

**Christology in African Independent Churches:  
Theological Reflections in  
Mennonite Missions Perspective**

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## *Abstract*

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### CHRISTOLOGY IN AFRICAN INDEPENDENT CHURCHES: THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS IN MENNONITE MISSIONS PERSPECTIVE

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What members of African Independent Churches (AICs) believe about the life and ministry of Jesus Christ has intrigued and confused Western-oriented Christians. This thesis examines the christologies of three AICs, the Harrist Church in Ivory Coast, the Spiritual Healing Church in Botswana, and the Church of Moshoeshoe in Lesotho in terms of how their christologies are informed by the Bible, history, Law, the Trinity, blessing and salvation, missions, the deification of founders, and the process of westernization, modernization, and urbanization in Africa. The author approaches these AICs through the research and experiences of Mennonite missionaries associated with the Mennonite Board of Missions (MBM) and the Africa Inter-Mennonite Missions (AIMM). These AICs exhibit a predominantly African outlook on life and religion, described herein as a pneumatological aetiology, which renders their understanding of Jesus Christ different from that of Western Churches. Their christologies can best be described as “nascent.”

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## Introduction

The face of Christianity is changing in both demography and form. Yet, surprisingly little attention is being paid by Western Christianity to the fact that the "axis of Christendom" is moving south. It is estimated that by the year 2000 there will be more Christians in Africa than in North America; more in Latin America than in Europe.<sup>1</sup> Further, while Christianity is typically divided into three categories, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant, surprisingly few Western Christians are aware that, "identifiable new forms of the Christian tradition are taking shape."<sup>2</sup>

In Africa, these dramatic changes can be observed in what is often called the "African Independent Churches," or "AICs." There is a strong temptation to ignore these "stepchildren of the modern missionary movement,"<sup>3</sup> who do not fit into the traditional denominational categories, or to treat them as "prodigal" or "illegitimate" children, themselves candidates for conversion.<sup>4</sup> The story of these churches which stretches back over a century<sup>5</sup> and the rapid growth they are experiencing can no longer be overlooked. The cry of the ancient Roman consul, "*Semper novi quid ex Africa*," is slowly being revived. Josiah U. Young III points to the proliferation of the AICs as a key indicator that new theologies are emerging in relation to the Christ and culture debate.<sup>6</sup>

The author of this thesis has some personal interest in this topic. Having spent several years in Bangladesh and Ghana as a child, where my parents worked with Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) and the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) respectively, and having travelled on numerous occasions to India and

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<sup>1</sup> Rev. Dr. Seth Adom-Oware, "African Instituted Churches and the development of African Christianity," Evangelization in Africa in the Third Millennium: Challenges and Prospects, edited by Justin S. Ukpong *et. al.*, (Port Harcourt, Nigeria: CIWA Press, 1992), p. 173.

<sup>2</sup> James Krabill, s.v. "African Independent Churches," in Mennonite Encyclopedia V (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Harold Press, 1990).

<sup>3</sup> Harold Turner, "A Further Dimension for Missions," International Review of Missions 247 (1973): 321-337.

<sup>4</sup> James Krabill, "Neither 'Reached' nor 'Unreached': The Response of One Mission Agency to the Independent Churches of West Africa," Paper to be published in the Mission Focus Annual Review 1998, p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> In fact, Harold Turner argues that "African movements" date back to 1570 in the late Kingdom of the Congo. Harold Turner, "Prolegomena to a Conference on Ministry to African Independent Churches," Ministry of Missions to African Independent Churches, edited by David A. Shank, (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite Board of Missions, 1987), p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> Josiah U. Young III, African Theology: A Critical and Annotated Bibliography, (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1993), p. 41.

the Middle East, non-Western forms of Christianity and Third World development are topics of great interest. As a Mennonite, I value the work of our denomination's missions agencies as they relate with Mennonite and non-Mennonite Christians around the world. I feel that more Mennonites should be aware of these involvements and accomplishments. Finally, as a minister in the Mennonite church, I am interested in various pastoral questions regarding christology: What are the needs of people that draw them to Christ? How do people view and express their experiences in Christ? How are people best nurtured to grow in their faith in Christ?

### Status Quaestionis

#### 1) AICs in General

Bengt Sundkler is often considered the first to bring attention to the numerical significance of these churches, and in 1948 he identified 800 independent churches in South Africa alone. By the time of the second edition of his book, Bantu Prophets in South Africa in 1961, he could identify 2, 200 such churches.<sup>7</sup> Looking at all of black Africa in 1968, David Barrett indicated there were at least 6, 000 independent churches with 9, 000, 000 members. At that time Barrett predicted this number would grow to 34, 000, 000 by the year 2, 000,<sup>8</sup> but in 1982 he offered updated figures, estimating 12, 000 churches and 33, 000, 000 members by 1985.<sup>9</sup> Harold Turner contributed greatly to the field when he published History of an African Independent Church: The Church of the Lord (Aladura),<sup>10</sup> the first in depth and sympathetic work on a specific group. In 1973, Turner outlined the history of interactions between the African Independent Churches and Western missions agencies,<sup>11</sup> which David Shank updated in 1985.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Bengt Sundkler, Bantu Prophets in South Africa, (London: Oxford University Press, 1961).

<sup>8</sup> David Barrett, Schism and Renewal in Africa, (London: Oxford University Press, 1968).

<sup>9</sup> David Barrett, World Christian Encyclopedia, (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 815. Despite Barrett's solid effort to accurately reflect statistical realities, works like this are an enormous undertaking and some figures are not accurate. For example, Stan Nussbaum observes that Barrett projects a mid-1980 number of 5,300 members for one independent church in Lesotho which Nussbaum can verify had diminished to less than 100 members. Stan Nussbaum, "New Religious Movements," pamphlet, (Elkhart: Mission Focus, 1989), p. 25, footnote 7.

<sup>10</sup> Harold Turner, History of an African Independent Church: The Church of the Lord (Aladura), vols. 1&2, (London: Oxford Press, 1967).

<sup>11</sup> Turner, "A Further Dimension for Missions," 321-337.

<sup>12</sup> David A. Shank, "Mission Relations with the Independent Churches in Africa," Missiology 13 (1985): 24-44.

Given the growing impact of these movements, the lack of attention being paid to these churches is regrettable and the lack of knowledge of the AICs in Western Christianity is disconcerting. To the study of religions, new religious movements like the AICs are the "Cinderella [story] of the study of religions, with the happy ending still out of sight."<sup>13</sup> To most missionaries and missiologists, "[t]he study of new movements is merely what dog shows are to dog breeders, something that a few people give their whole lives to while the rest of the world passes by without knowing or caring what the difference is between a keeshond and a Lhasa Apso."<sup>14</sup> For reasons political, historical, cultural, and pragmatic, the AICs remain understudied, misunderstood, and predominantly isolated from each other and from Western denominational churches in Africa .

A number of theses have been done at the Toronto School of Theology in recent years that relate to the topics of christology and AICs. Most recently, Stephanie Douglas has written a Master's Thesis, "The Role of Scripture in the Development of New Church Traditions," in which she argues that translating the Bible into the vernacular is a significant factor in the rise and formation of new indigenous movements in Africa.<sup>15</sup> Samuel Elolia wrote a Ph. D. Thesis in 1992 on the meeting of Christianity with African culture in Kenya.<sup>16</sup> Stephen Owoahena-Acheampong has written about the AICs in West Africa, paying special attention to their theology of healing.<sup>17</sup>

## 2) *Harrist Church in the Ivory Coast*

David A. Shank and James R. Krabill are Mennonite missionaries who have worked with and written extensively on the Harrists of Ivory Coast. Both have published Ph. D. theses on the Harrists: David A Shank, Prophet Harris: The 'Black

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<sup>13</sup> Hans-Jürgen Greschat, "The Founder' of Prophet Movements and the Phenomenology of Religion," Exploring New Religious Movements, edited by A. F. Walls and Wilbert R. Shenk, (Elkhart, Indiana: Mission Focus, 1990), pp. 19-27.

<sup>14</sup> Nussbaum, "New Religious Movements," p. 2.

<sup>15</sup> Stephanie Robyn Douglas, "The Role of Scripture in the Development of New Church Traditions: A Case Study of Two Kenyan African Independent Churches," (M.A. thesis, Wycliffe College, Toronto School of Theology, 1998).

<sup>16</sup> Samuel Kiptalai Elolia, "Christianity and Culture in Kenya: An Encounter Between the African Inland Mission and the Marakwet Belief Systems and Culture," (Ph. D. dissertation, University of St. Michael's College, 1992).

<sup>17</sup> Stephen Owoahene-Acheampong, "African Independent Churches in West Africa, With Particular Reference to their Theology and Practices of Healing," (Th. M. thesis, Regis College, Toronto School of Theology, 1991).

Elijah' of West Africa;<sup>18</sup> James R. Krabill, The Hymnody of the Harrist Church Among the Dida of South-Central Ivory Coast (1913-1949).<sup>19</sup> Shank has also published an extremely important article, "African Christian Religious Itinerary,"<sup>20</sup> in which he outlines the stages of growth between African traditional religions and "mature" or "New Testament" Christianity. In essence, Shank does here for the individual convert what Turner's typologies do for church movements as a whole. Two other significant English works on the history and identity of the Harrist Church in the Ivory Coast are from the 1970s, namely, Gordon Mackay Haliburton's The Prophet Harris,<sup>21</sup> and Sheila Walker's The Religious Revolution in the Ivory Coast.<sup>22</sup> While these works do not deal exclusively with christology, they have profound implications for understanding the christology of the Harrists.

### 3) *The Spiritual Healing Church in Botswana*

The history and beliefs of the Spiritual Healing Church in Botswana is not well documented, especially pertaining to christology. A number of published and unpublished articles will be used: Rachel Hilty Friesen's "A History of the Spiritual Healing Church in Botswana,"<sup>23</sup> includes sections on "beliefs and teachings" and "worship life and ritual." Jonathan Larson has written a number of articles, published and unpublished, which deal with AIC identity, literacy, rural churches,<sup>24</sup> Bible teaching, and ways that Mennonite missions can strengthen AICs.<sup>25</sup> His writings on Bible teaching and

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<sup>18</sup> David A. Shank, Prophet Harris, The 'Black Elijah' of West Africa, abridged by Jocelyn Murray, (New York: E. J. Brill, 1994).

<sup>19</sup> James R. Krabill, The Hymnody of the Harrist Church Among the Dida of South-Central Ivory Coast (1913-1949), (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1995).

<sup>20</sup> David A. Shank, "African Christian Religious Itinerary: Toward an Understanding of the Religious Itinerary from the Faith of African Traditional Religion(s) to that of the New Testament," Exploring New Religious Movements: Essays in Honour of Harold W. Turner, edited by A. F. Walls and Wilbert R. Shenk, (Elkhart, Indiana: Mission Focus, 1990), pp. 143-162.

<sup>21</sup> Gordon Mackay Haliburton, The Prophet Harris, (London: Longman Group Limited, 1971).

<sup>22</sup> Sheila S. Walker, The Religious Revolution in the Ivory Coast: The Prophet Harris and the Harrist Church, (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1983). Walker did the research from 1971-79, p. xi.

<sup>23</sup> Rachel Hilty Friesen, "A History of the Spiritual Healing Church in Botswana," (M.A. thesis, Knox College, Toronto School of Theology, 1990).

<sup>24</sup> Jonathan Larson, "Reflections on a Four-Day Mule Ride or The Encounter of Literate and Nonliterate in Independent Churches of Rural Botswana," Ministry of Missions to African Independent Churches, edited by David A. Shank, (Elkhart, Indiana: Mennonite Board of Missions, 1987), pp. 172-179.

<sup>25</sup> Jonathan Larson, "Occasional Paper #1," Mennonite Ministries, Botswana, August 9, 1984.

literacy are enlightening as they relate the importance of historical perspective to christology and ecclesiology. Interviews and E-mail conversations will provide a significant portion of the material on christology in the Spiritual Healing Church. A taped interview with Erica Thiessen<sup>26</sup> will be used, as well as ongoing personal conversations between the author and Jonathan Larson<sup>27</sup> and Rudy Dirks,<sup>28</sup> all of whom have worked or are working with the Spiritual Healing Church in Botswana. Jim Bertsche's very recently published extensive history of Africa Inter-Mennonite Missions (AIMM) will also provide information for the work of AIMM with the Spiritual Healing Church.<sup>29</sup>

#### 4) *The Church of Moshoeshoe in Lesotho*

Stan Nussbaum has worked with the Church of Moshoeshoe in Lesotho. In his Ph. D. thesis, "Toward Theological Dialogue with Independent Churches: A Study of Five Congregations in Lesotho,"<sup>30</sup> he deals directly with christology. His interest in AIC evangelization and missions<sup>31</sup> and Bible teaching<sup>32</sup> also deal solidly with christology. A taped interview with John and Tina Bohn will be used,<sup>33</sup> as well as ongoing personal conversations between the author and Stan Nussbaum.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Erica Thiessen, interview by author, October 2, 1998, Elkhart, Indiana, tape recording.

<sup>27</sup> Jonathan Larson, Atlanta, Georgia, to Andrew Brubacher Kaethler, St. Catharines, Ontario, from October 22, 1998, transcripts of E-mail in the hand of Andrew Brubacher Kaethler, St. Catharines. Larson was in Botswana between 1981 and 1994.

<sup>28</sup> Rudy Dirks, Botswana to Andrew Brubacher Kaethler, St. Catharines, Ontario, Nov. 11, 1998, January 27, 1999, March 22, 1999, transcripts of E-mail in the hand of Andrew Brubacher Kaethler. Dirks is presently in Botswana.

<sup>29</sup> Jim Bertsche, *CIM/AIMM: A Story of Vision, Commitment and Grace*, (Elkhart, Indiana: Fairway Press, 1998).

<sup>30</sup> Stan W. Nussbaum, "Toward Theological Dialogue with Independent Churches: A Study of Five Congregations in Lesotho," (Ph.D. thesis, University of South Africa, 1985).

<sup>31</sup> Stan Nussbaum, "African Independent Churches and a Call for a New Three-Self Formula for Mission," *Freedom and Interdependence*, edited by Stan Nussbaum, (Nairobi, Kenya: Organization of African Instituted Churches, 1994), pp. 1-8.

<sup>32</sup> Stan Nussbaum, "A Biblical Narrative Approach to Strengthening the Christology of Independent Churches in Lesotho," *Ministry of Missions to African Independent Churches*, edited by David A. Shank, (Elkhart, Indiana: Mennonite Board of Missions, 1987), pp. 180-189; Stan Nussbaum, "Proposal: African Bible Guides Project," *Ministry in Partnership with African Independent Churches*, edited by David A. Shank, (Elkhart, Indiana: Mennonite Board of Missions, 1991), pp. 275-292; Stan Nussbaum, "Bible Survey Course Developed for ALTK: 'Yahweh's Tribe'," photocopy, 1984.

<sup>33</sup> John and Tina Bohn, interview by author, October 1, 1998, Goshen, Indiana, tape recording. The Bohn's worked in Lesotho with AICs, including the Church of Moshoeshoe, between 1978 and 1993.

<sup>34</sup> Stan Nussbaum, Colorado Springs, Colorado to Andrew Brubacher Kaethler, St. Catharines, Ontario, from October 30, 1998 to May 27, 1999, transcripts of E-mail in the hand of Andrew Brubacher Kaethler. Nussbaum worked with various AICs in Lesotho between 1977 and 1983. He also served on staff at the Department of the Center for New Religious Movements, Selly Oak Colleges, Birmingham, England, 1986-1993.



