

**A CRITICAL STUDY OF THE CONCEPT OF GOD IN AFRICAN THEOLOGY:
EVALUATING THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF JOHN S. MBITI AND MERCY A.
ODUYOYE**

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Abstract

The researchers critically examined the Concept of God in African Theology; focusing especially on the contributions of John S. Mbiti and Mercy A. Oduyoye. The researchers interest is to investigate how John Mbiti and Mercy A. Oduyoye understand the concept of God in connection to the African traditional religio-cultural heritage. The idea is to make the concept of God become more relevant to African Christians so as to make them feel at home within the Christian faith. The researcher employed the use of descriptive and comparative analysis as well as secondary sources that dealt on the subject matter. The researcher discovered that John Mbiti has maintained African Monotheism and African Traditional Religion as a *praeparatio evangelica* and has arrived at a conclusion that the God revealed in the Bible is the same as the God worshipped in African Traditional Religion. In addition, the researcher discovers that Oduyoye disregards the belief by Africans that man alone represents the image of God. She as well disregards the belief that God is represents male gender. The researchers discovered that Oduyoye believes that just as men represent the image of God so do women represent as well the true image of God. Therefore, the researchers strongly recommend that Theology in Africa should be a contextualized Theology without distorting the message and content of the Holy Bible.

Keywords: God, African Theology, African monotheism, African Traditional Theology

Introduction

Tennent, (2010) says that Western Christians are facing a serious crisis concerning missions and Christian identity within the large global Christian movement. , a half century ago, those who lived in Africa, were facing a serious crisis concerning their identity within Western Christianity planted on the African continent.

African theologians acknowledged that the religio-cultural context of doing theology in Africa was different from that of the West and they began to prepare a deliberate transgression of or discontinuity with the traditional European method of approach to theology. In the process of the theological break with Western theological methodology, since the 1960s, African theologians have been attempting to produce a theology that incarnates the gospel message in the African culture on the theological level (Nyamiti, 2001).

Most African theologians have emphasized the African traditional religio-cultural heritage and have claimed that theological reflection is to be done in relationship to the cultural context in which African people live (Dickson, 1984). Which has come to be known as a process of

Contextualization or even Inculturation theology. However, the plurality of contexts within the African continent has resulted in a plurality of methodologies of theologizing. Consequently, the plurality of methodologies has produced diverse theological trends in Africa. Theology in Africa can broadly be distinguished between a Theology of Inculturation (Contextualization) which stresses Africa's religious cultural matters and a Theology of liberation, which emphasizes Africa's socio-political and economic matters (Martey, 1993). Martey classifies the two major theological directions into four theological trends based on four different points of departure: African Inculturation theology, which pays much attention to African traditional beliefs and culture; African liberation theology, which is centred on the problems of poverty, injustice and exploitation; South African Black theology; which emphasizes the racial issue and Africa Women's theology, which stresses the oppressive gender relations in both church and society.

This study is intended as an investigation of how the African theologians, John Samuel Mbiti and Mercy Amba Oduyoye reflect theologically on the understanding of God and of how they approach theology in the African context from the African male and female perspectives respectively. In exploring the questions concerning this subject, this study focuses solely on African Inculturation theology (hereafter referred to as AIT) and Africa Women's theology (hereafter referred to as AWT).

AIT and AWT have broad similarities, but differ in particular emphasis. African Inculturation theologians endeavour to bring African culture and traditional religiosity to bear on African theology in order to make the theology relevant and intelligible in the life, culture and thought of African people. They attempt to find its conceptual framework within the African traditional religio-cultural heritage and regard African traditional religions as a source of formulating theology in African context.

AWT focuses on the reinterpretation of the gospel in accordance with the requirements of the black women in Africa. AWT was born of women's experience of oppression not only in the socio-economic and political structure but also by religio-cultural factors. As Oduyoye maintains that women experience should be an integral part of the definition of being human and part of the data for theological reflection, the most crucial source of AWT is the women's experience of oppression.

Most male Inculturation theologians do pay much of their attention to the problem of cultural and religious identity and are reluctant to address the religio-cultural aspects that are oppressive to women in Africa, while African women theologians criticize the oppressive socio-cultural elements that dehumanize and marginalize women in both the society and church (Martey, 1993). This phenomenon indicates that the two theologies have different perspectives and motives in theologizing.

