the *morphe* of Christ can explain her nature and being. She has no being when detached from Christ” (Balthasar 1994, 49). Balthasar’s argument was hinged on the idea that only on the Cross does the Incarnation become manifest. It would be impossible “to speak of a ‘tendency toward the Incarnation’ on the part of God, as a development taking place in world history, without first accepting the purpose of this development” (Balthasar 1994, 49). In a nutshell, Balthasar’s main objection to “anonymous Christian” is that it derives from a theological method which ultimately presents the historical Christ-event merely as the manifestation of God’s salvific will in history rather than as an actual event (*ereignis*) of salvation (Conway 1993, 91). But like Kung, Balthasar in no way objects to the fact that meaningful non-Christians who embrace a good way of life can be saved.

In sum, what many of Rahner’s critics object to is the term he uses and the way he packaged his theory (i.e., the way he conceived his insight into salvation available without being

Catholic), but not the reality of his theological position. The critics do not mean to say that salvation is not possible for non-Christians, like our African ancestors. Rahner himself was aware of the difficulties surrounding his theory and was open to considering a better term that can serve the purpose. I will suggest a term, *chrétien d'origine* (ab-original Christians), in my conclusion that can rescue Rahner's terminology, at least in the case of our African ancestors. For our African ancestors are not "anonymous" to us. We know who they are and how they lived their graced existence. But in the meantime, there is no reason why "anonymous Christian" cannot a tool for conceptualizing how salvation is mediated to non-Christians. Admittedly, the term must be nuanced to make it acceptable for many non-Christian. This is why I think "anonymous Christian" can be a beginning point, not the end point, of any discussion—that salvation is indeed open to everyone because of God's universal salvific will and that the official church of Christ has its origins in and is borne by this efficacy. Christians are free to think that it is in Jesus Christ that the Christian religion can make a legitimate interpretation of this experience. For, from their vantage point, Jesus is the criterion for determining what is a human misunderstanding of the transcendental experience of God and the legitimate interpretation of the experience. "It is only in Christ that we Christians have the possibility of making a radical distinction between the categorical history of revelation in the full sense and its purity, and the formation of human substitutes for it and misinterpretations of it" (Rahner 1997, 157). This is the sense in which the Christian religion is the "homecoming" of everything in the way of truth. Rahner was clear that the advantage the Christian has over those who do not explicitly profess the Christian faith is that the Christian has a greater chance of salvation than the person who is an "anonymous Christian" (Rahner 1966, 132). The disadvantage of the non-Christian is that he or she is not a Christian at the social level (through baptism and membership of the church) in the sense of consciously objectifying his or her Christianity. However, whatever the non-Christian lacks in not being consciously Christian, he or she can make up through the grace of the Holy Spirit. As long as non-Christians, like adherents of ATRs, continue to posit a positively moral act in the full exercise of his or her free self-disposal, this act would be a positive supernatural salvific act in the actual economy of salvation.

Life Lived in the Presence of African Symbols

The May 1994 African synod of bishops was a monumental achievement for the African church in many respects. The synod, coming in the heels of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council (1963–65) which took place about three decades earlier, got the attention of the universal Church so much that Pope John Paul II had to signal approval with an accompanying document, *Ecclesia in Africa* (September 1995). Although a follow-up African synod took place in 2009, the importance of the 1994 synod cannot be overstated as this inaugural synod remains the reference point. Its purpose at the time was to advise the Roman Curia and formulate an agenda for the Catholic Church's evangelizing mission in Africa as the Church looked forward to the third Millennium. One of the things that emerged from the synod was an ecclesiology that addresses the African church's relationship with the universal Church headquartered in Rome. Despite the success of the synod, there was a feeling that the synod did not adequately address the key issues facing the African church, particularly inculturation. Although the synod (and the subsequent one following it in 2009) urged that particular attention be paid to African customs and traditions and urged that dialogue be fostered with

ATRs because ATRs are “the guarantors of [African] cultural values” (“Message of the Synod,” sec. 21), nothing substantial was said about the salvation of the African adherents of ATRs, particularly the ancestors who lived in the pre-Christian missionary era. Although the Second Vatican Council spoke optimistically of the salvation of “those who through no fault of their own do not know the Gospel of Christ or His church” (Paul VI 1964, 16), the African synod did not quite address the issue and not much has been done, at least on the part of the African church’s hierarchy, since the end of the synod to relate *Lumen Gentium*’s declaration to our African ancestors and ancestresses. Granted that the term “salvation” is near synonymous with Christianity (gaining eternal life won by Christ) ATRs, like other non-Christian religions, have their own different understandings of what salvation entails. Salvation in ATRs is that change from this worldly living to other-worldly living that John Hick describes as “a radical change from a profoundly unsatisfactory state to one that is limitlessly better” (Hick 2000, 55). If Christianity is going to speak of salvation in exclusively Christian terms, then it must account for how salvation is mediated to African ancestors and ancestresses.