## Premises

Christology is chosen as the focus of this thesis for two reasons. First, it makes sense that if the AICs are to be understood by Western Christians, it is helpful to start with that which unites Christianity in general: Christ. However, although christology needs to be central to any Christian theology, this does not mean that all christologies are the same. Conversely the second reason to study the christology of AICs is to learn what makes AICs different from Western Christianity.

In the Gospel of Matthew, 16:13-20, Jesus inquires as to what people thought about his identity. Then he turned to his disciples and asked, "But what about you? Who do you say that I am?" This is a question that every christology must ask, and that merits the effort of reflection. This is a question that will be asked of three AICs: "But you, members of the Harrist Church in Ivory Coast, members of the Spiritual Healing Church in Botswana, and members of the Church of Moshoeshoe in Lesotho, who do *you* say that I am?"

To study what a group believes about the identity of Jesus and his relevance in their lives is the most effective way to learn about them. Stated as such, the main task of this thesis is not to make a contribution to the field of christology. Rather, the task of this thesis is to raise awareness of the presence of the AICs in Africa, to listen to them, and to develop an understanding of their beliefs in Jesus Christ so that they may be mutual partners with their Western-minded counterparts in building the Kingdom of God.

In order to set the framework for listening to and understanding the christology of the AICs, two extremely significant models will be used. The first is Harold Turner's typology of the "various interactions between Christianity and the tribal religions." Here Turner identifies four movements between primal or tribal religions and the Christian religion (which he associates with indigenous autonomous churches, *i.e.* mission churches with indigenous leadership). The four stages include neo-primal movements, synthesist movements, hebraist movements, and the independent churches.<sup>35</sup> Turner's typology will be used as a tool to better understand the movement of organized groups toward Christianity and to provide a general framework for characterizing these groups.

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<sup>35</sup> Harold Turner, "Classification and Nomenclature of Modern African Religious Groups (Chart), African Independent Church Movements, edited by Victor E. W. Hayward, (London: Edinburgh House Press, 1963), p. 13.

Four provisos apply to the use of this typology. First, since this was put forth over 30 years ago, it must be recognized that while these categories are extremely helpful, the situation in Africa has changed and at least one major category must be added between the independent churches and the indigenous autonomous churches: the neopentecostal movements.<sup>36</sup> Second, it must be recognized at the outset that very few groups fit into one category alone. Many groups span two or more categories at any given time, and over a period of time can move in either direction. Third, the use of Turner's typology is to open understanding of AICs and increase the ability of Western Christians to listen to them, rather than to place restrictions on these churches and confine them to certain categories. Finally, there is a built in Western bias to his typology which assumes an evolutionary progression towards the Christian religion as defined in the mission churches. This author does not believe that the mission churches have sole possession of true Christianity in Africa. Nevertheless, Turner's typology remains an extremely helpful and useful tool.

The second typology that will be used to provide a framework for understanding the christology of the AICs is David Shank's, "African Christian Religious Itinerary: Toward an Understanding of the Religious Itinerary from the faith of African Traditional Religion(s) to that of the New Testament." What Turner does for movements as a whole, Shank does for individuals. Shank proposes that the "appropriation of Christian truths" is a gradual process that can be observed occurring in seven stages, beginning with "conversion to all-powerful God (compared with lesser divinities)" and ending with "discovery of the church as community of the Spirit and sign in the world of the coming Kingdom."<sup>37</sup>

There are three elements of Shank's religious itinerary that are noteworthy. First, Shank claims this is an African itinerary, not a Western one. It was developed based on the testimonies of Africans as they articulated their discovery of Christ and

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<sup>36</sup> James Krabill, interview by author, October 1 and 2, 1998, Goshen, Indiana, tape recording. James Krabill worked representing Mennonite Board of Missions with the Harrist Church in Ivory Coast.

<sup>37</sup> Shank, "African Christian Religious Itinerary," p. 161.

the Christian faith.<sup>38</sup> Second, Shank offers a corrective to Turner's typology by defining maturity in faith in Christ in terms of the Gospel, instead of in terms of a Western/missionary definition. He maintains that this itinerary is by no means "natural" or "evolutionary," but rather that it is the Gospel which pulls an individual through.<sup>39</sup> The third element is that this itinerary can help understand and explain the incredible diversity of thought on christology, both within and between specific AICs. Individuals, congregations, and AICs as a whole may be at different places in terms of their understanding of the encounter between Christ and traditional realities.

There are a number of assumptions present in this thesis that need to be stated. It is assumed that the springboard for understanding the AICs, or any new religious movement for that matter, lies in cultural anthropology. This is not the time or place to address the technicalities of the field. Suffice it to say that it is assumed in this thesis that adherents in the AICs are operating with a significantly different epistemology and ontology than the author and Western readers of this thesis. It is hoped that the tension between Western and African epistemology and ontology will not prevent understanding of the AICs and appreciation for their creative appropriation of Christianity, but rather that this tension will constitute a dialectic through which readers of this thesis will be able to learn not only about the faith of individuals with the AICs, but also about their own faith.

A further assumption is that the christologies of the AICs are in many ways "weak." The claim for such an evaluation of AIC christologies is widely based. First and foremost, the Bible itself is often infrequently and/or inconsistently used as a key source for understanding the person and ministry of Christ. This is in part related to illiteracy among the leadership. It is also in part a hermeneutical problem; how the Bible itself is used in the context of sermons and messages by leaders. Second, some AIC leaders, especially educated or younger leaders, have identified the lack of knowl-

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<sup>38</sup> David A. Shank, interview by author, October 1, 1998, Sturgis, Michigan, tape recording. David Shank worked representing Mennonite Board of Missions with the Harrist church in the Ivory Coast. For example, Shank suggests that someone like Charles Colson has obviously had a conversion experience of some manner, setting him on the path from paganism (in this case, Americanism) toward a New Testament understanding of Christ and the Christian faith. Shank notes that people in the West may follow a similar itinerary, which likely starts with a power encounter and ends with a similar New Testament understanding of the church as community of the Spirit and sign in the world of the coming Kingdom, but he has not identified all the stages in between.

<sup>39</sup> Shank, October 1, 1998.

edge of Christ to be problematic.<sup>40</sup> Third, many Mennonite missionaries have commented on the thought and practice of AICs regarding christology. For example, Stan Nussbaum observes that, “[i]f serious theological dialogue is to take place between Westerners and independents, it will be necessary to include the question of Christology in the discussion and to come to some understanding of the reasons that Christology seems to be a higher priority on Western than on independent church agendas.”<sup>41</sup> Finally, in comparison with African theology, which is very extensively developed by a number of African contextual theologians,<sup>42</sup> the AICs have a relatively underdeveloped understanding of the identity and ministry of Christ.

A final assumption is that the christologies of the AICs are primarily operative and functional, as opposed to doctrinal or academic. In other words, the way adherents in the AICs think about and experience Jesus Christ arises primarily from the ways that He is able to address the situations of their every day lives. These Christians are not interested in Western categories and methods. As one Mennonite missionary bluntly states: “If we expect the new movements to comment on current debates . . . we will be disappointed because they are not interested in our agenda and do not often express themselves in our terms.”<sup>43</sup> This means that these Africans likely will not express christology in “theological” terms, but will more readily express their faith in Christ in terms of confessions and testimonies.

Pneumatology is a defining factor in the way that AIC christologies operate. AIC christology can not be separated from African pneumatology. In the traditional African world view, every object and every event is connected with the spiritual world. This relates to issues around literacy and access to the Bible: Literate societies tend to em-

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<sup>40</sup> Charles Kudzerema, “Teaching Ministry in AICs: Strengths, Weaknesses and Alternatives Toward Positive Change,” *Ministry in Partnership with African Independent Churches*, edited by David A. Shank, (Elkhart, Indiana: Mennonite Board of Missions, 1991), pp. 240f, 245f.

<sup>41</sup> Nussbaum, “Toward Theological Dialogue,” p. 223.

<sup>42</sup> A brief list of authors and works that make thorough use of elements of Biblical christology and African religion and culture might include: Kofi Appiah-Kubi, “Christology,” *A Reader in African Christian Theology*, edited by John Parratt, (London: SPCK, 1987), pp. 69-79; *Ibid.*, “Indigenous African Christian Theology,” *African Theology en Route*, edited by Kofi Appiah-Kubi and Sergio Torres, (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1977), pp. 117-125; Jean-Marc Ela, *My Faith as an African*, translated by John Pairman and Susan Perry, (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1990); John Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa*, (London: S. P. C. K., 1970); Charles Nyamiti, *Christ as our Ancestor*, (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1984); *Ibid.*, “The Church as Christ’s Ancestral Mediation,” *The Church in African Christianity*, edited by J.N. K. Mugambi and Magesa Laurenti, (Nairobi, Kenya: Initiative Publishers, 1990), pp. 129-177; and John Pobee, “The Search for a Living Church in Africa,” *An African Call for Life*, edited by Masamba Ma Mpolo *et. al.*, (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1983), pp. 47-54; *Ibid.*, *Toward an African Theology*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979).

<sup>43</sup> Nussbaum, “New Religious Movements,” p. 9.

phasize the person and ministry of Jesus Christ, whom they learn about primarily through reading the New Testament, and oral societies tend to emphasize the work of the Spirit.<sup>44</sup> Thus, while pneumatology is not the focus of this thesis, it is essential to recognize that the operative christology is a pneumatological one. The vast majority of AIC adherents indicate they attend a particular independent church because it was there that they experienced a divine power that confronted spiritual realities which were causing hardships in their lives. Whatever the crisis, be it illness, barrenness, unemployment, legal problems, social conflicts, etc., it has a spiritual root. Faith in Christ may be connected with Christ's ability to address the problems Africans experience in life.

### Intent

In order to better understand the AICs and to better relate with them, much study and bridge building must be done. The task of this thesis is to explore the christologies of the Harrist Church, the Spiritual Healing Church, and the Church of Moshoeshoe in order to better understand AICs as a whole.

A word is in order about why the Harrist Church in Ivory Coast, the Spiritual Healing Church in Botswana, and the Church of Moshoeshoe are selected. The first criterion is that each of these groups have welcomed either Mennonite Board of Missions (MBM) or Africa Inter-Mennonite Missions (AIMM) into their midst. They are three of 100 or so AICs that MBM and AIMM relate with. The second criterion is that they generally fit into, or are moving toward, Turner's category of African Independent Church movements.<sup>45</sup> This is logical because it is highly unlikely that neo-primal or synthesist movements would perceive a need for anything more than "dialogue" with any Western denominational mission agency.<sup>46</sup> The third criterion is that these groups display a diversity of thought and practice regarding Christ, within, of course, the spectrum of AICs that MBM and AIMM work with. The fourth criterion is that they repre-

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<sup>44</sup> Jonathan Larson, October 22, 1998.

<sup>45</sup> David Shank suggests that when he arrived in the Ivory Coast, he would have roughly defined the Harrist movement in terms of Turner's typology as synthesist and hebraist. When he left, he would have classified them as independent churches, with notable residual tendencies towards synthesist and hebraist movements. Shank, October 1, 1998.

<sup>46</sup> Nussbaum, "New Religious Movements," pp. 13f.



sent different geographic and demographic regions in Africa. The Harrist Church is in West Africa, while both the Spiritual Healing Church in Botswana and the Church of Moshoeshoe are in Southern Africa. While two AICs from Southern Africa are being considered, it is apparent that the latter movement is more influenced by the social and political context in South Africa than the former. Further, using Bengt Sundkler's general classification, the Spiritual Healing Church would more readily be defined as a "Zionist" movement, focusing on African expressions of faith, while the Church of Moshoeshoe would be defined as an "Ethiopian" movement, maintaining similar ecclesiastical structures and forms of worship to the mission churches from which it separated, but ensuring indigenous leadership.<sup>47</sup> These criteria allow for a select sampling of AICs which will recognize the broad spectrum of AICs and help understand and appreciate AICs in general.

I am pursuing a Mennonite perspective on AIC christology not only because I am Mennonite, but because Mennonites have a solid history of working with AICs and a good rapport with leaders of these churches. Mennonites were among the very first denominational mission groups to relate with the AICs, entering into this field of missions when it was very unfashionable to do so. Others, such as Harold Turner, have attested to the "unsurpassed experience" of Mennonite missions with AICs.<sup>48</sup> MBM and AIMM, along with the individuals that represent them, possess a missiology that enables them to do four important things: to understand and appreciate the christologies of these three AICs; to critique them in a way that is thorough and fair; and to employ methods of teaching that encourage these churches to develop a mature christology, i.e. that is Biblically based and that is sensitive to the cultures in which these AICs exist and operate; and to encourage and facilitate dialogue among AICs and between AICs and mainline churches on topics such as christology.

### Thesis Statement

**In this thesis I shall argue that the Harrist Church, the Spiritual Healing Church, and the Church of Moshoeshoe have nascent christologies, which by**

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<sup>47</sup> Cf. Sundkler, pp. 38ff.

<sup>48</sup> Harold W. Turner, "Survey Article: The Study of New Religious Movements in Africa, 1968-1975," Religion 6 (1976): 89.

Biblical standards, the standards of some AIC leaders, the standards of missionaries, and the standards of African theology, are at the early stages of development. Using the typologies of Harold Turner and David Shank, I will show that the christologies of these AICs are diverse but have great potential to develop into maturity. I shall suggest that the broader church can learn from elements of AIC christologies, especially regarding the power of the living Christ. I shall also demonstrate how the Mennonite Board of Missions and the Africa Inter-Mennonite Missions have worked with these three AICs and others, seeking to help them further discover what it means to have faith in Christ in various African contexts.

### Methodology

The methodology of this thesis involves three steps. The first step is to set the stage by briefly discussing the meeting of African culture with Christianity. This includes touching briefly upon relevant aspects of African traditional religions, mission relations with AICs, African theology and christology and the development of the AIC movement.

The second step involves a more in depth look at the christologies of the Harrists, Spiritual Healing Church, and the Church of Moshoeshoe. Their christologies will be considered by looking at the way each church connects Christ in the following categories: the Bible, history, law, Trinity, blessing and salvation, power media and power encounter, impetus for missions and evangelism, messiah figures and the deification of founders, and the process of westernization, modernization and urbanization.

The third step is to offer theological reflections on the experiences of Mennonite missions which relate with these three AICs. This section will include a more in depth look at how MBM and AIMM have been a presence among the AICs, encouraging them in the areas of Bible training, leadership training and reconciliation work. It will also include a number of challenges in christology that this author and other missionaries feel will pertain to both the AICs and to the mission agencies that relate with AICs.

## Limitations

One limitation is that the author has minimal first-hand knowledge and experience with the AICs themselves. I admittedly approach this topic with the bias of someone educated in Western Christian theology, complete with an academic and systematic approach which is totally foreign to the way that members of AICs would generally think. This has potential to pose problems in how the author *listens* and *hears* what it is being said. To categorize aspects of religion as "christology," "pneumatology," "ecclesiology," *etc.* is already making an imposition, and may distort how Africans view life and faith. Conversely, unless one is submerged in African culture and in the life of the AICs, making western categorical impositions on the AICs is likely the lesser of two evils, the other evil being total ignorance.

Another limitation has to do more generally with African culture and the African world view. In traditional African culture and society, faith is passed from generation to generation orally. Literate versus oral culture is a "huge watershed factor in theology." Oral societies certainly have their own "libraries," but they include sources that in the West are not usually considered credible: memorized oral traditions, the world of natural phenomena, spiritual experiences through dreams, signs, and so forth.<sup>49</sup> Further, in oral societies, time and history are important only as they relate to the here and now. How the AICs house religious knowledge and how they perceive the history of religious experience poses questions for how someone from the West evaluates them. Is it fair to expect adherents of AICs to know, or care, who came first: Moses, Jesus or Paul?