Over the past few decades, a considerable number of studies have been conducted on the relationship between the gospel and its theological reflections articulated in the African context (Dickson, 1984). Although the relationship between the gospel and its expressions in the African context has been an object of study for a long time, there are still many controversies. One of the most controversial and crucial issues on the subject matter is who God is to Africans and how God is articulated by African theologians.

African theologians maintain that God is to be articulated in keeping with the African mentality and Africa needs with special reference to their tradition, culture, religion, history and current life experience (Motlhabi, 1994). Motlhabi says that the God articulated in African theology must be an African God who is incarnated in each distinct context of the African continent. This brings us the issue of the Christian identity and the cultural identity in the context of cultural plurality. How can the cultural identity that requires to be expressed in a particular cultural context and the Christian identity that claims to be presented universally be balanced? A theological articulation of the understanding of the concept of God in African theology is linked with the issues of the Christian identity and that of the cultural identity.

Another important consideration about AIT's and AWT's understanding about the concept of God is the theological way of understanding the interplay of the gospel and African culture. It seems reasonable to assume that the theological reflections on the understanding of God would be influenced by the way of understanding the interplay between the gospel and African culture. Therefore, theologians' way of understanding the interplay of the gospel and African culture needs to be discussed with reference to the process of contextualization by comparative and dialogical study of the theological reflection on God in AIT and AWT. Mbiti's and Oduyoye's models of contextualization will be discussed and it can be the ground on which to discuss the possible dialogue between the two theologies.

In the last few decades, many theologians like Martey (1993), Motlhabi (1994) and Munga, (1998) have investigated the relationship among different theological trends in African theology and a possibility of dialogue among the different trends of African theology. Although great attention has been given to the question of the relationship between AIT and African liberation theology or South African Black theology, there has not been a relatively major study undertaken on the dialogue between AIT and AWT. Therefore, there is an urgent need for investigation into the understanding of the concept of God in AIT and AWT. It is on the above premise that this research desires to attempt identifying how AIT and AWT articulate the understanding of God.

African Inculturation theologians and African women theologians have attempted to incarnate the gospel message in their specific contexts. If each genre formulates its own theology in general and articulates the understanding of God in particular, arguing its own theological relevance in the African context. The theological issues are how one theological articulation can secure its relevance and legitimacy with regard to the other that comes from different context and how each theology can ensure its cultural identity and contextuality for the African church and Christian identity and catholicity for world Christianity at the same time.

In this sense, the understanding of God in AIT and AWT is not merely a theological description of God, but an issue of a theological response based on their interplay between cultural identity, contextuality and Christian identity/Universally. This study focuses on how African Inculturation theologians and African women theologians articulate the understanding of God in their own context respectively and how theological contextuality and theological catholicity can be maintained simultaneously.

The purpose of the study stems from the researchers motivation which is to critically study the concept of God in African theology. The researchers through an analytical-comparative and dialogical study of the theological reflections on the understanding of God in AIT and AWT desires to examine whether African theologians actually achieve their theological aim that they

primarily intended to formulate a theology cooked in an African pot in which the Africans feel at home in the Christian faith. The researcher further wish to investigate how the African Inculturation theologian Mbiti and the African woman theologian Oduyoye articulate their understanding of God. By studying these two theologians' articulation of God, this study wants to know whether Mbiti and Oduyoye succeeded in communicating the gospel and the understanding of God to the African people so that the gospel message may become intelligible to Africans.

The researchers applied the use of an analytical-comparative and dialogical- descriptive approach which aided in the investigation on how an African Inculturation theologian (John S. Mbiti) and an African woman theologian (Mercy A. Oduyoye) reflect on God theologically and contextually.

There have been many discussions concerning the relationship between AIT and African liberation theology or South African Black theology whereas, relatively little attention has been paid to an analytic, detailed examination of interaction and dialogue between AIT and AWT. Therefore, this study will be centred solely on AIT that focuses on African religio-cultural matters and AWT that seeks the empowerment of women against women unfriendly traditional social economic and political system.