Veneration of ancestors occupies a central place in African cultures and traditions. Even John Paul II recognized the primordial place of ancestors in African belief systems and made a link between love for ancestors and the African sense of family and respect for God’s gift of life (John Paul II 2000, 43). The Pontiff remarked that “it is precisely this love for life that leads them to give such great importance to the veneration of their ancestors. They believe intuitively that the dead continue to live and remain in communion with them” (John Paul II 2000, 43). This recognition of the place of ancestors in the African family system makes it imperative to address the issue of salvation of the ancestors. African ancestors may not have been Christian in the sense of belonging explicitly to the Church community through formal baptism and initiation rites, but they lived religiously within the African systems of symbols and religions (ATRs). Charles Nyamiti has developed an argument about how Christ’s divine spirit is present in African ancestors, concluding thereby that through the grace that God confers through the Holy Spirit that Jesus Christ should be seen as an African ancestor (Nyamiti 2003, 83). There are also several others who have tried to inculturate Christianity using the metaphor of Christ as an African ancestor. Kwame Bediako, for example, speaks of Christ as the supreme African ancestor (Bediako 1995, 217) and Benezet Bujo agrees that Christ is the ancestor par excellence and “the privileged locus for a full understanding of the ancestors” (qtd in Stinton 2004, 49).

Lonergan, referencing a public lecture given at the University of Toronto in January 1968 by the Canadian Professor of Comparative Religion, Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1916-2000) in which Prof. Smith remarked that to live religiously is not merely to live in the presence of certain symbols, but to be involved with them or through them in quite a special way—a way that demands the totality of a person’s response and affects the person’s relations to everything else, including one’s neighbor, took Smith’s argument further—that besides reconstructing the history of different religious traditions, a more difficult question must be raised (Lonergan 1985, 122). The more difficult question concerns religious living. Are religions, like ATRs, salvific in and of themselves? Can Christians suppose that there are supernatural, grace-filled elements in non-Christian religions by which adherents of these religions are saved? Or are these religions simply soteriologically illegitimate from the start and incapable of having any positive significance as Karl Barth held? (Rahner 1985, 61). Even if we conceive “salvation”

as something only specifically Christian and assume that there is no salvation apart from Christ (however “Christ” is defined), do non-Christian religions, like ATRs, not contain supernatural elements arising out of the grace that God gives to all people freely on account of Christ? (Rahner 1985, 61). If the Christian church is not, as Rahner suggested, “an exclusive community of those who have a claim to salvation, but rather as the historically tangible vanguard and the historically and socially constituted explicit expression of what Christian hopes is present as a hidden reality even outside the visible church” (Rahner 1985, 77), might there then not be ways to conceive of adherents of religions like ATRs as saved? In all of this there is an important difference between what God offers and what humans are ready to receive, so that the universal offer of divine self-communication in practice depends on how open to it religions are in principle and in performance. If God does not reveal theologies, but God’s-self, as Cantwell Smith pointed out, might ATRs not be conceived as one of those finite, mundane, and human construct we call theological systems or religions that attempt a response to God’s-self-revelation? (Smith 1994, 56).

Returning to the Matter of African Response to God’s Self-Offer in the Light of the African Synod

Before the Second Vatican Council Rahner was in the forefront of those trying to conceptualize how the overwhelming mass of humanity, before and after Christ, who did not hear the gospel, can be “unquestionably and in principle excluded from the fulfillment of their lives and condemned to eternal meaninglessness” (Rahner 1963c, 39). Convinced of the efficacy of God’s grace to save anyone who says “yes,” at least in principle, Rahner developed the position that salvation is possible for non-Christians (including non-culpable atheists), while at the same time affirming the place of Jesus Christ as the definitive self-revelation of God. The “anonymous Christian” is Rahner’s technical way of speaking about a person who has accepted God’s gracious self-offer transcendentally in and through an implicit act of faith, even though this implicit act of faith has not been categorically expressed through baptism and membership in the church. Some theologians, as we have seen, disagree with Rahner’s “anonymous Christian” on the ground that his position relativizes the Christian faith and that it can constitute an obstacle in the church’s missionary activity in places like Africa. I cannot disagree more. The evidence of Christian expansion in Africa summarily disproves such a notion. Whether or not one agrees with Rahner’s terminology, the issue of salvation of our African ancestors must be addressed, particularly since the task of Christianizing Africans stands or falls on the way one interprets the relation of the African to their ancestors.

The basic presupposition of all religion is the belief in a transcendental reality people call by different names (God in English, Olorun in Yoruba, Chukwu in Igbo, and Mungu in Bantu). Some interior dynamism towards God is the horizon of all the activity of people who believe in transcendent being. The reality of God exists in their “intellectual and spiritual existences” (Rahner 1997, 45). This dynamism toward God, as I shall argue in the next section, is a prerequisite for “anonymous Christian” or “anonymous Christianity.” In explicating this theological position, Rahner was not concerned about actual salvation, but possible salvation of anyone who accepts the gift of God’s self-offer (grace) which Rahner explains is at the root of all human history, and what God did in Jesus’ life, death and resurrection.