A final limitation arises in the form of questioning how much one can generalize about AICs as a whole based on learning about the christology of three particular AICs. In evaluating the work of Sheila Walker, David Shank has observed that she has made some incorrect assumptions about the christology of the Prophet Harris and of Harrism as a whole in Ivory Coast based on her study of Ebrié Harrism.<sup>50</sup> If it is easy to make mistakes in generalizing about a particular movement as a whole, such as Harrism, how much easier is it to make mistakes about AICs in general from a study of three particular AICs?

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<sup>49</sup> Larson, October 22, 1998.

<sup>50</sup> David A. Shank, "The Harrist Church in the Ivory Coast," Review of The Religious Revolution in the Ivory Coast, by Sheila Walker, in Journal of Religion in Africa 15:1 (1985): 67-75.

## Chapter 1

### The Meeting of African Culture and Christianity

In order to understand the present state of Christianity and of new religious movements in Africa it is necessary to appreciate that traditional African culture and religion have not been abandoned by many African Christians, and especially not by adherents to the AICs. By now, it is widely accepted in schools of missions and evangelism that anyone wishing to share the Gospel in another context must take courses in cultural anthropology.<sup>1</sup> The assumption, correctly, is that it is not possible to effectively share the Gospel without knowing a people's culture and religion. African Christians themselves have identified an "urgent need for a thorough re-examination of the whole question of the relation between Christianity and African traditional religion."<sup>2</sup> Harold Turner, however, has also cautioned that the history and phenomenology of religion should not be left solely to anthropology precisely because, "[t]here is a rich reward [for the study of religion itself], for these new churches and movements present an extensive contemporary and dynamic sampling from the characteristic forms of religion. There are new holy cities...; new *langues des dieux*...; new festivals and rituals and symbols..."<sup>3</sup> To appreciate the "new" in religion in Africa, one must first apprehend the "old."

#### 1) African Traditional Religions

##### *a) Worldview: The Pneumatological Aetiology*

Of course, it is not possible to talk about African traditional religion in the singular because there is an incredible diversity of thought and practice in the world's second largest continent. John Pobee proposes that the *homo Africanus* is "a multi-headed hydra, displaying varieties not only *vis a vis* the non-African but also *vis a vis* other

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<sup>1</sup> Dave Roberts, interview by author, November 27 and December 3 1998, Niagara-On-The-Lake, Ontario, transcripts. Dave Roberts is with SIM in Zambia as Associate Director for Zambia and Secretary for Personnel with the Evangelical Church in Zambia.

<sup>2</sup> Samuel G. Kibicho, "The Continuity of the African Conception of God into and through Christianity: a Kikuyu Case-Study," Christianity in Independent Africa, edited by Edward Fasholé-Luke, *et. al.*, (London: Rex Collings, 1978), p. 370.

<sup>3</sup> Harold Turner, "The Contribution of Studies on Religion in Africa to Western Religious Studies," New Testament Christianity for Africa and the World: Essays in Honor of Harry Sawyerr, edited by Mark Glasswell and Edward W. Fasholé Luke, (London: S. P. C. K., 1974), p. 178.

species of *homo Africanus*.<sup>4</sup> For the purposes of this thesis, a brief picture of traditional beliefs will be presented, one which captures only the basics in order to provide a backdrop against which AIC christologies can be considered.

John Mbiti has dedicated much research throughout Africa and produced numerous works to assist Western readers to appreciate and respect African traditional religions.<sup>5</sup> From Mbiti's writings, one can observe three main constituents in the African world view: God, Spiritual Beings or Forces, and Humans.<sup>6</sup> God is typically understood as the Creator and Sustainer. It may be possible to talk about both the transcendence and immanence of God, as Mbiti does, but it must be remembered that God is not a "being" with whom the average person can have a direct or personal relationship. Placide Tempels first alerted the West to the fact that Africans do have a cogent and coherent ontology in Bantu Philosophy.<sup>7</sup> Later, Mbiti talks about the "anthropomorphic attributes and associations of God" and "human images of God."<sup>8</sup> Gabriel M. Setiloane asserts that there is no correctly-called "African Notion of the Supreme Being" because this "notion of a 'Being' is a Western reading of the African world-view."<sup>9</sup> Thus, God in traditional religions remains personally removed from Africans.

While God is not in the habit of interacting directly with humans, the same is not true of Spiritual Beings. Spiritual Beings can be very directly involved in the lives of Africans. Mbiti generally distinguishes between two kinds of Spiritual Beings: "those which were created as such, and those which were once human beings." He further subdivides these into four categories: divinities, God's associates, ordinary spirits and the living-dead.<sup>10</sup> Divinities are generally considered to be created by God and

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<sup>4</sup> John Pobee, Toward an African Theology, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), p. 43.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. among other works: John Mbiti, Introduction to African Religion, (London: Heinemann, 1975); *Ibid.*, Concepts of God in Africa, (London: S. P. C. K., 1970); John Mbiti, African Religions & Philosophy, (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1969).

<sup>6</sup> A fourth category could be added, "Objects of Power." Cf. Andrew Walls, "Introduction: African Christianity in the History of Religions," Christianity in the 1990s, edited by Christopher Fyfe and Andrew Walls, (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh, 1996), pp. 6ff.

<sup>7</sup> Placide Tempels, Bantu Philosophy, translated by Colin King, (Paris: Presence Africaine, 1959), pp. 15ff.

<sup>8</sup> Mbiti, Concepts of God in Africa, pp. 91-97; *Ibid.*, Introduction to African Religion, pp. 46-48.

<sup>9</sup> Gabriel M. Setiloane, African Theology: An Introduction, (Johannesburg: Skotaville Publishers, 1986), p. 21.

<sup>10</sup> Mbiti, African Religions & Philosophy, pp. 75-91. Mbiti, Introduction to African Religion, pp. 65ff, also offers a similar but somewhat simpler model in which he has two main categories of spirits, "nature spirits" and "human spirits." Nature spirits are divided into "sky spirits" and "earth spirits," and human spirits are divided into "ghosts (long-dead)" and "recently dead (living dead)."



to do the work of God, but there is no set number or function of these spirits among the various ethnic groups.<sup>11</sup> God's associates tend to be mythical in character, and generally function to explain history and creation. Getting a handle on the ordinary spirits, Mbiti admits, is extremely difficult because they defy description and written sources are confusing. Some spirits have the ability to reproduce, some the ability to become visible and inhabit humans. It is primarily with these ordinary spirits and the living-dead that Africans can have direct relationships. The living-dead are those who have departed for up to five generations and are in a state of "personal immortality". They are still "people," they are still part of families and, they still dwell in physical places. They are the closest link that the living have with the spirit world because the living-dead speak both the language of humans and the language of the spirits and God. Setiloane is quick to point out that the living-dead are not to be associated with the Divinity or God.<sup>12</sup> It is the ordinary spirits and the living-dead that certain gifted people, diviners or witches, are sometimes able to manipulate.

African religion has often been classified as "anthropocentric," meaning that it treats human existence as the center of the universe.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, Mbiti observes that African ontology is anthropocentric: "God is the Originator and Sustainer of man; the Spirits explain the destiny of man; man is the center of this ontology;..."<sup>14</sup> However, this notion of anthropocentrism must be tempered in its Western usage by the following notions. First, Africans have a very different understanding of space, which can be characterized by a lack of boundaries or categories. For the purposes of this thesis, what is most notable is that the physical world and the spirit world are one. The spirits and the ancestors do not live in another realm, they live in this world, and they directly interact with people who are alive. Second, Africans have a different concept of time. Mbiti notes time is "of little or no academic concern to African peoples," but for the benefit of Western readers, describes it as two-dimensional, consisting primarily of a

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<sup>11</sup> For example, the Yoruba have a large pantheon of divinities, 1, 700, while the Bambuti have only one major divinity. Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy*, pp. 76f.

<sup>12</sup> Setiloane, *African Theology*, pp. 17ff.

<sup>13</sup> Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, pp. 37ff.

<sup>14</sup> Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy*, p. 16.

“long past” and a “present.”<sup>15</sup> Third, Africans traditionally have a limited understanding of individual identity. Rather, one’s identity is strongly associated with social groups, such as a family and an ethnic group, and with the land.<sup>16</sup> Given the overall emphasis on human life as pertaining primarily to the here and the now and the larger community, African ontology, although anthropocentric, is hardly egocentric or narcissistic.

How do humans experience God and the Spiritual Beings within the African worldview? The term “pneumatological aetiology” describes this very well. There is a spiritual force associated with every person, with everything animate and inanimate, and with every event. In Africa, nothing “just happens;” everything has a religious and a spiritual cause. Whether it is AIDs or malaria or a lawsuit or a bus breaking down, there is a spiritual power and cause behind it. Tempels rightly made the direct connection between what he calls “force” and “being:” “The concept of ‘force’ is bound to the concept of ‘being’ even in the most abstract thinking upon the notion of being. Force is the nature of being, force is being, being is force.”<sup>17</sup> Spiritual realities are at the heart of human life and emotions. Africans realize that humans are not simply “thinking animals” and humanity cannot stand apart from the universe. For Africans to ignore the spiritual forces is to deny something that is an essential part of their make-up.<sup>18</sup> Africans do not dichotomize religion and life.<sup>19</sup> When all is religious, nothing is religion. There is no separate category for thinking about religion. Religion is simply integral to everyday life.

#### *b) Physical, Social and Spiritual Wholeness*

Keeping the equilibrium between these three constituents, God, Spiritual Beings, and Humanity, consumes much mental and emotional energy for Africans. Thus, the

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 15-25.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 100-109.

<sup>17</sup> Tempels, p. 35.

<sup>18</sup> F. B. Welbourne, “The Importance of Ghosts,” *African Independent Church Movements*, edited by Victor E. W. Hayward, (London: Edinburgh House Press, 1963), p. 19.

<sup>19</sup> John Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, pp. 44f.

soteriological quest for Africans is the quest for physical, social and spiritual “wholeness.”<sup>20</sup> Placide Tempels wondered: “How is it that the pagan, the uncivilized, is stable, while the *évolué*, the Christian is not? Because the pagan founds his life upon the traditional groundwork of his theodicy and his ontology, which include his *whole mental life in their purview* and supply him with a *complete solution to the problem of living*.”<sup>21</sup>

This “complete solution” undoubtedly involves maintaining relationships with Spiritual Beings, especially ancestors, and with members of one’s family and clan.<sup>22</sup> John Pobee notes the strength of the *sensus communis*, and observes that if Descartes’ dictum, *cogito ergo sum*, speaks for Western humanity, then the dictum, *cognatus ergo sum*, “I exist because I belong to a family,” speaks for African humanity.<sup>23</sup> When the equilibrium is disturbed, the spiritual forces manifest themselves physically and socially. M. M. Makhaye states: “Amongst African people sickness has always been an . . . intolerable and sudden crisis: throwing victims off balance by sudden pain and disability; threatening comfort and security; challenging the victim’s freedom to life; crippling his life powers and defeating his plans.”<sup>24</sup>

One can observe a negative element in the relationship of Africans with Spiritual Beings. At times it is a relationship that is driven by fear. Spiritual Beings have the potential to inflict suffering and harm on the living who do not please and honour them.<sup>25</sup> Mbiti downplays this negative relationship and the existence of evil spirits, stressing that the role of prayers, sacrifices and offerings are primarily means of worship and celebration.<sup>26</sup> Others are well aware of the fear that evil spirits can instill in Africans,<sup>27</sup> and that prayers, sacrifices and offerings are also widely used to appease angry or

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “Wholeness of Life in Africa,” *An African Call for Life*, edited by Masamba Ma Mpolo *et al.*, (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1983), pp. 113-122; Manas Buthelezi, “Salvation as Wholeness,” *A Reader in African Christian Theology*, edited by John Parratt, (London: S. P. C. K., 1987), pp. 95-101.

<sup>21</sup> Tempels goes on to explain how the *évolué*, and the Christian, have often failed to “reconcile” the new way of life with the old. Tempels, p. 19. Italics mine.

<sup>22</sup> On the importance of family and tribal relationships, cf. Setiloane, *African Theology*, pp. 9ff.

<sup>23</sup> The “family” of course includes the extended family, the living-dead, and the yet-to-be born. Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, p. 49.

<sup>24</sup> M. M. Makhaye, “Sickness and Healing in African Christian Perspective,” *Relevant Theology for Africa*, edited by Hans-Jurgen Becken, (Durban, South Africa: Lutheran Publishing House, 1973), p. 158.

<sup>25</sup> Dave Roberts, November 27 and December 3, 1998. Cf. also G. C. Oosthuizen, *Post-Christianity in Africa*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1968), p. 87.

<sup>26</sup> Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, pp. 64-76.

<sup>27</sup> Howard Brant, “Toward an SIM Position on Power Encounter,” A Society for International Ministries Position Paper. Unpublished. Pp. 4-7.

evil spirits and ancestors. Thus, for the Africans, while there is clearly a close connection between physical, social and spiritual health or illness, it is not always a positive one.

### *c) Oral Tradition*

Traditionally all religious knowledge in Africa is passed on orally. Illiteracy is such a part of traditional life in Africa that Setiloane and Mercy Amba Oduyoye see fit to begin the discussion of sources of African theology with African epistemology and oral traditions. Songs, folk-tales and art are all ways in which faith, morality, and life-skills are passed on.<sup>28</sup> There are significant parallels between the Old Testament and African traditional religions when it comes to the source of religious knowledge and the manner in which it is passed on. Walter Hollenweger observes that, "the medium of communication is, just as in biblical times, not the definition but the description, not the statement but the story, not the doctrine but the testimony, not the book but the parable, not a systematic theology. . . but a song."<sup>29</sup> Oral tradition is not only about passing away the evenings around the fire, it is a medium for religious education.<sup>30</sup> Africans generally speaking are not accustomed to expressing their faith in a categorized, systematized, well thought out and articulated manner.<sup>31</sup> Further, there are notable benefits to oral communication: "multidirectional communication;" active participation of listeners; emphasis on the community; and sympathy to the African concept of time stressing the past and present.<sup>32</sup> To know what Africans really believe means to listen to the oral expressions of the people.<sup>33</sup>

### *Conclusion*

The above discussion of pneumatological aetiology, the concept of wholeness,

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<sup>28</sup> Setiloane, *African Theology*, pp. 1f; Oduyoye, "Wholeness of Life in Africa," pp. 45-50.

<sup>29</sup> Walter Hollenweger, "After Twenty Years' Research on Pentecostalism," *International Review of Missions* 75 (1986): 10.

<sup>30</sup> Setiloane, *African Theology*, p. 2.

<sup>31</sup> *Speaking for Ourselves*, (Braamfontein, South Africa: Insititute for Contextual Theology, n.d.), p. 25.

<sup>32</sup> John Mbiti, "The Bible in African Culture," *Paths of African Theology*, edited by Rosino Gobellini, (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1994), pp. 33-36.

<sup>33</sup> John Onaiyekan, "Christological Trends in Contemporary Arican Theology," *Constructive Christian Theology*, edited by William R. Barr, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1997), p. 358.

and oral traditions is important because AIC theologies are directly informed by the deeply rooted traditional worldview. These theologies are defined by either what they willingly accept from African traditional religions, or by what they consciously reject. Regarding AIC christologies, this background helps us understand why many of the traditional Western Christian concepts of Jesus Christ are extremely awkward in the African worldview and why the Western Christ remains an abstraction for the AICs. Yet, the factors which influence the beliefs, practices and identity of AICs go beyond traditional African culture and religion.