A study of this nature should be an eye opener towards the knowledge of the understanding of the concept of God in African theology. This will be achieved through the examination of the contributions of John S. Mbiti who happened to be an African Inculturation theologian and Mercy A. Oduyoye who happened to be an African woman theologian, Africans will now be able to 'feel at home' within the Christian faith. This study will promote the communication of the gospel and the understanding of God to be done within an African context for an African to understand as well as apply in an African way.

Review of Literature

The Concept of African Theology

Mbiti (1998) classifies theological streams in Africa into oral theology, symbolic theology and written theology (p.9). In a paper presented at one theological conference, Mbiti, (2003) says that oral theology is the first born of theological output (p.3)

The term 'African theology' that first appeared in written form in 1956 has been used among African theologians especially since the 1960s. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, African theologians attempted to define what African theology is. However, there was no conclusive definition of African theology. At the African Conference of Churches Abidjan Assembly (1969), a tentative definition of African theology was offered. It was defined as a theology that is based on the biblical faith and speaks to the African soul in the categories of thought which arise out of the philosophy of African people (Muzorewa, 1985)

Mbiti, (1978) defines African theology as a theological reflection and expression by African Christians. (p.5). Nyamiti, (1994) clarifies African theology as the understanding and expression of the Christian faith in accordance with African needs and mentality in the broad sense and as the systematic and scientific presentation or elaboration of the Christian faith according to the needs and mentality of the Africans in its strict sense (p.10) Sawyer (1987) opines that, African theology is an attempt to interpret Christ to the Africans in such a way that

they feel at home in their new found Christian faith. Fashole Luke, (1975) says that the essence of African theology is to translate the one faith of Jesus Christ to suit the tongue, style, genius, character and culture of Africans. According to Pobee, (1979) African theology is to interpret essential Christian faith in authentic African language in the flux and turmoil of our time so that there may be genuine dialogue between the Christian faith and African culture.

In order to achieve this goal, African theologians use African concepts and African ethos as vehicles for the communication of the gospel in African contexts (Pobee,1979). Moyo (1983) defines African theology as an attempt by Christians in Africa to reflect systematically on the revelation of God in Jesus Christ and to articulate the results of that reflection through categories of thoughts which arise out of the philosophy of the African people. For Kurewa (1975) African theology is the study that seeks to reflect upon and expresses the Christian faith in African thought, form and idiom as it is experienced in African Christian communities and always in dialogue with the rest of Christendom. The final statement of the Conference of Ecumenical Dialogue of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) rejects an academic type of theology that is divorced from action and urges theologians to be with the poor in their struggle for liberation. The final communiqué of the Pan African Conference of the Third World Theologians in Ghana in 1977 claims that African theology must be contextualized and centred on liberation theology. Ukpong (1984) developed an elaborated definition of African theology and its task. For him, the task of the African Theologians consists in rethinking and re-expressing the original Christian message in within African cultural milieu. In the process there is inter-penetration of both. Christian faith enlightens African culture and the basic data of revelation as contained in the scriptures and traditions are critically re-examined for the purpose of giving them African Christian expressions. Thus, there is integration of culture and faith and from it is born a new theological reflection that is at once both African and Christian. African theology means Christian faith attaining African cultural expressions.

Some African theologians emphasize the aspect of systematic presentation of the Christian faith in African religio-cultural terms, some with the stressing the building of bridges between the gospel and African beliefs and culture; while others focus on the language of liberation. However, as the case may be, with such a variety of definitions, there seem to be an attempt to bring the African culture and traditional religiosity to bear in order to make the Christian gospel and theology relevant as well as meaningful to an African. These definitions strongly indicate that African theologians reject Western theology in its totality because to African theologians, it does not comply with or reflect with the African needs and mentality.

According to Sawyer, (1987), the major concern of African theology is clearly to communicate the gospel to the people of Africa within their cultural milieu and traditional religiosity and as well express theology to them in a way that is intelligible. Its major aim is to make Africans feel at home within the Christian faith and by so doing make them genuine Christians who are Africans. The theology that Africans have sought to produce is a theology cooked in an African pot that is truly African and authentically Christian (Ukpong, 1984).