It is hard to dispute that the traditional African experienced this dynamism toward God. Africans are extremely, and one may even felicitously say “dangerously,” religious. God’s self-

communication is mediated to traditional Africans in their historical/cultural situations. Their acceptance of God's self-offer has been articulated in folklores, songs, proverbs, and religions, (ATRs). ATRs are the religion of the African, for the African, and by the African. Some traditional Africans are polytheistic, monotheistic, and even monolatrous (the existence of one supreme being one among other deities). The supreme being is known by various names: Chineke (the One who created all things) and Olodumare (the one who surpasses all things). The supreme God is surrounded by other divinities/minor gods (angels in the Christian sense). Each community or clan had its own personal deity who acts as its guarantor or protector. One unfamiliar with African culture might construe widespread belief in divinities to be an indication that Africans were polytheists. Perhaps some were polytheists. But not all were polytheists. Some expressed "diffused monotheism." The African synod affirmed that the central doctrine of ATRs is "the belief in a Supreme Being Who is Creator, Giver of Everything, Just Judge, Eternal and so forth" ("Propositions," sec. 42). In the assessment of the synod, adherents of ATRs are worthy of respect, not only because they are believers in God and in spiritual values, but also because their beliefs and values lead many to be open to the fullness of revelation in Jesus Christ through the proclamation of the Gospel ("Propositions," sec. 42).

The belief in spiritual values of ATRs was vividly described by the Belgian Franciscan missionary to the Congo, Placide Tempels (1906–1977) who was impressed that the Bantu people among whom he worked express belief in degrees and variations of "forces." He also observed that, among the Bantu, being is inseparable from "force." Force is the nature of things. They are hierarchically organized and differ in their essences or nature. First comes the divine "force," which is followed by celestial "forces," human "force," and vegetative and mineral "forces" in that order (Tempels 1969, 37). Pope John Paul II was perhaps acknowledging this fact and more when he applauded the African sense of the sacred vis-à-vis how human transgressions (sin in Christian parlance) are punished. "Africans have a profound religious sense," the Pontiff remarked. "The reality of sin in its individual and social forms is very much present in the consciousness of these peoples, as is also the need for ties of purification and expiation" (John Paul II 2000, 42).

The traditional African had no written legal codes in the Jewish or Christian sense of Decalogue or Law Codes. Nonetheless morality and religious experience were mediated through symbols, myths, rituals, arts etc., which colored their worldviews and reality. Unlike in the western tradition where it is commonplace to distinguish the secular from the sacred and the church from the state, the traditional African made no such distinction. The secular was the sacred and the sacred was the secular, something akin to Rahner's idea that there is no pure nature—that we are from the beginning graced. In this sense it is easy to see why the traditional African societies were organized along religious lines—that which religion condemned or forbade was forbidden and condemned by society and that which religion approved was approved by society.

The idea that there was no "pure nature" fueled belief in the interrelationships between the divinities and the people, between clan deity and community. There was also a belief in interaction between the living and the dead (Christian sense of communion of saints, if you like.) Ancestors were never considered dead. They were thought to occupy a privileged place in the community. The co-sanguinity between the ancestors and the people and its pristine ties

to ethics and afterlife has also been affirmed by the African synod. “In many cultures, there are clear ideas of who merits to be called an ancestor. Were many of these not seeking God with a sincere heart?” (“Propositions,” sec. 36). This interaction between the living and the dead was in fact the basis for morality. Prayers were offered to the divinities and the “relocated” ancestors before embarking on an important project. Before going to war with a prospective enemy, for instance, prayers were offered to secure divine protection. God was invoked before and after meals or festivals. Even before conception men and women invoked the help of the deity. Rites of passages, like weddings and burials were also accompanied by prayers. The African synod added credence to this in emphasizing that the practice of venerating ancestors “in no way implies worshipping them” (“Propositions,” sec. 36). This idea of confusing veneration of the ancestors with ancestor worship led some influential people in the (Western) Church to condemn Jesuit missionary practice in 17th century China that distinguished venerating from worshipping and blessed the venerating. John Paul II has also added that this communion with ancestors could in some way be “a preparation for belief in the communion of the saints” (John Paul II 2000, 43). The Pope has also correctly tied the belief in ancestors to the fundamental role the family plays in the life of the African (see John Paul II 2000, 43). Africans use such festive events as naming ceremonies to celebrate who they are (God-loving and God-fearing people). African names, like Hebrew names, are theophoric. Most names either begin with God (as prefix) or end with God (as suffix.) A name like Chibuzor, for instance, means “God is the way,” Chinedu “God leads”, Chukwuemeka “God has done wonders”, Oloruntobi “God is great”, Oluranti “God has remembered me”. In songs and arts, Africans also reveal their rich religious heritage. Most songs have religious undertones. People express their hopes and fears through songs and use them to invoke divine help. No wonder the African synod observed, how “the extended African family is the sacred place where all the riches of our tradition converge” (“Message of the Synod,” sec. 27).