## 2) Mission Church Relations with AICs

### a) *Anti-Missions Sentiment*

One does not need to read very far in contemporary writings on missions and the history of missions in Africa, both those by Africans and those by Western Christians, to uncover strong anti-missions sentiment among Africans. Negative feelings are evident in the writings of African Christians such as Oduyoye, who declares that Africans needed to be delivered from missions, from missionary hagiographies and from Western cultural oppression associated with missions.<sup>34</sup> Lamin Sanneh observes that missionaries falsely assumed that the Africans did not know God, but found out otherwise as they began to translate the Gospel into local languages.<sup>35</sup> The cultural and intellectual arrogance present within the history of missions can not be denied.

Within the AICs, similar feelings can also readily be found. Missionaries working with AICs sense a tarrying feeling of distrust of missionaries due to past and present criticism of traditional beliefs. These feelings are also due to a perception on the part of AICs that Western/Mission church relations with them are merely a means to another end,<sup>36</sup> *i.e.*, to convert them to “true” Christianity. AIC members recall incidents where missionaries manipulated local African leaders<sup>37</sup> and were insensitive to issues of cross-

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<sup>34</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflections on Christianity in Africa, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1986), pp. 1-44, and Josiah U. Young III, African Theology, pp. 31-34.

<sup>35</sup> Lamin Sanneh, Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1989), pp. 167f.

<sup>36</sup> Dirks, January 27, 1999. Cf. also Nussbaum, “New Religious Movements,” pp. 11f.

<sup>37</sup> For example, Sheila Walker and David Shank illustrate this in the way a message was extracted from the Prophet Harris for the Harrist churches, instructing them to join the Methodist church only. Cf. Walker, The Religious Revolution, pp. 66-68; David A. Shank, “The Taming of the Prophet Harris,” Journal of Religion in Africa 27:1 (1997): 59-95.



cultural communications.<sup>38</sup> Schisms and conflicts arose in churches because of “high-handed and racist policies of European Missionaries.”<sup>39</sup> As a result of historical injustices, most AICs have marked reservations about relating seriously with Christians associated with Western or mission churches. When relationships do form, the process of strengthening these relationships and building lasting trust can be slow, and marked by blunders and misunderstandings.

#### *b) Persisting Roadblocks to Positive Relations*

Although much has changed in the way that Western missionaries approach missions with peoples of non-Western cultures, there remain a number of persisting problem areas which continue to inhibit the development of relationships between Western church groups and the AICs. One area is a “tacit hierarchy of religions” which affords new religious movements such as the AICs a place close to the bottom.<sup>40</sup> This is undoubtedly a major cause of lingering feelings of inferiority among the AICs.<sup>41</sup> Another area is the basic model of missions. While the “parent-child” model was slowly dropped starting mid-century in favour of a “partnership” model, this new model has not successfully rid missions in Africa of paternalism.<sup>42</sup> A third area is apparent in the way AICs trigger a rather awkward feeling among Western church groups in Africa, who do not know whether to treat them as fellow-Christians or not, and so the AICs have largely been left out of both the fields of contextual theology and of interfaith dialogue.<sup>43</sup> Finally, it remains a problem that many Western Christians still do not take seriously the African worldview and the incredible influence that spiritual powers can have on Africans. Western Christianity has by and large either ignored the powers, or condemned them,<sup>44</sup> resulting for many Africans in a “conversion” to the externals of

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<sup>38</sup> Cf. David A. Shank, “The Problem of Christian Cross-Cultural Communication Illustrated: Research notes on ‘The Finding of the Prophet Harris by M. Benoît’,” *Missiology* 7:2 (1979): 211-231.

<sup>39</sup> S. A. Dada, *The African Church: A Decade of Revolution*, (Ibadan: Ayo Ajayi, n.d.), p. 10.

<sup>40</sup> Nussbaum, “New Religious Movements,” pp. 14f.

<sup>41</sup> Jacob A. Loewen, “Mission Churches, Independent Churches, and Felt Needs in Africa,” *Missiology* 3 (1976): 421.

<sup>42</sup> Stan Nussbaum points to a 1947 meeting of the International Missionary Council in Whitby, Ontario as the place where changes in missions models were first discussed. Paternalism remains a problem, according to Nussbaum, because partnerships were sought along denominational lines where there were existing relationships. The partnership model works best in “stranger to stranger” situations, where both sides are seen as equal partners. Cf. Nussbaum, “New Religious Movements,” pp. 9f.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 14f.

<sup>44</sup> Loewen, “Felt Needs in Africa,” 410.

Western Christianity without a "change of heart."<sup>45</sup> Western Christianity needs to accept that Africans will generally gravitate toward the form of religion which best captures and responds to the depth of this pneumatological aetiology.<sup>46</sup>

*c) Revising the History of Missions in Africa*

Although there are clearly low points in the history of Christian missions to Africa, and even areas which continue to merit improvement, it must also be duly noted that missionaries have helped preserve African culture and have assisted Africans in coping with colonizing forces. David A. Shank asserts it is not quite true that Christianity is a burden on Africa as a result of colonization.<sup>47</sup> He observes that in the last few decades there has developed a school of thought that corrects some of the assumptions Africans and Western anthropologists alike submit about the missionaries' role in weakening of African culture. This "school" involves Christian historians and missiologists such as Adrian Hastings, Lamin Sanneh, Harold Turner, and Andrew Walls.<sup>48</sup>

These individuals perceive Christian missions as having actually helped to preserve African culture. First, Shank and Sanneh, among others, point out that the European administration used the church just as much as it used Africans and their institutions to further colonial interests.<sup>49</sup> Second, Sanneh observes that before colonial influence invaded the church in Africa, African leadership was seen as beneficial and important and was actively pursued.<sup>50</sup> Third, it has been demonstrated that missionaries at

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<sup>45</sup> Dirks, January 27, 1999.

<sup>46</sup> While Islam and Christianity are both guilty of cultural iconoclasm, the success of Islam in Northern Africa, and its more recent growth in East and Southern Africa, can be attributed to its ability to incorporate local spiritual realities. For an interesting story showing the importance of spiritual realities such as sorcery in the midst of both Christianity and Islam, cf. Loren Entz, "Challenges to Abou's Jesus," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 22:1 (1986): 46-50. It is arguable that the form of Islam that is spreading throughout Africa is what Phil Parshall describes as "folk Islam," which highly syncretistic and readily melds with local spiritual and social systems. The example Parshall deals with in depth is rural Islam in Bangladesh, but something very similar can be said to be occurring throughout Africa. Cf. Phil Parshall, *Bridges to Islam: A Christian Perspective on Folk Islam*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1983), pp. 71-111.

<sup>47</sup> Shank, October 1, 1998.

<sup>48</sup> Shank calls this the "Aberdeen School," in reference to those who worked in relation to the department that Harold Turner helped set up the University of Aberdeen. Shank, October 1, 1998. Sanneh, Shank and Walls will be used below. Cf. also Adrian Hastings, *The Church in Africa: 1450-1950*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994); Harold Turner, "The Relationship Between Development and New Religious Movements in the Tribal Societies of the Third World," *God and Global Justice: Religion and Poverty in an Unequal World*, edited by Frederick Ferré and Rita Mataragon, (New York: Paragon House, 1985), pp. 84-110.

<sup>49</sup> Shank discerns that this was especially the case after the Conference of Berlin, and notes that after national independence was granted to African countries in the 1960's, African evangelism took off, indicating that the problem was much more with the colonial governments than with the mission agencies. Shank, October 1, 1998. Cf. also Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, p. 159.

<sup>50</sup> In fact, in outlining the rise of separatist sentiments in African churches, Sanneh claims the "humiliation of Bishop Crowther" was a turning point. Lamin Sanneh, *Western Christianity: The Religious Impact*, (London: C. Hurst & Company, 1983), pp. 168ff.

times actively stood up on behalf of Africans against the “arbitrary initiatives of local [colonial] administrations.”<sup>51</sup> Fourth, it is significant to recognize with Sanneh the contribution missionaries made to the preservation of African culture by translating the Gospel into the vernacular. This massive task, still ongoing, has kindled an interest in African languages and literature, and helped increase a sense of self-awareness and self-worth.<sup>52</sup> Finally, the idea that Christianity served as a de-Africanizing force cannot be denied. However, as Andrew Walls points out, the arrival of a Christian worldview coincided with a breakdown of African ones, as opposed to being the sole cause of the breakdown.<sup>53</sup>

These last two points are especially important in the development of AICs. Stephanie Douglas’s recent thesis establishes the important role that translating the scriptures into the vernacular has played in the formation of AICs. Building on David Barrett’s observation that the presence of vernacular translations of the Scriptures is one of the factors present in the formation of AICs,<sup>54</sup> Douglas firmly establishes the case with two examples from Kenya and shows how an Ethiopian AIC uses the Scriptures differently than a Zionist AIC.<sup>55</sup>

Further, in reference to Walls’ observation, we see in the AICs a clear “third option.” The AICs clearly represent a syncretic alternative to two systems, African traditional religions and Western Christianity, and have eclectically incorporated some elements from both traditions.<sup>56</sup> Christianity, however, has acted as the leaven for change and the formation of AICs out of a background in African traditional religions.

### 3) African Theology and Christology

During the course of the past few decades the mainline African churches have developed indigenous African theologies of their own. Regrettably, there is very little

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<sup>51</sup> Perrin Jassy, Basic Community in the African Church, (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1973), p. 30. The example here is of missions to the Luo in East Africa.

<sup>52</sup> Sanneh, Translating the Message, pp. 167f, 170.

<sup>53</sup> Andrew Walls, “Towards Understanding Africa’s Place in Christian History,” Religion in a Pluralistic Society, edited by John S. Pobee, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1976), pp. 180-189; Walls, “Introduction,” pp. 6-11.

<sup>54</sup> Barrett, Schism and Renewal.

<sup>55</sup> Douglas, “The Role of Scripture.”

<sup>56</sup> Shank, October 1, 1998.

discourse between AIC theology and African theology. AICs maintain an equally reserved approach toward Africans in mainline churches as they do toward missionaries.

It is clearly the case that many African leaders and theologians within the mainline churches in Africa today share the desire of AICs to establish a faith rooted in key elements of Christianity, as set out in the Bible, while using indigenous expressions and African cultural symbolism. Of particular interest to the AICs might be the African theologians whom Josiah U. Young III terms the “new guard” in his African Theology: A Critical Analysis and Annotated Bibliography, who are willing and able to shed their reliance on Western systems and categories.<sup>57</sup> Notwithstanding the problems of access and illiteracy, some potentially fruitful discussions could unfold.

It is not only that AICs can learn from African theology, it is also that African theology can learn from AIC theology. Marthinus Daneel has noted that AICs represent “an important basic source” for African theology precisely because they lack a systematic theology and bring theology to life through music, prayers, liturgies and community life.<sup>58</sup> Daneel shows how this is true for christology, as he suggests the AICs have a beneficial understanding of the suffering, power and lordship of Christ within the African context.<sup>59</sup>

Pursuing christology further, there are a number of parallels between the quests of AICs and African theology that merit attention. The first is simply the recognition that christologies are not static and over time “develop” or change. John Onaiyekan has recently boldly asserted that African theology *is* African christology. Christ is at the center of theology in Africa, so that what African Christians believe about Jesus Christ becomes definitive of African theology as a whole.<sup>60</sup> Onaiyekan’s assertion appears to be light-years away from the apology that John Mbiti made over twenty-five years ago in his essay, “Some African Concepts of Christology.” Mbiti suggested at that point that “African concepts of Christology do not exist.”<sup>61</sup> Certainly, much has been written

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<sup>57</sup> Young, Annotated Bibliography, pp. 25-33.

<sup>58</sup> M. L. Daneel, “Towards a Theologia Africana? the Contribution of Independent Churches to African Theology,” Missionalia 12:2 (1984): 64ff.

<sup>59</sup> M. L. Daneel, “Towards a Theologia Africana? the Contribution of Independent Churches to African Theology,” Missionalia 12:2 (1984): 76-88.

<sup>60</sup> Onaiyekan, “Christological Trends,” p. 356. This assertion was also made earlier by M. L. Daneel. Daneel, “Towards a Theologia Africana?” 76ff.

<sup>61</sup> John Mbiti, “Some African Concepts of Christology,” Christ and the Younger Churches, edited by C. F. Vicedom, (London: S. P. C. K., 1972), p. 51.

in the last twenty-five years on African christology, and Onaiyekan feels that it is now very appropriate to talk about “trends” within a “youthful” field of African christology.<sup>62</sup>

A second parallel comes with Setiloane’s observation that African theology strives to take seriously African spirituality and the African’s “pragmatic view of religion.”<sup>63</sup> Applied to Jesus Christ, however, we find some discrepancies. Setiloane suggests that Africans “have no difficulty with [Christianity’s] basic teaching about its subject and mentor Jesus of Nazareth, . . . [and] fundamental claims about his humanity. Nor has the traditional worldview had any occasion to question or even doubt claims about his Divinity. . . ” He goes on to suggest that “[c]ontroversy arises when Western Christianity begins to universalize the parochial attempt of the early Church to understand this mystery of the working of the Divinity. . . through the so-called Creeds and Doctrines of the Church...”<sup>64</sup> The AICs in focus do indeed take seriously African spirituality and also maintain a pragmatic view of religion. However, they have a hard time grasping the Divinity of Christ. Creedal statements about Christ, especially the Apostle’s and Nicene Creeds, are readily recited in some AIC worship services, but it is not clear how these statements are internalized or signified.<sup>65</sup>

A third area where parallels can be drawn is the use of African images of Christ. It has been demonstrated that the AICs use culturally appropriate titles for Jesus Christ. For example, James Krabill has illustrated how one AIC incorporated local cultural phrases and functions for Christ into their hymns.<sup>66</sup> However, where the AICs can perhaps learn from African christology is how to use these titles and images in a way that is more consistent with Biblical perspectives on Christ. François Kabasele Lumbala’s Celebrating Jesus in Africa: Liturgy and Inculturation takes seriously the notion that liturgical expressions of faith in worship can be extremely meaningful for those who are illiterate.<sup>67</sup> The images of Christ presented in Robert Shreiter’s Faces of

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<sup>62</sup> Onaiyekan, “Christological Trends,” p. 357.

<sup>63</sup> Setiloane, African Theology, p. 30.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 34f.

<sup>65</sup> Andrew Walls, “The Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator of Culture,” Missionalia 10 (1982): 95.

<sup>66</sup> Krabill, Hymnody of the Harrist Church, pp. 346-382.

<sup>67</sup> François Kabasele Lumbala, Celebrating Jesus in Africa: Liturgy and Inculturation, (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1998).

Jesus in Africa<sup>68</sup> include Christ as master of initiation, chief, ancestor and elder brother, healer, and liberator, and may be valuable for AICs, which maintain elements of the traditional social structure.

#### 4) The AIC Phenomenon: Formation and Classification

##### *a) Causes and Factors of Independency*

Relative to the entire field of research on the AICs, a good deal of it has been dedicated to deciphering the causes of independency in Africa. David Barrett, John Baur, Marie-France Perrin Jassy, Nathaniel Ndiokwere, Nya Kwiawor Taryor, Sr., Harold Turner are just a few of the many scholars who have addressed possible causes and the role of various factors in the rise of independency.<sup>69</sup> Gottfried Oosterwal has written a short but extremely important booklet, Modern Messianic Movements, on the worldwide rise of “radical religious movements which have drawn their dynamic from some of the central themes of the Christian faith,” especially the themes of eschatology and messianism.<sup>70</sup> Oosterwal’s writings suggest that what is happening in the rise of AICs must be considered as part of a much larger, global phenomenon. However, for the purposes of this paper, it is mainly his critical analysis of the causative factors of these movements that are of interest. Barrett’s work is also significant because it is one of the first to offer a comprehensive approach, considering many factors throughout the continent.<sup>71</sup>

In his pioneering work, Schism and Renewal in Africa, Barrett considers eighteen statistical “casual factors” which he measures on a “scale of religious tension” and make up “the background correlates of independency.”<sup>72</sup> More recently, John Baur has suggested that Barrett’s study put too much weight on exogenous “missionary factors” and

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<sup>68</sup> Faces of Jesus in Africa, edited by Robert J. Shreiter, (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1991).