Emergence of African Theology

African intellectuals who were studying in Rome around the mid 1950s ventured on anew theological course deviating from the prevailing Western image of Africa. This new intellectual direction was stimulated by anthropological studies on African culture and religions. It made possible a radical re-evaluation of the past discourses on African culture and religions (Mudimbe, 1997). African Catholic theologians started to articulate an African Theology. The

term African theology was used first by M. Hebga in a collection essays written by a group of African and Haitian Roman Catholic priests that was published under the title *Des Pretres noirs s'interrogent*, in 1956 (Ukpong, 1988).

Ukpong further states that this publication is considered as the first formal emergence of modern 'African theology'. The book paid keen attention to the problem of the indigenization of the faith and discussed the matter of relating the Christian message to the life and thought of African people.

Young black Catholic priests attempted to respond to the assumptions that Africa represented a cultural and religious *tabula rasa* for the imposition of Western Christian civilization. Africa was considered and erroneously so as a 'dirty blackboard' that must be wiped clean before the Christian faith and its civilizing influences could be inscribed on it. With an emphasis on the African heritage, the book attempted to emphasise the need to develop a valid theology for Africa that was done in a more genuinely African way (Parratt, 1995).

In this sense (Tienou,2007), states that *Des Pretres noirs s'interrogent* not only indicates the call for a culturally integrated theology but also signifies the passion to fight against theological imperialism. He further states that it serves as a quest for conscious self-theologizing by Africans and African theologians.

In the Protestant circle, a conference sponsored by the Christian Council of Gold Coast on 'Christianity and African culture' was held in 1955 in the Gold coast. At the conference Busia and Baeta affirmed continuity between African religion and Christianity. Busia called on the church to come to grips with traditional practice and with the worldview that these beliefs and practices imply (Hastings, 1979).

In 1958, the All African conference sponsored by the Christian Council of Churches in Nigeria, with some financial help from the International Missionary Council was held at Ibadan, Nigeria. It was the first of several major Pan-African Christian meetings uplift future discussions of the problem of Africanization and the possibility of building on the traditional religious heritage for proclaiming the gospel in Africa.

According to Westerlund, (1985), by the mid 1950s and the early 1960s early African theologians mainly questioned Western theological ecclesiastical imperialism. They were preoccupied with searching for a way to give Christianity an African colour as well as attempted a critique of missionary theology and agitated for an African Christianity and theology.

The Possibility and Necessity of African Theology

The discussion on the necessity and possibility of African Theology were paved by the Vatican II document and several papal papers which made a drastic and emergent call for the respect for and the dialogue with other religions and by the All African Conference of Churches, which gave impetus to theological development in the Protestant Church in Africa.

By the mid 1960s, African theologians had moved away from the critique of the missionary theological method and the agitation for an African theology. They became involved in developing an African theology void of Western influences. Idowu (1965) strongly called for the need of such a break from Western theology and argued the urgency for the indigenization

of theology in Africa. He intensely argued that the Church in Nigeria was losing its relevance by clinging to the Western style and value system and had stopped responding to the specific tasks of its call to Nigeria.

His conviction is that 'the time is overdue for the Church in Nigeria to look at herself, to examine her own soul, to justify her existence in the country, to answer in precise terms the questions whether her purpose in Nigeria is not to serve as an effective tool of imperialism or as a veritable means to soften Nigerians for the purpose of convenient exploitations by Europeans.

According to Hastings (1979), African theologians' prime concern during the years of the first flowering of African theology in the 1960s was to achieve a sympathetic understanding of the traditional religious heritage. The central themes of their writings was the nature of African traditional religions and its relationship of continuity rather than that of discontinuity with the Christian faith.

Idowu and Hastings make it very clear in their writings that it was very necessary and a matter of urgency for Africans to develop their own theology void of Western influences. They saw the need why Africans should feel at home with the Christian faith. To them, it was very much possible for African theologians to come together in order to develop a theology that would best fit Africa, which speaks the language of the people and is quite understandable to the people. A theology developed by Africans for Africans.