Finally, the African idea of God is tied to the idea of divine retribution and judgment. This supreme being who is holy, good, all-knowing and all-seeing expects his/her followers to be holy and pure in the inter-personal relations with others. An act of goodness to one’s neighbor was seen as an act of goodness to deity. An evil act towards neighbor was equally interpreted as an evil act to deity. I must note here the objections of the African writer Okot p’Bitek who scoffs at the idea of relating the notion of God in ATRs to Christianity. He thinks it is nothing more than “defensive operations.” p’Bitek also dismisses the efforts of the likes of John Mbiti, Bolaji Idowu, and Leopold Senghor who all try to show that the Christian God who is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent is the same God of the ATRs. p’Bitek calls them “intellectual smugglers” who are “busy introducing Greek metaphysical conceptions into African religious thought” (P’Bitek 1973, 89–90). Okot p’Bitek is a self-proclaimed non-religious, non-pagan, and non-Christian whose romanticization of anything traditionally African, especially African cultures, at times goes too far. His criticisms can be unhelpful for interreligious dialogue. In the next section, I will introduce the notion of dialectics to help mitigate such unhelpful criticisms. For, it is indisputable that the African sense of interpersonal relationships is part and parcel of their overall attempt to come to grips with the problem of evil in a graced world. A genuine work towards liberation from evil is willy-nilly “grounded in grace and lived out in charity, hope, and faith” (Ormerod 2015, 465). The acts of faith, hope, and charity, which are grounded in grace are, as John Paul II said, part of “God’s salvific plan

for Africa [and] at the origin of the growth of the churches on the African continent” (John Paul II 2000, 29). It is these values that lead many Africans today to be open to the fullness of revelation in Jesus Christ through the proclamation of the Gospel (“Propositions,” sec. 42).

Dialectics and a Radically Relativized Version of Rahner’s Theory

My argument has been proceeding in logical stages. I sum it up here in three steps. The first step accepts as paradigmatic the “Supernatural existential” as articulated by Rahner—that the human person is “the event of God’s absolute self-communication” (Rahner 1997, 126). Rahner shows how the supernatural revelation of God is always operative in space and time and how the acceptance of this revelation also takes place everywhere the human community is found (Rahner 1997, 313), pre-Christian Africa included. One of Bernard Lonergan’s functional specialties is what he carefully termed dialectics. The main objective of dialectics is to deal with conflicts. The conflicts may be known or unknown. They may also be latent or overt in people’s imaginations. The conflict dialectics deals with may also be hidden in the historical traditions of a people or may even be enshrined in their religious imaginations (Lonergan 2017, 220). Robert Doran has helped to develop this idea further by making an important distinction between two forms of dialectics: a dialectic of contraries and a dialectic of contradictories. A dialectic of contraries, according to this distinction, refers to a confrontation that happens when two principles encounter each other, but are still able to work harmoniously together in a creative tension. A dialectic of contradictories, on the other hand, refers to a confrontation that happens when two principles encounter each other, but find each other to be mutually exclusive, thereby necessitating a choice between the one or the other. While a dialectic of contraries is a matter of both/and, a dialectic of contradictories is a matter of either/or (Doran 1990, 68–71).

Let me illustrate this with some new findings that have been uncovered by theologians working in the area of interreligious dialogue. They speak of a new trend of double or even multiple religious belonging among some Southern Christians, especially in Asia. The trend is a hybridization of religiousness that is as troubling as it is perplexing. In this hybridization, a person may accept a sense of meaning for their “religious belief from more than one religious-spiritual orientation and tradition while strongly rooted in, firmly belonging to, and espousing only one among them” (Magesa 2013, 123). In concrete terms, a person may be a Christian while still professing to be a Hindu and/or a Buddhist at the same time. A hybrid cultural-religious identity is a good example of this dialectic of contradictories. How do you reconcile polytheistic Hinduism of over 330 million gods with a monotheistic Christian faith? A hybrid religious identity is, however, quite different from a hyphenated religious identity. The latter is an example of a dialect of contraries. An example of a hyphenated religious identity would be a Black person who is culturally African, but religiously Christian (African-Christian). There is no denying that a hybrid cultural-religious identity is somewhat related to a hyphenated religious identity. However, the two are significantly different. “While hybrid identity claims to spiritually profess and socially and institutionally identify double or multiple faiths at one and the same time, hyphenated identity espouses only a single belonging” (Magesa 2013, 123). Put differently, Christians with a hybrid identity (Hindu-Buddhist-Christian) find themselves in multiple religious worlds from which they alternate from the one to the other, depending on circumstances (Magesa 2013, 123). But Christians with a hyphenated religious identity