<sup>69</sup> Barrett, Schism and Renewal, pp. 83-158; John Baur, 2000 Years of Christianity in Africa, (Nairobi: Paulines Publications, 1994), pp. 261-359; Jassy, Basic Community, pp. 13-24, 75-101; Nathaniel Ndiokwere, Prophecy and Revolution, (London: S. P. C. K.: 1981), pp. 1-134; Nya Kwiawor Taryor, Sr., Impact of the African Tradition on Christianity, (Chicago: The Struggler’s Press, 1984), pp. 22-82; Turner, The Church of the Lord (Aladura), pp. 1-34; Harold Turner, Religious Innovation in Africa: Collected Essays on New Religious Movements, (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1979), pp. 3-31.

<sup>70</sup> Gottfried Oosterwal, Modern Messianic Movements: As a Theological and Missionary Challenge, (Elkhart, Indiana: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1973).

<sup>71</sup> Many studies have been done, but almost all considered either specific movements or regions, or focused on specific factors, such as politics, economics, culture, etc..

<sup>72</sup> Barrett, Schism and Renewal, pp. 92-115. Adrian Hastings lists ten factors. Cf. Adrian Hastings, Mission and Ministry, (London: Sheed and Ward, 1971), p. 208.

not enough on endogenous “African factors.” He suggests the simple theory that colonialism and Protestantism acted as the root causes for the “separatist protest movements” (*i.e.* the Ethiopian AICs),<sup>73</sup> and that religious and social heritage was the primary source leading to the rise of prophetic-charismatic movements (*i. e.* Zionist AICs).<sup>74</sup>

Barrett offers a brief evaluation of the literature until 1968 on causative factors leading to the rise of independent churches. He observes that this literature has generally pointed to one of the following as being dominant: historical, political, economic, factors, religious and theological factors.<sup>75</sup> Oosterwal considers each of these so-called factors, ruling out social protest, political liberation, economic deprivation, culture clash, general anxiety and distress, or missionary/theological issues as the leading cause for the rise of new religious movements.<sup>76</sup> Barrett and Oosthuizen persuasively conclude that no one single factor can be put forth as “the cause either of independency in any given case, or of the whole phenomenon of independency in Africa.” Based on his research, Barrett notes that none of the causes is present in all of the cases but work together to create levels of “tribal zeitgeist.” When tribal zeitgeist is high, the formation of independent churches is more likely to happen.<sup>77</sup> Similarly, Oosterwal asserts that these movements are not caused by one or a combination of these factors, but that “the social, political, economic, cultural, psychological and historical factors as a *totality*, as a *complex-whole*, . . . worked like a mighty *catalyst*. . . [and] created the particular

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<sup>73</sup> “Protestantism” as a cause deserves clarification. First, Jesse Mugambi observes that areas in Africa which have a high number of AICs also tend to have a high number of mission church denominations. When Ethiopian churches were formed, they simply seceded from the mission churches but did not join with other secessions from other mission churches. Disunity and denominationalism in the the Western church spilled over into disunity and denominationalism amongst AICs. J. N. K. Mugambi, interview by author, February 10, 1999, Toronto, Ontario.

However, there is a theological-historical factor present as well. Sundkler reports that one parting leader made the comment: “I make use of my Protestant birth right . . . We do as Luther did on October 31, 1517. Cf. Sundkler, p. 170.

Protestantism, a church of the Word, could not have expected anything different from African Christians than a desire to “find their personal faith” and a “complete basis for daily living” rooted in an African reading of the Bible. Cf. Baur, 2000 Years of Christianity in Africa, p. 352.

This explains in part why there have been such few splits from the Roman Catholic church. Catholicism, in contrast, emphasizes unity, hierarchical order, clerical leadership and sacramental life. The only sizable and enduring AIC with Catholic roots is the Maria Legio Church in Kenya, and even this church is made up of only 10% Catholics. Another 10% come from Protestant churches, while the majority are marginal Catholics and from traditional African religions. Cf. Jassy, Basic Community, pp. 98ff; Baur, 2000 Years of Christianity in Africa, p. 354.

<sup>74</sup> Baur, 2000 Years of Christianity in Africa, p. 352.

<sup>75</sup> Barrett, Schism and Renewal, pp. 92-96.

<sup>76</sup> Oosterwal, Modern Messianic Movements, pp. 17-25.

<sup>77</sup> Barrett, Schism and Renewal, pp. 217ff.

situation in which the (overtly or latently) present messianic idea . . . burst into a full-fledged messianic movement.”<sup>78</sup>

This approach to the formation of AICs is consistent with the idea that the local realities are diverse and that only a certain amount of interpolation can happen.<sup>79</sup> It is also consistent with the idea that if one wants to truly understand the AICs, it must be remembered that their members themselves do not see independency in terms of quantifiable factors. It is therefore a distortion to impose these categories as primary causes. AIC adherents do give accounts for their own formation. One member of the Harrist church offers the reminder that for Africans, the reason for the success of AICs is that they are “a purely African religion founded by an African for the Africans.”<sup>80</sup> Others have attributed the formation of AICs directly to the work of the Holy Spirit.<sup>81</sup>

As this last comment indicates, this approach is also consistent with the notion that AIC movements are generally pneumatologically driven. Since the majority of AICs are founded by charismatic figures, some sociologists are led to conclude that the factors *created* the leader.<sup>82</sup> However, if we take Barrett and Oosterwal seriously, we can allow divine inspiration, expressed by reference to the Scriptures and the presence of the Holy Spirit.. This doesn’t mean that the Holy Spirit or the Gospel themselves become the “causative factors.” As Douglas asserts, having the Scriptures in the vernacular is an “occasioning,” not a “causative,” factor.<sup>83</sup>

### *b) AIC Typologies*

Classifying AICs can be equally as difficult and evasive a task as outlining the causes for the rise of AICs. Before considering a number of typologies that may be helpful in understanding AIC christology, a word of caution is essential. Harold Turner

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<sup>78</sup> Oosterwal, *Modern Messianic Movements*, p. 24. This differs slightly from Turner’s assertion that, “in every case, a traumatic situation had led to the formation of a new religious movement...” Both, however, conclude similarly that this new religious movement was syncretistic, “drawing on the two different religious traditions available and creating a new amalgam.” Turner, *Religious Innovation*, pp. 4f.

<sup>79</sup> Shank, October 1, 1998.

<sup>80</sup> David A. Shank, “An Open Window into the Harrist Church,” *Mission Focus* 9:3 (1981):56. In this article Shank discusses Alphonse Boyé’s Aké, *Le harriste face a sa religion*, (Anono, Ivory Coast: Published by the author, 1980). Aké’s booklet is a “brief and unpretentious” insider’s view of the Harrist movement.

<sup>81</sup> *Speaking for Ourselves*, p. 25.

<sup>82</sup> Cf. Jean-Pierre Dozon, *La Cause des prophetes: Politique et religion en Afrique contemporaine*, (Paris, Seuil, 1995).

<sup>83</sup> “By introducing this differentiation, it is being argued that two elements are usually present in schism: 1) the source of the dispute; 2) the means for an authoritative break.” Douglas, “The Role of Scripture,” p. 16.



himself suggests there are at least two dangers in the process of typologizing African religious movements. First, he acknowledges that study of these movements is relatively new and that solid conclusions cannot be made. In new fields of study, "the initial system can be no more than a hypothesis depending for its confirmation or correction upon its success in clarifying and analysing the phenomena to which it is applied."<sup>84</sup> While considerable research has been done since Turner made this comment in 1967, the AICs remain a relatively new field of study.

Second, these movements are not static, but dynamic, and they do not necessarily progress chronologically or in one direction. There is tension between the "pilgrim principle" which pulls toward a universal understanding of movements and the "error of generic religion," and the "indigenizing principle" which pulls toward the particular understanding of movements and the "error of isolation."<sup>85</sup> Similarly, Oosterwal recognizes the tension between microscopic and macroscopic investigations. He warns that focusing on distinctions created by typologies can lead to "artificial dichotomies" and "obscure the whole." These typologies may only represent a snapshot of a movement at a particular time or of certain "adventitious aspects" of the movement.<sup>86</sup>

Third, and even more important, one must recognize that the entire endeavour to typologize African religious movements is itself problematic because it is a Western task, not an African one. "[T]he very concept of a typology, whether used by African or by other scholars, is a Western mode of thought, and the terms used to elaborate it may have been refined in the West and retain a connotation that is primarily Western."<sup>87</sup> When this "western orientation" is imposed, the underlying assumption is an arrogant one: that independent churches are moving closer to "authentic Christianity" when they become more like mission churches.<sup>88</sup> Unchecked, this danger is exhibited by many missionaries. Even Bengt Sundkler in his earlier writings saw such movements as regressive, as a "bridge over which the Africans are brought back to the old heathenism

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<sup>84</sup> Turner, Religious Innovation, p. 3.

<sup>85</sup> Joel B. Kailing, "Inside, Outside, Upside Down: In Relationship with African Independent Churches," International Review of Missions 77 (1988): 53-56.

<sup>86</sup> Oosterwal, Modern Messianic Movements, pp. 11f.

<sup>87</sup> Harold Turner, "A Typology for African Religious Movements," Journal of Religion in Africa 1:1 (1967): 1f.

<sup>88</sup> Kailing, "Inside, Outside, Upside Down," 52.

from whence they once came.”<sup>89</sup> Likewise, in an earlier work of G. C. Oosthuizen he refers to independent church movements as “post-Christian” because he feels they have reverted back to “non-Christian practices” and weakened attitudes toward Christ.<sup>90</sup> This post-Christian dynamic may be present in some AICs, but it is impossible to make it a generalization.

This leads to a fourth limitation, and one that is articulated by AIC leaders, that the vast majority of typologies put forth have not been done by Africans themselves and are inaccurate. One AIC leader complains that AICs are often mislabeled as “sects,” “cults,” “nativistic,” “separatist” or “syncretistic.” As a result, this leader writes:

It is therefore not surprising that we do not recognize ourselves in their writings. We find them seriously misleading and often far from the truth. . . . They have their own frame of reference: assumptions of anthropology or sociology or Western Theology. We find ourselves judged in terms of these norms. The view from the outside, especially from outside of our African culture, tends to distort the picture and to prevent the outsider from seeing the real point about what we believe and what we are doing.<sup>91</sup>

Despite these serious limitations and inadequacies, typologies still possess a means for Western readers to come to terms with the AICs. In the context of AIC christology, these typologies assist Western readers to better understand the roles that Jesus Christ plays in AIC churches.

#### i) Bengt Sundkler

Bengt Sundkler is often considered to be the first to offer an in-depth, well researched typology of new religious movements in Africa. In Bantu Prophets in South Africa,<sup>92</sup> Sundkler looks at the situation in South Africa around the middle of this century. While South Africa may only represent a small portion of Africa geographically, the influence of these movements in South Africa extend well beyond the political borders.

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<sup>89</sup> Sundkler, p. 55.

<sup>90</sup> G. C. Oosthuizen, Post-Christianity in Africa: Theological and Anthropological Study, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1968), pp. 4ff, 71-118.

<sup>91</sup> Speaking for Ourselves, p. 5.

<sup>92</sup> Sundkler.

Two basic groups of independent churches are set forth: “Ethiopian” and “Zionist.”<sup>93</sup> Sundkler bases these categories largely on political and cultural causative factors that led to the rise of these movements. He reports that the first “Ethiopian” church formed in 1872 in Witwatersrand.<sup>94</sup> The name of the church, significantly, stems from Psalm 68: 31, “. . . let Ethiopia hasten to stretch out its hands to God” (NRSV). The founders of the early Ethiopian churches were interested in mobilizing South African blacks to form tribal and inter-tribal organizations, such as new churches, with African leadership.<sup>95</sup> The Zionist churches can trace their origins to the Christian Catholic Church in Zion (Zion City, Illinois) and were later influenced by American Pentecostalism.<sup>96</sup> These churches have placed religio-cultural concerns at the forefront. They are driven by apocalyptic beliefs, led by prophetic leaders, and contain the profound desire to express their faith in “African” ways. The Zionists want to bring Africa “from darkness to light” and “from illness to health.” They also exhibit what could be termed “Pentecostal tendencies.”<sup>97</sup> Thus, the Ethiopian churches are more concerned about indigenous leadership, while the Zionist churches are more concerned about indigenous forms of worship. Further, as Baur has noted, the first “wave” of independent churches between 1890 and 1920 were largely of the schismatic, separatist, protest Ethiopian type. A second wave, dominant from the 1920s to the 1960s, was of the prophetic-charismatic, healing-oriented Zionist type.<sup>98</sup>

## ii) Turner

Harold Turner takes a broader approach to the analysis of new religious movements in Africa, offering more categories. He also goes beyond formative factors and an

<sup>93</sup> In West Africa, Zionist type churches are commonly called “Aladura” or “Spirit” churches.

<sup>94</sup> Baur suggests the first Ethiopian church was founded in 1892 in South Africa, while Paul Makhubu contends it was in Zaire around 1870. Cf. Baur, *2000 Years of Christianity in Africa*, p. 352; Paul Makhubu, *Who are the Independent Churches?* (Johannesburg: Skotaville, 1988), p. 6.

<sup>95</sup> Sundkler, pp. 38-43. Paul Makhubu comments that during this period Ethiopia symbolized black leadership and black nationalism for Africans, giving Psalm 68 special political significance. Makhubu, pp. 8f.

<sup>96</sup> Steve Hayes, “African Initiated Churches,” <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Parthenon/8409/aic.htm>, (January 22, 1999).

<sup>97</sup> Sundkler, pp. 47-50, 221ff.

<sup>98</sup> Baur, *2000 Years of Christianity in Africa*, p. 350. Of less importance, Baur suggests a third wave of independency which coincides with the push for national independency in the mid to late 1960s. This wave included both Ethiopian and Zionist type churches. No major groups were founded during the period of national independency, and about as many folded as were formed.

anthropological approach to a phenomenological analysis.<sup>99</sup> Turner's work has become the standard, and others offering typologies generally either agree or disagree with his categories, or more often, simply alter them for their own purposes.

Turner's original typology was published in 1963, where he includes four categories between African traditional religions and Christianity: neo-primal, synthesist, hebraist, and independent churches.<sup>100</sup> He offered later refinements in 1967, notably the addition of an "Islamic" category, and the incorporation of "Prophet-Healing (Zionist or Aladura)" and "Ethiopian" movements as "types" of independent churches.<sup>101</sup>

Turner describes the "Neo-Primal" and "Hebraist" movements as those that are not Christian as such, but arose primarily in reaction to the cultural changes affecting African life as a result of Westernization. The "Hebraist" movements may draw organizational patterns from Christian churches, and may adopt some Judaistic religious practices and beliefs gleaned from the Old Testament. This movement is characterized by a rejection of idols or fetishes and a strong emphasis on laws and rituals, and significantly, a "radical breakthrough in favour of faith in the one God." However, in the end both Neo-Primal and Hebraist movements are "nativistic" and desire to stress African religion and reject what they deem as "foreign features" of religion.<sup>102</sup>

What Turner then describes as "Christian" movements he divides into "Older Churches (mission or autonomous church)" and "African Independent Churches." He further divides the AICs into "Prophet-Healing (Zionist or Aladura)" and "Ethiopian" churches, roughly following Sundkler's lead, emphasizing that Ethiopian churches are formed by secession from a mission church, and Zionist churches are founded by Prophet-Healers.<sup>103</sup> However, the two main criteria for inclusion in the category of AIC is that these groups "have an attitude to Jesus Christ and to the Scriptures that indicate a church."<sup>104</sup> As will become evident below this is a fairly loose definition of "Christian," and it is debatable exactly what the parameters of this "attitude" should be.