The Understanding of the Concept of God in Mbiti's Theology

This section focuses on how John S. Mbiti, one of the leading African Inculturation Theologians has articulated the understanding of God in Africa within a Christian theological framework, aiming at achieving a dialogue and integration between the Christian faith and the traditional African religiosity. In this section, Mbiti's understanding about the concept of God will be dealt with in relation to his methodology, theological concerns and his articulation of God in African theology will be evaluated.

Mbiti's Theological Concerns

According to Mbiti, (1970), Christianity has Christianized Africa but Africa had not yet Africanized Christianity. He diagnoses the African Church as a church without a theology, without theologians and without theological concerns. In order to proffer a remedy, the gospel and Christianity have to be deeply rooted within the point of African religiosity and the African should be free to express the Christian faith in a manner suitable to African conditions and backgrounds (Han, Y.S & Beyers, J. 2017)

For Mbiti, the gospel which remains basically universal and the same for all times is proclaimed within the African language and cultural context and the particular culture becomes the medium of receiving, diffusing and relaying the gospel. Therefore, the church in Africa should do her best to communicate the meaning of the gospel to Africans in such a way that the gospel can be understood.

To understand Mbiti's theological concerns and how one source combines with the other to form his theology, it helps to look at the sources of his theology, in order to produce an authentic theology that is meaningful to the African context. Mbiti suggests the following sources of African Theology: The Bible, the theology of older churches and the major traditions

of Christendom, African traditional religions, African Philosophy and African religious heritage and the living experience of the church in Africa. Mbiti designates them as 'four pillars on which theological systems of the church in Africa could be erected'. Therefore, Mbiti sees a threefold task for Christian theology in Africa which is to retain its African religio-cultural heritage, to endow Christianity with an African imprint and character and to sustain the uniqueness and catholicity of Christianity (Kinney, 1979).

Mbiti's Understanding of the Concept of God

Mbiti, (1980), acknowledges that the first and most intriguing topic that instantly attracted his concern was the thinking of African people about God. According to Mbiti he had attempted to communicate the biblical revelation to the African people and to make the gospel intelligible to its hearers. In Mbiti's view, African Christians who convert from ATR cannot understand the Christian teaching about God without the help of their traditional knowledge of God because the whole life of African people is not possible to be separated from their religious beliefs and practices.

Mbiti, therefore, pursues integration of the traditional African religious heritage with Christianity. He regards the traditional African religious heritage as a fundamental ground on which the Christian faith can be effectively understood in Africa. Mbiti's concern to integrate the traditional African religious heritage and Christianity led him to study and focus on the parallels between the two through his comparative study of ATR and Christianity, Mbiti further finds that, great commonality between the two revolves round the concepts about God. Mbiti asserts that the ATR monotheism revolves around the concepts of God, whom the people feel and believe they have known since time immemorial (Mbiti, 2004). Mbiti, therefore, interprets the anthropological data of more than 300 African ethnic concept of God using Christian theological terms.

The concept of God is perhaps the single doctrine that has attracted remarkable interest in African scholarship of religions and theology. According to Kombo (2000), the reasons African scholars have shown interest in the African concepts of God are that African theologians seem to view theology as primarily about engaging in discussions about God, since for them, God occupies the most important place in the African cosmology.

In reaction to the presupposition of some anthropologists and Christian missionaries that African could not conceive the idea of the supreme God is fallacious. It true that in some mythologies of Africans about God, there are some myths that talks of, *deus remotus*, *deus absconditus* and *deus otiosus* . These myths do not support some erroneous presuppositions that Africa could not conceive the idea of God.

Mbiti (2009), he states that he is convinced that African people have the concepts and belief in God before foreign Christians or Muslim missionaries and travellers arrived Africa. Missionaries who introduced the gospel to Africa did not bring God to the African continent rather Africans had known and worshipped the same God who the Christians had come to introduce them to. Africans have always had a monotheistic religion which is solely on the belief in one God who is powerful, created all that is in existence and rules over the affairs of human. This is the same God who the Christian missionaries had come to introduce the Africans to not knowing that they had known him long before their coming. Elsewhere, Idowu (1973) described the African monotheism, which was interjected by additional belief in deities, spirits, ancestors and magical substances a 'diffused monotheism'.