(African-Christian) stand firmly and are well rooted in Christianity, though they are still “willing and ready to welcome values, insights and practices than enhance the horizons of the Christian faith and expand its understanding” (Magesa 2013, 124). The emphasis here is on the role of local agency and indigenous appropriation of Christianity—something Lamin Sanneh argued has helped to release the two missionary faiths (Christianity and Islam) that came to Africa “from the fixed, motionless time frame in which they have been frozen and submit them to the animated surge of history where nothing stands still” (Sanneh 1983, xvi). A hyphenated religious identity is enhanced by grace and nature—the eschatological vision of God who endows all of humanity with the gift of salvation and the actual acceptance of this gift in history. Thus, the salvation of African ancestors can be maintained by an appeal to the dialectic of contraries. When Christians who are engaged in interreligious dialogue assert that religions other than Christianity are nothing but instances of divine self-manifestation in a graced world, the logic itself is one of a dialectic of contraries. Laurenti Magesa suggests that in the encounter between Christianity and African religions that the way forward is not a Christianization of African customs and traditions, but a dialogue that recognizes the dynamism of these customs and traditions that culminates in a spirituality that leads to God (Magesa 2013). For inexplicable reasons, Western Christian missionaries failed to engage in dialogue with ATRs. That failure cries out for redress.

My second step stems from the notion of the dialectic of contraries (described in the first step). It is anchored in Rahner’s thesis that the salvation that Jesus Christ offers and the kingdom of God that he has inaugurated is not intended only for “a special group” of people, but for everyone who is open to its reception (Rahner 1997, 328). Nearly all African theologians agree that Christian theology can no longer afford not to engage the worldviews of the African people—their beliefs, values, and traditional orientation (see Michael 2013 and Magesa 1997). One of the things the dialectic of contraries helps us grasp is that not all the differences between the African worldviews and the Christian Gospel are dialectically opposed; that the differences here are not contradictions that cannot be resolved. Indeed, many of the differences in the respective worldviews are merely perspectival. In saying this, I do not mean to suggest that everything in ATRs are without their drawbacks. Laurenti Magesa’s study has already set the record straight in this regard—that while ATRs contain elements that confer abundant life, they also contain elements that threaten life (Magesa 1997). I am also not suggesting that Christianity and ATRs share the same theological meanings or the exact same message (Magesa 2010, 75). Things like witchcraft, which are still commonplace in some African communities, and the ancient practices of killing of twins, which was carried out in some communities in Nigeria before the Christian encounter with Africa, are a few instances of anomalies that should be and are in fact being sanitized. It is the role of dialectics to identify such oddities and expunge them. To return to the point, dialectics of contraries makes it feasible to speak of African ancestors as “graced” and even “Christians” of a sort. I have already alluded to some misunderstandings, and even distortions, of Rahner’s theory of “anonymous Christian” by some who think it relativizes the Church’s missionary effort. Perhaps dialectics of contraries helps to mitigate such concerns. At the same time, I do acknowledge that there is argument on the side of critics who find problem with the theory for good reasons, particularly since Rahner’s formulation of the theory can lead to an absolutized notion of Christianity and Church. Again, Lonergan’s dialectics becomes useful,

since it reconciles differences. With dialectics of contraries, it is not feasible to have an absolutized notion of Christian or Church. Dialectics of contraries can help yield rather a radically-relativized version of “anonymous Christian.” A radically-relativized theory of “anonymous Christian” retains differences in perspective and does not make adherents of ATRs Christians; in the same way a Buddhist or Hindu cannot be made a Christian. What a radically-relativized theory of “anonymous Christian” does is affirm the truth of the Christian faith, while still recognizing that truth and grace is also integral to ATRs, without diminishing in the process the significance of Christianity.

My third step derives from the previous two. With dialectics, the mass movement of Africans to institutional Christianity is not to be conceived as “conversion” as such, but as a transition from a horizontal exercise of freedom to a vertical process of “Christianization” (Dadosky 2004, 74). This reasoning stems from a distinction Lonergan made, albeit relying on the Jesuit French Thomist, Joseph de Finance (1904–2000), between a horizontal exercise of freedom and vertical exercise of freedom. According to this important distinction, a horizontal exercise is a decision or choice a person makes within an established horizon and a vertical exercise is a set of judgments and decisions a person makes to move from one horizon to another (Lonergan 1996, 237). Conversion, in its proper sense, is a movement into a new horizon, an about-face and a new beginning that repudiates the old (Lonergan 1996, 237–38). Many African Christians have not and will not repudiate the “old” because of its ties to their culture. They may profess Christianity, but they are still African-Christians because they live in the world of ATRs, are characterized by the worldviews of ATRs, and make some important life decisions and choices within the established horizons of African culture with its overload of ATRs. Put differently, the hyphenated religious identity African-Christians allows the Black people of Africa, who draw inspiration from their African traditional values, to be truly African and Christian, the same way the hyphenated cultural identity allows Black people in the United States to be African and American. In Africa, therefore, Christianization does not necessarily amount to a repudiation of an already established horizon. Thus, in so far as dialectics helps us to appreciate our differences with others who differ radically from us, not in the sense of contradictories, but in terms of contraries, it provides us the occasion for a reflection and an occasion for a self-scrutiny that can lead to a new understanding of oneself, one’s destiny, others, and their destiny (Lonergan 2017, 238).