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<sup>99</sup> Turner, "A Typology for African Religious Movements," 5f.

<sup>100</sup> Turner, "Classification and Nomenclature," p. 13.

<sup>101</sup> Turner, "A Typology for African Religious Movements," 33.

<sup>102</sup> Turner, Religious Innovation, pp. 4f; Turner, "A Typology for African Religious Movements," 6-10.

<sup>103</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, 22ff.

<sup>104</sup> Turner, Religious Innovation, p. 88.

Attempts have been made by others to improve on this typology. A major and significant addition to Turner's typology is a totally new category for "neo-pentecostal" movements. While Turner did make references to pentecostal and messianic "tendencies" that have been visible for quite some time, he could in no way have foreseen the incredible growth of this kind of movement since the mid-1980s.<sup>105</sup> As a result, there is a need for further differentiation. It must also be noted that pentecostal influences are by no means unique to AICs in Africa, and are tied to charismatic renewal movements throughout the continent.<sup>106</sup>

Others have tried to improve on the above typologies. Dean Gilliland, for example, reworks Turner's model to reflect more recent charismatic influences. He divides the AICs into four groups, in order of decreasing proximity to missions churches: 1) primary evangelical-pentecostal, 2) secondary evangelical-pentecostal, 3) revelational indigenous, and 4) indigenous eclectic. The basic difference between the first two groups is that the primary evangelical-pentecostal groups have had some contact with European or American organizations, while the secondary evangelical-pentecostal groups are almost entirely unrelated to church groups outside of Africa.<sup>107</sup> Admittedly by the title of the article, "How 'Christian' Are African Independent Churches?" Gilliland's objective is not simply to understand AICs, but to evaluate their "orthodoxy" compared to mission-planted churches.<sup>108</sup>

Joel Kailing offers another revision, combining the typologies of Turner, Sundkler, and Gilliland. Kailing's significant contribution comes in further bringing to light the tension between the particular and the universal, between the "pilgrim principle" and the "indigenizing principle."<sup>109</sup>

Paul Makhubu, writing as a participant in AICs, demonstrates the interplay which occurs between the basic types originally set forth. Makhubu identifies the "Ap-

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<sup>105</sup> James Krabill, October 1 and October 2, 1998.

<sup>106</sup> Cf. Steve Hayes, "The Iviyo Lofakazi Bakakristu (Legion of Christ's Witnesses) and its Links with Other Renewal Movements," Empirical Studies of African Independent/Indigenous Churches, edited by G. C. Oosthuizen and Irving Hexham, (Lewiston, N.Y.: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), pp. 65-90. Cf. also Matthews A. Ojo, "Charismatic Movements in Africa," Christianity in Africa in the 1990s, edited by Christopher Fyfe and Andrew Walls, (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh, 1996), pp. 92-110.

<sup>107</sup> Dean Gilliland, "How 'Christian' Are African Independent Churches?" Missiology 14:3 (1986): 266-270.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 260ff.

<sup>109</sup> Kailing, "Inside, Outside, Upside Down," 52-56. Regarding the "indigenizing" and "pilgrim" principles, cf. also Walls, "Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator," 97-99.

ostolic-Type Churches,” “Evangelical-Pentecostal-Type Churches,” “Zionist-cum-Ethiopian-Type Churches,” as additional types.<sup>110</sup> He notes that with some groups the differences are expressed in terms of practices or rituals rather than beliefs or theology.<sup>111</sup>

iii) Shank

What Harold Turner does for new religious movements as a whole, David Shank does for individuals within these movements in his extremely significant article, “African Christian Religious Itinerary: Towards an Understanding of the Religious Itinerary from the Faith of African Traditional Religion(s) to that of the New Testament.”<sup>112</sup> Relying on African texts and testimonies, Shank composes an itinerary which he suggests can be experienced by those in AICs and in mainline churches. In other words, it is an “African” itinerary, not a Western one.<sup>113</sup> It has been directly used and tested by others, very recently by Allison Howell,<sup>114</sup> to understand movements in other areas.

Shank offers an important improvement on Turner’s model by asserting that the individual’s movement from traditional religions to Christianity is in no way a “natural” or “evolutionary” one. It is the Gospel that *pulls* the convert through. Thus, Africans are not leaving traditional religions for Western Christianity, they are leaving traditional religions for New Testament Christianity understood in the African context. This is possible, Shank believes, because the same basic steps for conversion occur in the New Testament, beginning with an experience of the power of Jesus Christ.<sup>115</sup>

However, Shank declares that “conversion” is not a one-time, all-encompassing experience. Rather, as the title of his chart indicates, it is a “process of gradual appropriation of Christian truth: new apprehensions, new appreciations.”<sup>116</sup> It is not a process

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<sup>110</sup> Makhubu, pp. 5-16.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>112</sup> Shank, “African Christian Religious Itinerary,” pp. 143-162.

<sup>113</sup> Shank, October 1, 1998. Shank does suggest that someone from the West may experience a somewhat similar itinerary. For example, someone like Charles Colson has obviously had some kind of conversion experience, setting him on the path from paganism (in this case, Americanism) towards a New Testament understanding of Christ and the Christian faith. Shank notes that people in the West may follow a similar itinerary, which likely starts with a power encounter of some sort and ends with a similar New Testament understanding of the church as community of the Spirit and sign in the world of the coming Kingdom, but he has not identified all the stages in between.

<sup>114</sup> Cf. Allison Howell, The Religious Itinerary of a Ghanaian People: Kasena and the Christian Gospel, (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1997).

<sup>115</sup> Shank, October 1, 1998.

<sup>116</sup> Shank, “African Christian Religious Itinerary,” p. 161.

that Africans necessarily follow to the end: some people only progress to the first or second stage.<sup>117</sup> It is also a process that may lead Africans through numerous denominations and churches.<sup>118</sup> What is important, Shank believes, is that Africans experience the power of God and Jesus Christ and abandon traditional methods of coping with evil spirits. In doing so they undergo a “radical, symbolic break from a religious past, mark[ing] the beginning of a new religious itinerary.”<sup>119</sup>

There are seven stages in Shank’s model. For the purposes of this thesis, the stages that have significance for christology will be highlighted. The first stage is conversion to an “all powerful God.” Christ may or may not be identified in this stage, but if he is, it is in relation to his power over the less powerful entities. The third step is to recognize that the “Law of God and Bible and cross replace fetishes and taboos.” As will be observed below, many AICs place great emphasis on New Testament passages in which Jesus is understood to “confirm” the Law of the Old Testament. The fifth step is the “discovery of the grace of God revealed in Christ.” The sixth step is life in the Spirit, with an understanding of Spirit transformed from spirit as “punctual intervention” to spirit as “Christ-presence.” Finally, the seventh step is “discovery of the church as the community of the Spirit and sign of the world of the coming kingdom,” a kingdom initiated by Christ and a community that experiences Christ’s presence.<sup>120</sup>

### *c) Pneumatology and Oral Theology*

As helpful as the above typologies may be, there are a number overarching themes that must additionally be kept at the forefront. As already suggested, AIC christology functions within the traditional African pneumatological aetiology. It is impossible to understand the role of Christ with AICs without understanding the role of the spirits.

Sundkler was one of the first to recognize the great importance of spirituality

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<sup>117</sup> Shank, October 1, 1998.

<sup>118</sup> This is not always seen as positive. Cf. Shank, “An Open Window,” 58; David A. Shank, “And a ‘Man of Africa’ Says to the Churches...” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 11:3 (1980): 225f.

<sup>119</sup> Shank, “African Christian Religious Itinerary,” p. 143.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 151-153, 161.

within the AICs, which he called “uMoya-theology.”<sup>121</sup> Certainly, there is much in AIC pneumatology that leaves the Western Christian quite uncomfortable, especially the “charismatic-like overtones,” the “nativistic elements of ancestor veneration and witch beliefs,” and the “dance induced trancing.”<sup>122</sup> Yet, if one actually listens to the AICs, one will discover a strong desire for “recovery of the supernatural.”<sup>123</sup> AIC adherents feel that outsiders have too readily left out the work of the Holy Spirit in their churches, and that outsiders have ignored or put down their sensitivity to the world of spirits and the African’s “spiritual hunger.” These AIC leaders believe that the Holy Spirit is “our teacher and our guide in everything,” even the one who “assures us that the Bible comes from God.”<sup>124</sup> Even Africans within the mainline churches are becoming increasingly aware that all churches in Africa must take African spirituality and pneumatology seriously.<sup>125</sup>

AIC pneumatology is not summed up in the Holy Spirit. Within the AICs, ancestral spirits, witches and spirits of affliction can be active alongside the Holy Spirit.<sup>126</sup> Turner recognizes that pneumatology is a “distinctive emphasis” of AICs, especially the Zionist type, and that “the Godhead is envisaged as present and powerful through the Holy Spirit, who reveals the will of God and the destiny of the individual, guides through dangers, and fills men with new powers of prophecy, utterance, prayer, and healing.”<sup>127</sup> Pneumatology is not only at the heart of the lives of Africans and AIC christologies, it is also at the heart of Biblical hermeneutics. The Bible and how it is read and interpreted in terms of the role of Christ and the church are necessarily bound to the context in which the Bible is read.<sup>128</sup> Certainly, the attraction to the AICs for many Africans is that it takes African cosmology seriously, and does offer “fortification”

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<sup>121</sup> Sundkler, pp. 242ff.

<sup>122</sup> W. D. Hammond-Tooke, “The Aetiology of Spirit in Southern Africa,” Afro-Christian Religion and Healing in Southern Africa, edited by G. C. Oosthuizen *et. al.*, (Lewiston, N. Y.: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1989), p. 45.

<sup>123</sup> Kailing, “Inside, Outside, Upside Down,” 52-56. Cf. also Loewen, “Felt Needs in Africa,” 409, 414.

<sup>124</sup> Speaking for Ourselves, pp. 16, 26f.

<sup>125</sup> Gwinyai H. Muzorewa, The Origins and Development of African Theology, (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1985), pp. 42-44.

<sup>126</sup> Hammond-Tooke, “The Aetiology of Spirit,” pp. 47-65.

<sup>127</sup> Turner, “A Typology for African Religious Movements,” 24f.

<sup>128</sup> Cf. Zablon Nthamburi and Douglas Waruta, “Biblical Hermeneutics in African Instituted Churches,” The Bible in African Christianity: Essays in Biblical Theology, edited by H. W. Kinoti and J. M. Waliggo, (Nairobi: Action Publishers, 1997), pp. 47ff.



against evil spirits and healing when the spirits have their way against the health of Africans. Although M. C. Kitshoff postulates that the "Spirit that heals is the Spirit of Christ,"<sup>129</sup> not all Western observers of AICs are convinced of this. Some contend that God's power does not extend far enough over all spirits, especially the demonic.<sup>130</sup>

A second reality is that the vast majority of AIC adherents are illiterate and function with oral theologies and oral christologies. Jack Goody has written extensively on the impact that literacy versus illiteracy can make on any society and culture, not only on the way that people think and communicate, but also the things that they think and communicate about.<sup>131</sup> Using northern Ghana as an example, Goody demonstrates that, although most African societies have come into contact with literacy through commerce and the spread of Islam, it has had a greater impact on local culture in some areas than in others. Of interest here, he demonstrates the connection between literacy and religion. In the case of northern Ghana, literacy was largely restricted to the religious elite who used it to access religious and magical texts. Culture and society as a whole become only marginally more literate as a result of the presence of religious writings.<sup>132</sup>

When it comes to AICs, it is also the case that literate versus oral culture is a "huge watershed factor in theology."<sup>133</sup> Yet it is not a matter of the absence or presence of knowledge or of theology. And, as Walter Hollenweger maintains, it is certainly not the case that oral cultures are "primitive."<sup>134</sup> Oral societies certainly have their own "libraries," but they include sources that in the West are not usually considered credible: memorized oral traditions, the world of natural phenomena, spiritual experiences

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<sup>129</sup> M. C. Kitshoff, "African Independent Churches: A Mighty Movement," Claiming the Promise: African Churches Speak, edited by Margaret S. Larom, (New York: Friendship Press, 1994), pp. 100f.

<sup>130</sup> Kailing, "Inside, Outside, Upside Down," 43. This is particularly important for for conservative and evangelical Christians who are concerned about the power that supernatural beings can have over individuals and communities. For authors Phil Parshall and Charles Kraft, true "power encounters" with Christ mean the submission of all supernatural forces to the power of Christ. Cf. Parshall, Bridges to Islam, pp. 135-138; Charles H. Kraft, Christianity With Power, (Ann Arbor, Michigan: 1989), pp. 55, 92ff.

<sup>131</sup> Jack Goody, The Interface Between the Written and the Oral, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). Also, Jack Goody and Ian Watt, "The Consequences of Literacy," Literacy in Traditional Societies, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), pp. 27-68.

<sup>132</sup> Jack Goody, "Restricted Literacy in Northern Ghana," Literacy in Traditional Societies, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), pp. 239ff.

<sup>133</sup> Larson, October 22, 1998.

<sup>134</sup> Hollenweger, "After Twenty Years' Research," 10.

through dreams, signs, and so forth.<sup>135</sup> In what Joseph Healey and Donald Sybertz call “African narrative theology of inculturation,” one starts with “African oral literature and the wide range of narrative and oral forms: proverbs, sayings, myths, plays and songs explained in their Ancestral and cultural contexts.”<sup>136</sup> A number of AIC leaders have declared: “.. we *do* have a theology of our own. It is a theology that is written in our hearts. We do not usually speak about it as a theology and we do not write about it in any systematic way; but it is there in the way we believe and the way we worship and the way we live.”<sup>137</sup>

One of the ways theology “is there” in oral societies surfaces in the observation by Larson that oral cultures tend to be more in tune with the Holy Spirit.<sup>138</sup> Hollenweger confirms in his research into the origins of Pentecostalism, and its spread into and throughout Africa, that there is a connection between orality and sensitivity to the moving of the Spirit.<sup>139</sup> As Hammond-Tooke notes, it is difficult to keep the Trinity in perfect equilibrium. In the case of AICs, it is the Holy Spirit that is elevated.<sup>140</sup>

Given the reality of oral theology, it would make sense that AICs find some connection with the oral tradition in the Bible. Most of what is contained in the Bible, including the stories of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, began and continued as oral tradition. Thus, Mbiti assumes that “the Bible rings a noble bell in African life.”<sup>141</sup> But this “noble bell” is not ringing very loudly in many AICs, ironically, because of the emphasis on the leading and authority of the Spirit, which is much easier for illiterates to access.

Another consequence of the emphasis on oral theology in AICs is that historical perspective is greatly weakened. When Christ cannot be perceived in historical perspective, relating with people in a different time and culture, the fullness of the life and

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<sup>135</sup> Larson, October 22, 1998.

<sup>136</sup> Joseph Healey and Donald Sybertz, Towards an African Narrative Theology, (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1996), pp. 28ff, 34-43.

<sup>137</sup> Speaking for Ourselves, p. 25.

<sup>138</sup> Conversely, literate cultures are more aware of Jesus Christ, whom people learn about by reading the Bible. Larson, October 22, 1998.

<sup>139</sup> Walter Hollenweger, Pentecostalism: Origins and Developments Worldwide, (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1997), pp. 2, 18ff.

<sup>140</sup> Hammond-Tooke, “The Aetiology of Spirit,” p. 44.