Through Mbiti's anthropological study of ATR, he discovered similarities between the African concept of God and the Christian concept of God and focused on their similarities. In consequence, he translated his anthropological data into Christian theological terms and interpreted ATR theologically. He placed ATR on the same footings as the Old Testament hence both of them served as a *praeparatio evangelica*. To Mbiti there is actually no difference between the God Africans had known and conceived through their religion (ATR) and the God Christians worship.

The Understanding of God in Oduyoye's Theology

According to (Oduyoye, 1998, 2001), In the early debate about African Theology, women's issues and women theologians' voices were not in the forefront. Since the 1970s, the situation has rapidly changed and the feminist movement has become one of the main challenges in the theological field. African women's theology has emerged with new conceptual tools and theologians reflect theology in a different way of thinking and has begun to articulate women's experiences and concerns in their theology.

Oduyoye criticizes oppressive traditional African religious beliefs and practices against women as well as African Christianity which has been shaped by Western Christian missionaries and has legitimized the patriarchal order. Oduyoye's understanding of the concept of God and her formulating of the image of God in the contemporary African context will be discussed with reference to her methodology and the status of women in African culture and the African church.

Oduyoye's theological concern is to analyze the interaction between African culture and the Christian gospel so that both might be incorporated into a new creative symbiosis (Pemberton, 2003). Oduyoye, therefore, pays her attention to the study of African traditional culture and religions.

According to Oduyoye, the arrogant Western Christianity and missionaries understood African religions not as an integral part of Africa culture and life but as nothing but idolatry. They hesitated to accept the resilience of religious rituals and forced African people to accept the Western style of Christianity.

For Oduyoye, Africans do not need to give up their cultural identity to become Christians and it is not uncommon to see African Christians who follow traditional beliefs and practices such as pouring libations, incantations, naming and performing lifecycle (such as puberty, marriage, marriage, funeral, coronation and burial rites) ceremonies in their traditional culture. According to Oduyoye (1995), she believes that African culture conveys the Christian message as various cultures carry the Christian message to other parts of the world and thus there is a Christianity that is culturally coloured in Africa.

Oduyoye (1991), African religions and culture have influenced the shape of women's communal identity and sense of belonging while at the same time these have been manipulated and employed as a tool of control and oppression of women. For this reason, Oduyoye analyzes the social, religio-cultural elements and myths that affect women's lives in Africa and discloses its dehumanizing elements against women. Some aspects of African religio-cultural beliefs and practices such as stereotypical sex roles, blood taboos rites, , ritual impurity cleansing from birth and menstrual flow and the restriction of women from certain rituals, exclude women from full participation in the family, church and society and make them give up their autonomy.

According to Oduyoye, (1995), African men have used the outdated sexist statement ‘gender is an indication of ability’ in order to oppress women and validate the low social status imposed on women.

In African women’s lives, the ‘wholeness’ of women-being depends exclusively on child bearing and motherhood (Oduyoye, 1992). Mbiti, (1991), says that ‘nothing else is as valuable as having children... if a woman has everything else, except children, she would have no cause or joy to give thanks’ (p.16). Outside the prominent biological role of a female as birthing and mothering, the image of a woman is portrayed negatively; a person who is ‘quarrelsome’, disharmonious and malignant (Oduyoye, 1995). Oduyoye claims that Christianity and the Church have kept silent on the violence meted against women ignored the oppression of women and strengthened patriarchal structures and hierarchies in the church.

Kanyoro (2002) asserts that the African culture holds communities captive and communities hold individuals captive to the culture. It is on the above premise that Oduyoye provided a methodology known as ‘cultural hermeneutics’ to serve as a process by which African women theologians analyze and interpret their culture, religion and the Christian heritage through cultural eyes, aiming to communicate the gospel to both women and men within the African context. To Oduyoye, it is not only interpreting the Bible from an African cultural perspective but from an African woman’s perspective.

In theological perspective of some African women, the concept of God as male is very problematic. God, who transcends gender, is imaged in male terms and thus the female is to be seen as created in the image of the male and not directly in the image of God (Oduyoye, 1986). Some women have realized that they have surrendered not only to a man-made world but also to a man-made God. The imaging and visualization of God as a man has blinded the church to the absence or presence of women and has allowed males alone to exercise leadership in the church. Oduyoye (1995) says that the understanding of God as male weakens the status of women in the church and forces women to serve in subservient silence.