The growth of churches in Africa is a phenomenon many, including the Church’s hierarchy, have spoken of in terms of “conversion of Africa.” But “conversion of Africa” may be misapplied here. John Dadosky has correctly pointed out how contemporary scholarship on conversion is helping to identify and clarify the various aspects of personal transformation (Dadosky 2004, 74). According to Dadosky, one can distinguish between the aspect of conversion that pertains to the interior transformation of the subject and an aspect of conversion that pertains to a change in one’s explicit religious affiliation or religious status. The former, the interior aspect of conversion, is rooted in the Bible and is known as *metanoia*—an about-face or turn around, which leads to change in conduct. The latter, conversion that leads to change in one’s explicit religious affiliation, is essentially nominal (for example, moving from one religion, say ATRs to Christianity), though that does not mean that it cannot lead to “*metanoia*.” But there is also another kind of conversion, according to Dadosky, that contemporary scholarship has identified as expressing changes in the outward

expression of religious identity. They are changes that occur when one makes “transition from one belief system or institution to another belief system or institution” (Dadosky 2004, 74). Contemporary scholarship has found the word “conversion” to be a misnomer when used here. Some scholars have dropped the term altogether “in favor of terminology that more accurately expresses the historical-social dimension of religious affiliation and identity” (Dadosky 2004, 74). Paul offers a good example in his letters where he indicated that the first hearers of the gospel themselves after conversion still were short of the gospel in some areas of behaviors and thought (Gal. 1: 1–9). The point here is not simply that interior transformation cannot occur on a mass scale, but that interior transformation is a prerequisite for mass transition to institutional transition. Thus, this buttresses the idea that the mass transition of Africans to institutional Christianity is a phenomenon yet to be properly named or identified, but not “conversion.” The prior “conversion” (inner transformation) has roots in ATRs. This point has been reinforced in a dissertation by an African student who cleverly pointed out how it is the eco-social ethics of Ubuntu that is rooted in African worldview that makes it possible for African Christians to honor Jesus as both Creator and ecological ancestor of all life (see Kaoma 2010). Thus, if the inner process of conversion as it pertains to the interiority of Africans is rooted in ATRs, might there be grounds to speak of our long-gone ancestors and ancestresses as “anonymous Christians,” or even more proto-Christian or *chrétien d’origine*?

Why a Paradigm Matters

Scholars in interreligious dialogue work with a typology, paradigm, or model. Paul Knitter has condensed them into three models he calls the inclusivist, exclusivist, and pluralist models and shows the strengths and weaknesses of each model (Knitter 2002). Knitter reasons that any Christian dialogue with non-Christian religions inevitably ends in one of four frames of replacement (stems from exclusivist model), fulfillment (stems from inclusivist model), mutuality and acceptance (stems from pluralism model). Commenting on Knitter’s proposal, Laurenti Magesa argues that when applied to the African context, Knitter’s proposal would amount to “a choice between total overthrow of African epistemology, complete abandonment of European epistemology, reconciliation between the two, or mutual tolerance between them” (Magesa 2013, 126). The first option, Magesa argues, is unconscionable, since it amounts to cultural genocide. The second option, he says, is neither probable nor possible, because of the universal character of belief in Christ. He reasons that we are therefore left with the two last options: reconciliation between the two or tolerance between the two (Magesa 2013, 127). In my view, reconciliation between the two might prove even more difficult in the light of the 2000 Congregation of the Doctrine of Faith (CDF) document *Dominus Iesus*’ warning against what the document calls “religious relativism” that seeks to suggest “that one religion is as good as another” (Congregation of the Doctrine of Faith 2000, 22). Despite the controversies that have trailed the CDF document, there is a general feeling that *Dominus Iesus* is directed against the religious pluralism “whirling in from Asia” (Chia 2002, 289), particularly the Sikh and Hindu teachings that all religions are alternative routes to God. Three important points should, therefore, be noted here. First, in contradistinction to Sikh or Hindu religions, at no time has ATRs claimed to be an established church or creed in the *Dominus Iesus*’ sense of an alternative route to God. African religions also do not claim to be any pietistic movements. They do not refer to themselves as “church.” More importantly, they do not have

any missionary or proselytizing goal. They are simply a life-force that unites the life-vision of the African peoples under their umbrella. Second, *Dominus Iesus*' warning is mainly directed against "those who wish to remove the Christological concentration from ecclesiology in favor of a pluralistic theocenteredness that dissolves the church's witness into the general stream of human religious consciousness and symbolism," (Macchia 2000, 271), something ATRs have never been and cannot be accused of. Third, *Dominus Iesus*' stern warning against "relativistic theories which seek to justify religious pluralism" (Congregation of the Doctrine of Faith 2000, 4) is not in any way an abandonment of Vatican II's teaching that, "The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in [non-Christian religions] (Paul VI 1965c, 2). In fact, *Dominus Iesus* also affirms that God makes Godself "present in many ways, not only to individuals, but also to entire peoples through their spiritual riches of which their religions are the main and essential expression" (Congregation of the Doctrine of Faith 2000, 8). Therefore, dialogue with ATRs remains the most reasonable and most viable option going forward.