<sup>141</sup> Mbiti, “The Bible in African Culture,” p. 29.

ministry of Christ is lost. An ahistorical Christ becomes anemic apart from the power dynamic that is emphasized in AICs. This is one area where western Christianity can offer some “helpful insights and corrective.”<sup>142</sup>

### *Conclusion*

Whether it is out of reaction to what the mission churches represented, or out of a desire to express their faith within the African pneumatological aetiology, or even some of both, the AICs appear to have a greater appreciation for the Holy Spirit than Jesus Christ. The realities of pneumatology and oral theology in AICs help explain the affinity to pentecostalism, an influence which continues to increase throughout Africa. These realities do not mean that AICs are void of christology, but that they employ “African Traditional (non-Christian)” or “African Nonsystematic” christologies.<sup>143</sup>

Nevertheless, all this in no way diminishes the need to study AIC christologies, for these nascent christologies have plenty of room to mature toward a Biblical understanding of Christ, as AIC members progress along their individual religious itineraries. It means that persons from Western churches who wish to interact with the AICs must not only work hard at developing relationships of trust, to reverse the negative sentiments that persist about the history of missions in Africa and the legacy of colonialism, but they must also strive hard to find theological common ground. Such common ground in christology, for example, could start with what is known to Western Christianity as the *Christus Victor* model of the salvation that Christ offers, a model that emphasizes the power of Christ over the powerful evil forces in this world.<sup>144</sup>

## **5) Introduction to the Harrist Church, the Spiritual Healing Church, and the Church of Moshoeshoe**

### *a) Introduction to the Harrist Church of Ivory Coast*

The history of the prophet Harris and the formation of the Harrist church has been extremely well documented in comparison to the scarce historiographical literature

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<sup>142</sup> Kailing, “Inside, Outside, Upside Down,” 48.

<sup>143</sup> Charles Nyamiti, “Contemporary African Christologies: Assessment and Practical Suggestions,” *Paths of African Theology*, edited by Rosino Gibellini, (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1994), pp. 66-69.

<sup>144</sup> Daneel, “Towards a Theologia Africana?” 83ff.

on many AICs. The reports, however, are wide ranging, both in terms of accuracy and in terms of how Harris and his movement have been received and interpreted.<sup>145</sup> The prophet Harris and the early movement are often manipulated in Western accounts, either “tamed” or “demonized.” Responses depend on the theological and denominational agenda of the writers, as well as the degree to which Harris and Harrism posed a threat to the interests of those doing the reporting.<sup>146</sup>

William Wadé Harris was born between 1860 and 1865<sup>147</sup> in the coastal region of Liberia to the “heathen” Glebo people, part of the larger Kru family. Although his mother was Methodist and he attended a mission school,<sup>148</sup> he was “converted” as a young adult in the Methodist Episcopal Church. Here, he later taught school and served in the church.<sup>149</sup> During mid-life, Harris became disillusioned by escalating ecclesial and political tensions in Liberia. He was briefly imprisoned in 1909 for treason against the Republic of Liberia, accused of taking a “pro-British” or “anti-French” stance and inciting the people of Whole and Half Graway to a “warlike attitude.” He was later accused of insurrection and of helping precipitate the Grebo War of 1910.<sup>150</sup> During this period we see that Harris alienated himself from both the dominant ecclesial and dominant political institutions in Liberia.

In this tense political and ecclesial context Harris’ prophetic ministry was about to begin. In relating to the colonial powers, Harris demonstrated an aggressive and charismatic leadership style.<sup>151</sup> In relating to the mission churches, he listened to others and formed his own theological and christological insights. Harris developed a “comprehensive messianic, apocalyptic and eschatological” pattern of thinking based on a

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<sup>145</sup> For a thorough survey of the literature on the Prophet Harris, cf. David A. Shank, “The Prophet Harris: A Historiographical and Bibliographical Survey,” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 14:2 (1983): 130-160.

<sup>146</sup> For example, early Catholic reports were quite negative, while early Protestant reports were generally positive. Early African reports were overtly “enthusiastic.” Shank, “The Taming of the Prophet Harris,” 59-95; Shank, “The Prophet Harris: A Historiographical and Bibliographical Survey,” 130ff.

<sup>147</sup> A birthdate closer to 1860 is preferred by David A. Shank, while Gordon Haliburton reports 1865. Shank’s date appears to be more accurate, using cross-references with other documented events in the early life of Harris as a measure. Cf. Shank, *Prophet Harris*, p. 29, footnote 6; Haliburton, *The Prophet Harris*, p. 7.

<sup>148</sup> Shank, *Prophet Harris*, pp. 27ff.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57ff.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 86-101. The Americans were also a key political force, and it was eventually a *pax americana* that the Glebo people had to be content with.

<sup>151</sup> While Harris had undoubtedly developed some administrative skills, he was not known for his administrative abilities. In fact, many of his attempts to institutionalize the Harrist church in the Ivory Coast were not successful. For example, David Barrett reports that Harris tried to set up a church structure with a college, cardinals and even a pope. Lamin Sanneh suggest this failed because of “vernacular ferment” and ethnic pluralism (precisely why he tried to add some structure to the existing churches. Barrett, *Schism and Renewal*, p. 176; Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, p. 168.

doctrine of Elijah with apocalyptic and eschatological dimensions.<sup>152</sup> While historians such as Gordon Haliburton and Sheila Walker have not caught the “full weight of of the apocalyptic and messianic dimension in Harris’s self-perception,” Shank asserts that it was a Christian/Jewish/Jehovah’s Witness eschatology which ultimately drove Harris in his ministry.<sup>153</sup> He plainly perceived himself to be the “eschatological Elijah” of Malachi 4<sup>154</sup> who would lead a “messianic breakthrough into the imminent advent of the peaceful and prosperous reign of Christ.” He saw himself as head of a non-denominational “Christ Church” which would merge into the Kingdom with the arrival of Christ.<sup>155</sup>

When Harris became a fugitive from Liberia, he moved east along the shoreline of South-West Africa, preaching and converting people from “fetishism.” His attitude and approach to evangelism was innovative. He was “indiscreet, imprudent and undiplomatic,” challenging traditional religion at its root.<sup>156</sup> Harris is reported to have converted 100, 000 to 200, 000 people in just 18 months until he was also expelled from the Ivory Coast.<sup>157</sup> The situation in the Ivory Coast was “ripe” for prophetism. Jean Pierre Dozon suggests that it was ultimately the political and social conditions in Liberia and the Ivory Coast that created the prophet Harris.<sup>158</sup> Political and social factors apparent in the Ivory Coast included a loose interrelation of micro-societies, an unchronological understanding of time, the reassertion of colonialism by the French, the onset of WWI,<sup>159</sup> and the need for a “new world view” as the old one appeared to be breaking down.<sup>160</sup> However, as Oosterwal asserts, conditions like these are not solely

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<sup>152</sup> Major influences on Harris include: Edward Blyden, a Presbyterian colonialist and politician who was sympathetic to issues of African culture; Samuel W. Seaton, a Glebo christian leader; the writings of Rev. F. A. K. Russell, the founder of the “Russellites,” later known as the Jehovah’s Witnesses; and a trance which he experienced in 1910 in which he became personally convicted of the evils of fetishism and of the impending reign of Jesus. Shank, “The Taming of the Prophet Harris,” 62; Shank, *Prophet Harris*, pp. 70 ff., 104ff.

<sup>153</sup> Shank, October 1, 1998. Cf. also Shank, “The Taming of the Prophet Harris,” 62.

<sup>154</sup> Shank, “Review of *The Religious Revolution*,” by S. Walker, 72.

<sup>155</sup> Shank, “The Taming of the Prophet Harris,” 62.

<sup>156</sup> G. O. M. Tasie, “Christian Awakening in West Africa 1914-18: A Study in the Significance of Native Agency,” *The History of Christianity in West Africa*, edited by Ogbu Kalu, (London: Longman, 1980), p. 297.

<sup>157</sup> Krabill, “Neither ‘Reached’ Nor ‘Unreached,’” p. 3.

<sup>158</sup> Cf. , *La cause des prophètes*, pp. 13-72.

<sup>159</sup> Krabill, *Hymnody of the Harrist Church*, pp. 213-228. Krabill’s comments are in reference to the Dida people of the Ivory Coast. For more information on the pre-Harris context in the Ivory coast, cf. Shank, “Review of *The Religious Revolution*,” by S. Walker, 67; Walker, *The Religious Revolution*, pp. 28-34; Haliburton, *The Prophet Harris*, pp. 39-47.

<sup>160</sup> Walls, “Africa’s Place in Christian History,” pp. 187f.

responsible for the rise of such movements; they merely act as catalysts for messianic expectations.<sup>161</sup> Shank, more boldly, suggests divine inspiration was also a real factor in the ministry of Harris.<sup>162</sup>

There are two unique mitigating factors in the history of the Harrist Church. First, Harris was preaching to an entire group of people who had “little if any previous exposure to Christianity.”<sup>163</sup> The vast majority of AIC movements originated in areas where there were already mission churches present. Second, while Harris himself founded the movement without extraneous cooperation, he directed his followers to mission churches,<sup>164</sup> both Protestant and Catholic.<sup>165</sup> Since in most areas that Harris preached there was no previous mission presence, the arrival of “white men with the Bible” became the fulfillment of prophecy and initially the source of much excitement and anticipation.<sup>166</sup> The early contacts between Harrists and missionaries did not have the effect that the Prophet Harris anticipated. The missionaries tried to lure the Harrists into their own respective denominations instead of simply teaching them about the Bible and Christianity in general. Some Harrists later left the mission churches to return to the Harrist church or other AICs.<sup>167</sup>

The Harrist church continues to grow today, although once again it is being influenced by foreign movements. The proliferation of evangelical-pentecostal movements in Africa is having an impact on the Harrist church. However, this time the influence appears to be accepted from within, as opposed to being imposed from without.<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> Oosterwal, *Modern Messianic Movements*, p. 24.

<sup>162</sup> Shank, October 1, 1998.

<sup>163</sup> James Krabill, “Neither ‘Reached’ Nor ‘Unreached,’” p. 2.

<sup>164</sup> Reasons shared by Harris and his followers for joining mission churches include: elements of prophetic expectation and fulfillment, benefits from missions education, protection from colonial powers, and instances where Harris or his followers were subjects of “humiliation and trickery” designed to persuade Harris to join the mission establishments. Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 5f.

<sup>165</sup> This is a fascinating element of Harrist history. Usually foreign missionaries came first, and then African leaders stepped in. In this instance, it was an African founder that pointed the movement towards foreign missions. This had consequences for interdenominational relations, as competition between Protestants and Catholics increased. As a consequence, in the Ebrié area, all but three congregations apparently “abandoned” Harris for Catholic and Protestant churches. The Roman Catholic Church in the Ivory Coast grew from 1000 to 3000 members, and from 400 to 10,000 catechumens, in the 10 years after Harris’s passage. Many were later brought back into the Harrist fold by the Harrist leader John Ahui as anti-colonial sentiments swelled in the 1920s and 1940s. John Ahui differed from Pierre Benoit, a Methodist missionary, on Harris’s self-understanding and mission in relation to mission churches. Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 3ff; Shank, “Review of *The Religious Revolution*,” by S. Walker, 73f; Shank, “The Taming of the Prophet Harris,” 60ff, 63ff, 79ff; W. H. Paul William Ahui, *Le Prophète William Wadè Harris: Son message d’humilité et du progrès*, (Abidjan: Les Nouvelles Editions Africaines, 1988).

<sup>166</sup> Krabill, “Neither ‘Reached’ Nor ‘Unreached,’” p. 5; Shank, October 1, 1998.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, ; Krabill, “Neither ‘Reached’ Nor ‘Unreached,’” pp. 5ff.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

### *b) Introduction to the Spiritual Healing Church of Botswana*

Although Christians within the AICs represent nearly one half of all Christians in Botswana,<sup>169</sup> published studies on the Independent churches in Botswana, including the Spiritual Healing Church, are scarce. The unpublished studies that do exist are housed at the University of Botswana and are not readily accessible outside the country. Fortunately, a number of individuals connected with Mennonite missions in Botswana have made the history of these churches known in the West, including a thesis and subsequent article by Rachel Hilty Friesen,<sup>170</sup> a thesis by Don Boschman,<sup>171</sup> and an article by B. Rantsudu.<sup>172</sup>

As with many aspects of life in Botswana, there are important historical connections with South Africa. Robert Moffat of the London Missionary Society (LMS) was the first missionary to visit Botswana in 1821 based out of his mission station in Kuruman, South Africa.<sup>173</sup> Batswana chiefs regarded LMS missionaries favourably. However, fearing schisms they limited Roman Catholic and Anglican missionaries to only a few districts, and virtually banned all Zionist and Ethiopian churches. This restrictive policy persisted until just prior to Botswana's independence in 1966.<sup>174</sup> Although collecting exact statistics on the numbers of AICs is extremely difficult, as of 1990 there were approximately 170 AICs in Botswana<sup>175</sup> and this number may easily be over 300 at present.<sup>176</sup>

Although founded in Botswana, the Spiritual Healing Church is described by R. H. Friesen as "a child" of the independent church movement in South Africa and in Lesotho. During the Charismatic Revival of 1923, the Prophet Harry Morolong came from Thaba Nchu-Bloemfontein, South Africa, and visited the village of Matsiloje in

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<sup>169</sup> Jonathan Larson, "Tenth Anniversary Reflections on our Work with IC's in Botswana," January 20, 1986, Gaborone.

<sup>170</sup> Rachel Friesen, "A History of the Spiritual Healing Church," R. H. Friesen, "Origins of the Spiritual Healing Church in Botswana," *Afro-Christianity at the Grassroots*, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994), pp. 37-50.

<sup>171</sup> Don Boschman, "The Conflict Between New Religious Movements and the State in the Bechuanaland Protectorate Prior to 1945," (Th.M thesis, Harvard Divinity School, 1989).

<sup>172</sup> B. Rantsudu, "The Conflict Between the Spiritual Healing Church and the Authorities Before Independence," *Afro-Christianity at the Grassroots*, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994), pp. 51-54.

<sup>173</sup> Rachel Friesen, "Origins of the Spiritual Healing Church," p. 37. Don Boschman reports a date three years earlier in 1821. Boschman, "Conflict," p. 4.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>175</sup> Rachel Friesen, "Origins of the Spiritual Healing Church," p. 38.

<sup>176</sup> Rudy Dirks, interview by author, May 27, 1999, at Bethany Mennonite Church, Virgil, Ontario.

the Bechuanaland Protectorate (now Botswana). There were already others from South Africa who had settled in the area, having earlier been displaced by inter-tribal conflict and European colonization.<sup>177</sup> Morolong began preaching in the Methodist church, encouraging young people to change their ways and prepare for the coming Kingdom of God. His preaching drew people from all over, who came to witness this great speaker and the accompanying spiritual phenomena of trembling, shaking and speaking in tongues. After Morolong returned to South Africa, a number of young people continued meeting together to pray and the spiritual phenomena continued for a number of years.<sup>178</sup> While this particular movement seems to have died out, it did leave a lasting impression on one of its participants, Jacob Mokgwetsi Motswaosele.

Jacob Mokgwetsi Motswaosele was to become known as Prophet Mokaleng and the founder of the Spiritual Healing Church. As a young man he worked in South Africa. On annual or semi-annual visits to Matsiloje he held prayer meetings. In 1949 he had several visions urging him to return permanently to Matsiloje and prophesy. He quickly gained a reputation for possessing numerous spiritual gifts, including the gift of healing, the gift of "sight" (the ability to diagnose the cause of illness, interpret dreams, and foretell the future), the gift of preaching, and the gift of possessing "power from God."<sup>179</sup> Soon he was involved in a full time ministry of prayer and healing.