Oduyoye, (1997), attempts to establish the nature of the reality of God in African cosmology and culture through the construction of a dialogue between the gospel and African culture. Most Africans believes in the existence of God. For Oduyoye, God is constantly involved in the affairs of human beings. This God is seen as the one without whom nothing holds together. He is the designer and maker of the universe, the foundation of life, sustainer and controller of all things. He cares, shows compassion as well as has the power to punish injustice (Oduyoye, 2001).The male centred context of African culture and Christianity, however, produces an assumption that God is male. The androcentrism and the male image of God are tied up. The assumption of the androcentric thought about a monotheistic male God rationalizes the marginalization of women. This implies that only males can represent God as leaders in the church and society. Based on the above, African women theologians attempt to read the Bible and depict God’s image from women’s perspective. They articulate God as the loving liberator of the oppressed and the rescuer of the marginalized. Through their experience of the liberating God of the bible, women understand God as the one who is empowering them with a spirituality that resists the dehumanization of their own lives (Oduyoye, 1997). Oduyoye believes that Africans believe in Christ and sees him a friend who helps them bear life’s burden and the prophet who challenges oppressors and hypocrites. Oduyoye articulates the understanding of God not only in resistance to the androcentric situation but also for the transformation of African cultural aspects that are oppressive to women.

According to Oduyoye, if God is spirit and transcends gender, the masculine language of Christianity needs to be re-examined. To feminists, the masculine language of God as father has no theological significance but it is a cultural and linguistic limitation only. There must be a new attempt to use new language instead of using the masculine language for God. African women theologians therefore, search for a possibility of God as female hence the bible symbolizes God as possessing feminine characteristics.

Conclusion

Having viewed Mbiti and Oduyoye's understanding of the concept of God in African Theology, one could see that both theologians have areas where they both agreed such as the fact that there has been an influence of the Western culture and Christianity on Africans' mentality about God and Christianity and that there is a need for Africans to reject Western influence. Both African theologians as well believe that there seems to be a continuity between the gospel and ATR as well as African culture. They both uphold the fact that ATR is monotheistic. Oduyoye and Mbiti upholds that ATR is an instrument of God's revelation to mankind in Africa and just as God revealed himself to the Jewish people in the Old Testament so did God reveal himself to Africans through ATR.

However, it was observed that Mbiti fails to deal with the oppressive situation of women and some critical issues of contemporary society, such as socio-political and economic injustice, racism, sexism and inequality. Oduyoye on the other hand, has developed a theological methodology which motivates African women to affirm African identity in reaction to western Christianity and analyzes the elements of ATR and African culture that are oppressive to and dehumanize women. She has called for the liberation of women against the traditional and contemporary oppressive cultural system to African women.

However, by emphasizing women's experience of oppression and the voice of the weak in the society, Oduyoye makes the mistake to justifying the illustration that characterizes the poor as good and the rich as sinners. To Oduyoye, the responsibility and duty of theologians are to be with the poor in their struggle for liberation. In Oduyoye's theology, her point of reference seems to be the needs of the people rather the commandments of the Bible.

The researchers observe that neither Mbiti nor Oduyoye seem to succeed in maintaining the Christian identity and the African cultural identity simultaneously and in communicating the gospel message and the understanding of God to Africans so that the gospel message becomes intelligible to them. The researchers, therefore, strongly recommend the following for the future of African theology and for a better understanding of God 1. The bible should be emphasized as the prime and major source of African theology. In trying to understand God within the African context the Bible should serve as the basic tool while African experiences as well as African religio-cultural system are weighed through the Bible for a better understanding. 2. African theologians must admit that there are certain key elements of the ATR that are not in conformity with Christianity when weighed against Biblical truth. They must as well desist from believing that the same God of the ATR is the same God of the Bible because different cultural settings in Africa have different conceptions about the God they worship which is quite different from that of Christianity. The understanding of God should go beyond this. 3. The researchers recommends that African theologians should see to it that Christianity remains particular to various cultures and still universal at the same time in order not to distort the tenets of the faith.

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