To affirm that Africans responded to God's-self offer using the guides of ATRs is not the attitude of pluralism or relativism that *Dominus Iesus* condemns. The early Christian explorers and missionaries, particularly the French and Portuguese, dismissed ATRs as "fetish" (pagan) without understanding the nature of the religions they were condemning. Not to see the possibility of "anonymous Christians" among the adherents of ATRs is to leave open the question: Does that mean that our ancestors (especially those who lived sincere lives) have been condemned to eternal meaninglessness? Given that the traditional African had an unflinching belief in a supreme being and patterned their lives in accordance with the dictates of their religions (albeit imperfect), could their religious expressions not be an anticipation of God's full revelation in the person of Jesus Christ? Is not a religion (ATRs) that stresses the love of neighbor and of God "anonymously" Christian in some respects? Are some ATRs values, like belief in a supreme deity, sense of the sacred, sense of community, respect for life etc., not values that can be characterized as "Christian"?

ATRs, like every other living faith (tribal religion) is characterized by a dearth of written records. Even in cases where written documents and data are available their sources are usually from the reports, descriptions and notes of outsiders, particularly Christian missionaries. As valuable as these sources may have been, they usually lack objectivity. The observations made by the outsiders are usually unrelated to the social context in which they occur, and events are distorted by being judged from Western Christian perspective (Newing 1975, 14). In 1861, for example, a western explorer said of the Nuer people of Africa, "like all other tribes of the white Nile they have no idea of a Deity, nor even a vestige of superstition; they are mere brutes, whose idea of earthly happiness is an unlimited supply of wives, cattle and...beer" (Newing 1975, 15). But with Evans Pritchard's landmark work it was later discovered that even though the Nuer people were primitive by the usual standards of reckoning, "their religious thought is remarkably sensitive, refined, and intelligent" (Pritchard 1956, 232). This misrepresentation reminds one of the case of Charles Darwin's landing in Tierra del Fuego in 1833. He was sure he had discovered an aboriginal people with no religion. But half a century later a scholar who took time to learn the language and culture of the Fuegians discovered that they had a well-developed concept of God whom they call *Watainainaiwa* (the Eternal One) and that there never was a time when the idea of God was not known to them.

What I have been attempting thus far is to answer the question that has been posed since Vatican II regarding whether and how the non-Christian religions (like ATRs) can be a means of salvation for those who belong to them. The Council categorically affirms that “the Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy” in non-Christian religions, and that the Catholic Church “regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men” (Paul VI 1965c, 2). What the Council did not do, however, is clarify how salvation is mediated to these non-Christians that the Catholic Church wants to dialogue and collaborate with to “preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found [in these religions]” (Paul VI 1965c, 2). Where the Council was silent, Rahner’s theory of “anonymous Christian” offers a pathway to be explored: “anyone who does not close himself to God in an ultimate act of his life and his freedom through free and personal sin for which he is really and subjectively guilty and for which he cannot shirk responsibility” stands open to achieving salvation (Rahner 1997, 143). The suggestion here is that a modified version of the theory, i.e., a relativized-non-absolutized version of the theory of “anonymous Christian,” answers the question of how salvation is mediated to our African ancestors. Langdon Gilkey, I believe, was one who understood the need for this kind of a relativized non-absolutized theory of “anonymous Christian” in his remark about inter-religious dialogue, which presupposes his view on soteriology:

On the one hand, we do not relinquish our own standpoint or starting point: What is dialogue if our Buddhist partner ceases to be Buddhist or we cease to be Christian? Nor on the other hand do we absolutize our own standpoint—lest no interchange take place at all. On the contrary, we relativize it radically; truth and grace are also with the other, so that now ours is only one way. And yet we remain there: embodying stubbornly but relatively our unconditional affirmations. Or in reverse, we qualify our acknowledged relativism by participating in our quite particular but still stoutly affirmed perspective. Again, it is in praxis that we uncover a relative absoluteness. (Gilkey 1994, 47)

When Rahner developed “anonymous Christian,” he did not conceive of it as an instrument for evangelization. So, the suggestion that the theory can hamper the Church’s missionary work cannot withstand scrutiny. Christian resurgence in Africa has also laid such fears to rest. Rahner conceived the theory rather in the light of the threat posed to Christianity in Europe by secularism, pluralism and atheism. He intended it as a framework for dialogue, a framework for understanding how God’s grace can still be active in what appears, on the surface, a graceless world. In the face of inter-religious conflicts in Africa, especially between Christians and Muslims, Rahner’s theological position can serve as a starting point for dialogue. One of the things he has proven is that the “secret presence of God” (Paul VI 1965a, 9) is found in other cultures and religions. “Anonymous Christian” also validates “the good that is sown” in the hearts and minds of African ancestors and the good in African “rites and customs” (Paul VI 1964, 17).

