

Title: Revelation as Primal Sensing: a Theological Investigation into the Interaction Between Christian Faith and African Religious Traditions

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation fills a gap in African Christian thought regarding the relationship between Christian faith and African traditions. The gap is that—withstanding the light shed on the relationship by the debate within the threefold typology (exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism)—there is ambivalence in African Christian thought regarding the value of African religious traditions for Christian faith. This ambivalence is sometimes expressed in complaints by theologians against what appears to be either “syncretism,” “divided loyalties,” “religious schizophrenia,” or “double-mindedness” in African Christian religious experience and expression.

In the view of this dissertation, the ambivalence in African Christian thought stems from the inability of the current debate to provide a broad ranging theological understanding of African traditions as a whole. Although the typology clarifies the Christian position vis-à-vis specific African beliefs relative to Christological and soteriological claims of Christian faith, it leaves much of the spiritual universe of African traditions unaccounted for. Consequently, a significant portion of the day to day experience of many Africans is in relative theological ambiguity.

This dissertation provides a broad ranging theological understanding of African religious traditions as a whole. It does so in three steps. First, it identifies the foundational elements of African religious traditions, namely, the African “sense of God,” sense of reality, and sense of vocation. This identification is critical because it gives one a theoretical grasp of African religious traditions as a whole. Second, it proposes a framework to achieve this, based on the theological imperatives of creation and providence, on the one hand, and the gospel, on the other. Third, based on these theological imperatives, the dissertation offers a theological account of the foundational elements of African traditions—the “sense of God,” sense of reality, and sense of vocation. Beginning from the assumption that—in the encounter with African traditions—the onus rests squarely with Christian theology to account for African traditions, the dissertation shows that the foundational elements of African traditions are best understood through the lens of divine activity in creation and providence in relation to divine activity in the redemption revealed in Christ.