Conclusion

Addressing the issue of the countless millions of Africans who responded to God's offer of love and lived conscientious lives before the advent of Christianity is by no means a novel idea. It is matter of theological significance for African theologians. Charles Nyamiti has even taken the matter further to posit the idea that Jesus Christ is our Brother-ancestor and "the archetype of our supernature and Christian conduct" (Nyamiti 1984, 35). Others, like Laurenti Magesa and Benezet Bujo, have also developed a similar ancestor-Christology. The ecclesiological implication of their work can no longer be ignored. The ancestor-Christology is ancillary argument to the idea that "All Africans, men and women alike, who lived according to the African spiritual ideal can be considered as 'Christians before Christians' [*chretiens avant la lettre*]" (Bujo 2013, x). Agbonkhianmeghe Orabator commendably took a step in that direction in his 2016 Wade Lecture at Marquette University. Orabator himself was raised in the devout practices of his own tribal religion. His positive commitment to indigenous religions has not only made him examine, but also refute the caricatures of ATRs by those Christian missionaries who wrongly caricatured ATRs as "animism" and "fetish." Commendably, Orabator explores the ATRs' beliefs and practices that honor the earth and promote the integrity of creation, especially as they bear on ethical principles, values, and virtues that are essential for sustainable solutions to ecological crisis (Orabator 2016). More of such engagement by African theologians is needed. Failure to do so will pose a lot of problems for the Christian faith in the continent, especially since a sizeable number of Africans today are still adherents of ATRs. To give the impression that their pre-Christian ancestors are not saved is ecumenically insensitive. Not only does the insensitivity hamper inter-religious dialogue, but it also undermines the credibility of the Christian faith.

Contrary to what some early missionary Christianity thought, many today no longer doubt that there are elements of ATRs that are compatible with the Christian faith. ATRs attempt an explanation on how the universe was created, teach what is right and wrong, define relationships between human beings in community and teach their adherents how to live a good life. Vatican II offers grounds for arguing that these elements could be regarded as saving anticipations of the gospel. The *lineamenta* of the 1994 African synod also acknowledges that "we can speak of God's activity in other religious traditions without reference to Christ as the foundation and norm for the revelation of who God is" (Shorter 1991, 76). What Rahner's theory does essentially is provide a way of understanding it. Admittedly, ATRs have some limitations (some of which I have identified already). But the lapses do not diminish the supernatural elements in these religions nor make them less mediations of God's grace. A Salvific role cannot be denied any religion just because of its limitations. From a Christian perspective, even the Jewish religion had to go through a process of correction and purification and that did not contradict its role as a medium of salvation for the Jews (Rahner 1966, 126-27).

In sum, I can see how a Christian might accept the teaching that salvation occurs through Christ. But I do not understand salvation through Christ to mean exclusively by membership in the Christian church. Salvation can occur anywhere because the divine work of God through Christ has already permeated all of human history (Schwobel 1992, 41). Wolfhart Pannenberg (1928–2014) seems to sum up the position I am alluding to:

The parable of the last judgment does also imply, however, that Jesus and his proclamation are the final norm in deciding on whether a person will be admitted to or excluded from the communion of the kingdom. He is the norm even in relation to those who never knew him in their lifetime. The conclusion is that many do in fact belong to Jesus and in the kingdom he proclaimed who were not members of the Chosen People of Israel or the Christian church. But it is the affinity of their lives to Jesus' mission and proclamation that will prove decisive in their eternal salvation. Thus Jesus remains the final criterion for all human beings, while only the members of his church know about this criterion and can be certain about their salvation providing they live according to their faith. (Pannenberg 1992, 98–99)

Every authentic religion is an attempt at union with God. The ATR's fidelity to prayer, its esteem for dignified self-discipline, and its mystical call for union with the divine, are a few indications of a human response to the offer of God's self. To assume that the adherents of ATRs (or those who never heard the gospel of Christ) are inevitably lost, "would indeed be an agonizing conclusion to those whose basic belief is that 'God is love.'" (Anderson 1994, 234). In the Christian tradition it is taken for granted that Abraham, Jacob, Moses and a holy host of noble men and women of the Hebrew Scriptures enjoy fellowship with God. Yet these people neither knew Jesus nor the salvation he was to effect. There are also instances of 'sinners' who were justified before God when they renounced their sins and offered animal sacrifices. How did they attain fellowship with God when they never heard the gospel of Christ? It is hard, therefore, not to reasonably conclude that the non-Christian religions manifest an anonymous but nonetheless effective operation of grace (Schillebeeckx 1963, 7). Our African ancestors are, therefore, not "anonymous" because we know who they are and how they lived their graced lives. They are for us *chrétien d'origine*, i.e., ab-original Christians.

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