In the years leading up to Prophet Mokaleng's ministry, the British authorities and chiefs in the Bechuanaland Protectorate continued to restrict the growth of churches which were considered "unwelcome."<sup>180</sup> Local tribal leaders, *dikgosi*, felt threatened by AICs such as the Spiritual Healing Church. Missionaries with the London Mission Society considered anyone participating in movements outside their churches and structures as "dissidents" working to reverse social, cultural and medical progress.<sup>181</sup> Mokaleng himself was tolerated,<sup>182</sup> in part because initially he sought to work within the Methodist Church and the St. John's Apostolic Faith Mission. "[H]e wanted to

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<sup>177</sup> Rachel Friesen, "Origins of the Spiritual Healing Church," pp. 19-28.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 33-38.

<sup>179</sup> Rachel Friesen, "Origins of the Spiritual Healing Church," pp. 43-45.

<sup>180</sup> Boschman, pp. 63-79.

<sup>181</sup> Rantsudu, "The Conflict Between," pp. 51-54.

<sup>182</sup> Mokaleng himself was occasionally "summoned" to Francistown to be investigated, but unlike many other AIC leaders he was never imprisoned or tortured.



pray for people, heal them and send them back to their own churches.”<sup>183</sup> However, forming a new church soon became appealing. Because of his emphasis on healing by the Spirit, the mission churches treated Mokaleng and those he had healed as dissenters.<sup>184</sup> In 1952 he established the “Apostolic United Faith Coloured Church,” (the first of numerous names used until its final form settled as the “Spiritual Healing Church”).

Although Mokaleng was afforded much more freedom than many AIC leaders, his church was restricted to activity in Matsiloje until 1966. After Botswana gained independence and religious freedom was instated, the small, informal prayer groups that had survived outside Matsiloje quickly grew into full congregations. Since this time, the church has grown steadily, and in 1990 was composed of twenty-six congregations with a membership of approximately 16, 000. Church growth has been especially strong in urban areas where the Spiritual Healing Church attracts younger people who have come to towns and cities to find employment.<sup>185</sup>

What is of christological significance in the history of the Spiritual Healing Church is precisely the lack of christological references mentioned by these authors and the sources that they used. This appears to be the case for the majority of Zionist independent churches, where the practices and manifestations of the Spirit are far more relevant than having the right doctrine or intellectual framework. Christ is not directly associated with the ministries of Prophet Harry Morolong or Prophet Mokaleng. The relationship of these leaders to Jesus Christ does not factor in. What is important is their charisma and leadership abilities. Their gifts are from God, not from or through Christ. Even the New Testament church is scarcely referred to, although it might provide a model for a church which is experiencing all the pains and joys of growth.

### *c) Introduction to the Church of Moshoeshoe of Lesotho*

The Moshoeshoe Berean Bible Readers Church, commonly shortened to *Kerekeng ea Moshoeshoe* or the “Church of Moshoeshoe,” is named after the King Moshoeshoe, the “highly admired first great chief of Lesotho.”<sup>186</sup> The name of the church alone indicates

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<sup>183</sup> Rachel Friesen, “Origins of the Spiritual Healing Church,” p. 43.

<sup>184</sup> Rachel Friesen, “A History of the Spiritual Healing Church,” pp. 46ff.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 56-71.

<sup>186</sup> Claire deBrun, “Koalabata Church Dedication,” *AIMM Messenger* 53:2 (1986): 10.

politics factored into its genesis, a motivation typical in the formation of Ethiopian type AICs.

Moshoes Sesotho society. At the time of his birth and youth, this sleepy mountainous corner of South Africa was relatively unaffected by European colonization. It is reported that, "Moshoeshoe had never seen a horse, a gun, or a white person until he was forty. . ."<sup>187</sup> This serenity was all to change dramatically as political upheaval to the south moved north, related not only to colonialism and conflict with the Afrikaans, but also inter-tribal Zulu warfare.<sup>188</sup> In this context, Moshoeshoe was to the peoples and history of the region what Moses was to the Israelites in pre-Davidic times.<sup>189</sup> Moshoeshoe is described as a peaceful, humane, conciliatory, disciplined, clearheaded man, who was able to bridge the old order and the new, able to balance traditional authority with colonial institutions.<sup>190</sup> In the end, his great feat was to form and maintain a relatively loosely knit kingdom, with chiefs of various tribes under his kingship.<sup>191</sup> All this he did with the help and cooperation of the Paris Evangelical Missionary Society.<sup>192</sup>

The history of the Church of Moshoeshoe itself starts with its founder, Walter Matitta, from the Berea District. It is unclear whether Matitta grew up under the PEMS or as a "heathen," but what is clear is that as a young man, he experienced powerful visions. In one particular vision he "died" and went to heaven, met God and Satan, and witnessed angels arguing over to which one Matitta belonged.<sup>193</sup> This experi-

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<sup>187</sup> Leonard Monteath Thompson, *Survival in Two Worlds: Moshoeshoe of Lesotho, 1786-1879*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), pp. 1ff, 9.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 29ff.

<sup>189</sup> Nussbaum, "Toward Theological Dialogue," p. 24.

<sup>190</sup> Thompson, pp. 117ff.

<sup>191</sup> Thompson, pp. 171ff. Some of the tribes in the area under Moshoeshoe's kingship had come more recently to escape the political and inter-tribal conflicts to the south, adding to the precariousness of the situation but also attesting to the skill with which Moshoeshoe was able to mediate.

<sup>192</sup> The Paris Evangelical Missionary Society (PEMS), based out of France, had little vested interest in the tensions between the Dutch Afrikaners and the British, and consistently aligned themselves with the best interests of the BaSotho. Denominational conflict did arise later when Moshoeshoe allowed Reformed, Catholic and Anglican missionaries into the country.

Stan Nussbaum notes two significant elements of this socio-religious history of Lesotho. First, traditional religion in Lesotho tends to be less centralized and less organized than in areas where a dominant people have been established for years. Second, it is not possible to find the "genuine" African roots of the Basotho nation because the nation originated with Moshoeshoe at approximately the same time as contact with the whites and Christianity. Nussbaum, "Toward Theological Dialogue," pp. 25f.

<sup>193</sup> Part of the vision involved black and white cocks living with him, and having a cock fight in which the black cock won. This was interpreted to represent the human tensions based on race, and a foreshadowing of independence. Gordon Mackay Haliburton, "Walter Matitta and Josiel Lefela: A Prophet and a Politician in Lesotho," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 7 (1975): 113-116.

ence ultimately led him to become an evangelist under the PEMS. It is reported that during the three days that he was dead, Matitta also became literate. After reading the Bible for himself, he became aware of discrepancies between what he read and what the missionaries had been teaching.<sup>194</sup> Soon he was travelling beyond his home congregation in Koalabata, and his charismatic style and the “enthusiastic ways of worship” which his followers preferred soon led to a split from the PEMS.<sup>195</sup> In 1922 he formed the Moshoeshoe Berean Bible Readers Church.

Again, what is of christological significance in the origins of the Church of Moshoeshoe is the lack of christological references. Although there is a marked parallel between the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the “death” and “resurrection” of Walter Matitta, this is not seen as significant. Where there may be important points of contact lie in the title of the church, which refers to it as a “Bible Readers” church, but what its readers appropriate from the Bible with regards to Christ will be discussed below.

Now we must turn to the main task of the thesis, which is to explore various aspects of christology of these three AICs.

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<sup>194</sup> John and Tina Bohn.

<sup>195</sup> Nussbaum, “Toward Theological Dialogue,” p. 29.

Chapter Two  
AIC Christology:  
Description and Analysis

**Introduction**

Jesus: you are a solid rock!  
The green mamba dies at the sight of Jesus.  
Iron rod that cannot be coiled into a head-pad;  
The cobra turns on his back, prostrate before you!  
Jesus, you are the Elephant Hunter, Fearless one!  
You have killed the evil spirit, and cut off its head!  
The drums of the king have announced it in the morning.  
All of your attendants lead the way, dancing with joy! ...  
Soldiers, police, and crowds of young men leap in jubilation  
Priests and pastors in procession,  
thousands of them!  
lift state swords high in salute. ...  
Let us beat gong-gong  
and announce it to the nations:  
Let us bring your Beauty and show him to them.<sup>1</sup>

This poem clearly displays christological significance. The sense of the power of Jesus is demonstrated in African terms. Jesus is mentioned as a power in relation to the spiritual, social, political and emotional realities familiar to Africans: poisonous snakes, elephants, evil spirits, etc. There is a sense that the name “Jesus” is important, and the titles for Jesus are also significant.

Traditional African images boldly persist in the African church, and particularly in the AICs. Samuel G. Kibicho suggests that, in contrast to the view of missionary Christianity which assumes a “radical discontinuity” from traditional African expressions of the divine, “what we actually have is a *radical continuity* of ATR [African Traditional Religions], particularly in the conception of God, even into and through Christianity.”<sup>2</sup> In this thesis, it is assumed along with Kibicho that a “radical reinterpretation of Christianity” and its view of traditional African expressions of faith is necessary.<sup>3</sup> This chapter assumes that, in order to apply this reinterpretation of Christianity with

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<sup>1</sup> “Most Uplifting Poem Ever Sent Me,” Review of AIC 10:1 (1999): 7-8. From Jesus of the Deep Forest: Prayers and Praises of Afua Kuma. Translated by Jon P. Kirby. (Accra, Ghana: Asempa Press, 1981).

<sup>2</sup> Kibicho, p. 371. Italics mine.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 387ff.

regard to the AICs, it is first necessary to consider what the AICs believe, in this case, about the person and ministry of Jesus Christ and the significance of Christ in AICs today.

In order to grasp the christological concepts operative in the three AICs in question, the following categories will be explored for each church: the Bible, history, law, trinity, blessing and salvation, power media, missions, messiah figures, and finally, the process of westernization, modernization and urbanization. This process will reveal some of the similarities and differences among the three AICs, as well as expose some of the major christological issues that these churches address.

Before delving into the categories below, a number of cautionary comments are in order. First, it is much easier to find written material that deal with these kinds of inquiries on AICs in general than it is to find information on one given church. A risk is involved because a certain amount of extrapolation occurs when applying comments made in general about AICs to particular groups. Second, there is incredible diversity within each group, so that a wide range of comments, some even contradictory, could be said about a church and it might be true for a small segment of the church, but not the group as a whole. Furthermore, there may be a discrepancy between what the church officially states and what individuals actually believe, resulting in an "official" christology and a "people's" christology.<sup>4</sup> The question is: which is representative of the view of the church? Third, it must be underscored that many of the categories below are Western categories, not African categories. They address Western questions, not African ones. They are designed to assist the Western reader in understanding AICs, not to assist AICs in understanding themselves. Fourth, to directly ask such questions of AIC participants would not necessarily elicit a straightforward, truthful or helpful response. Since these questions are not necessarily part of their own agenda, the answers may be evasive or misleading because the respondents may be searching for the "real agenda" behind the questions.<sup>5</sup> Finally, the authors referred to herein may

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<sup>4</sup> Many AICs do have official doctrines and constitutions because it is required to be "registered" with the national governments. It is also known that with some groups, for instance, the Kimbanguists of Zambia, that there is great variance between official statements and church beliefs and practices, some of which is perhaps intentional. With the Kimbanguists, for example, the official doctrine includes the orthodox theological formulation of the Trinity. The "peoples theology," however, is that God is the Father, Jesus is the Son (who has essentially come and gone) and Simon Kimbangu is the incarnation of the Holy Spirit. Rhoda Schrag, interview by author, Elkhart, Indiana, October 2, 1998, transcript. Cf. also Marie-Louise Martin, *Kimbangu: An African Prophet and His Church*, translated by D. M. Moore, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1975), pp. 143-149.

<sup>5</sup> Dirks, January 27, 1999.

themselves be preoccupied with Western categories, or with fields in which they are trained and most interested. One author may highlight one element from one AIC that another author overlooks, even though that element is present in both AICs.

### 1) Use of the Bible

The claim has been staked that the Bible is “the most influential, most widely translated and the most widely read set of documents in contemporary Africa.” It has been used to unify the church and to divide the church in Africa.<sup>6</sup> These claims need to be tested in the context of AICs. Below is a report of how one AIC leader responded at the end of conference entitled “Reading the Bible from an African Perspective” held at the University of Botswana in 1997. At the end of the conference, this is how an AIC leader of the Memorial Apostolic Church, Bishop Masole, responded:

Masole began to pace up and down the aisle, and spoke with much animation and gesticulation. The Spirit was upon him, and he had to preach. He laid his Bible on the table in front of him and said, ‘So what are you saying about this Bible?’ ‘This Bible. . . comes from *Modimo* (God) . . . and came down to *lefatshe* (the world).’ He had started by asking for a translator since he intended to speak in Setswana and the translator had faithfully translated into English. But as Masole got wound up he couldn’t wait for the translator so he switched to English, at which time, during the pauses, the translator added helpfully in Setswana - ‘You heard him.’ Masole continued, ‘I used to despise this Bible. It came from ‘*Makgoa*’ (Western whites) and so I despised it. Then in 1946 God spoke to me by his Spirit. And I began to heal people. And more people came to be healed. Then we started a church. Much later on I began to read the Bible, and I saw that the same things that we were doing in the church were written in this Bible. And so now I believed in this Bible. I said ‘hal-lelujah!’ that the *makgoa* brought this Bible to Africa.’<sup>7</sup>

This report highlights a number of questions that surface in AIC christologies regarding the use of the Bible: How central is the Bible for christology? What kind of authority does it possess, and how does that authority relate to traditional sources? How does the Bible function as a source of morality? Which parts of the Bible are used? Who has access to the Bible (a question of literacy

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<sup>6</sup> Jesse N. K. Mugambi, “The Bible and Ecumenism in African Christianity,” *The Bible in African Christianity: Essays in Biblical Theology*, edited by H. W. Kinoti and J. M. Waliggo, (Nairobi, Kenya: Acton Publishers, 1997), pp. 71ff, 73ff, 78.

<sup>7</sup> Rudy Dirks, “AIC Leader Challenges African Academics,” *Review of AICs* 9:1 (1998): 5-7.

and availability of the Bible in the vernacular)? Who interprets the Bible and who decides how the Bible is interpreted (a question of hermeneutics and spirituality)? These issues were not issues in themselves for this AIC leader, but part of this responder's entire experience of faith and life, something about which he was obviously quite passionate and articulate.

*a) Use of the Bible in the Harrist Church of Ivory Coast*

Thirty years ago, David Barrett suggested that possessing the Bible in the vernacular has played an important role in the formation of independent movements. Breaking from missions churches, or forming churches *de novo*, caused AICs to turn to the Bible in search of "legitimation and continuity" within the larger Christian tradition.<sup>8</sup>

James Krabill laments that little further research has been done to test Barrett's assessment. Krabill has, however, set out to identify the use of Scripture in the hymnody of the Dida Harrists<sup>9</sup> and provide principles for investigating this with other AICs.<sup>10</sup> What Krabill discovers is that, while it has always been a challenge for Dida Harrists to get to know "the Book" that the Prophet introduced to them in 1913-1914, as the Dida became increasingly literate their hymns became increasingly rooted in a Biblical style and in actual scriptural passages.<sup>11</sup>

Specifically regarding references to Christ, Krabill analyzes terms used in the following three periods of Dida hymnody: 1913-1927, 1927-1939, and 1939-1949. Two general trends appear. First, the hymns become increasingly informed by Biblical sources. Words like "True Vine," "Good Shepherd," "Jesus of Nazareth" and "Jesus of Galilee" are commonly used in the last period. Second, there appears to be a slight progression in understanding the person and ministry of Jesus. Earlier titles tended to be "honorific" in tone, while the later ones began to answer questions regarding the

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<sup>8</sup> Barrett, *Schism and Renewal*, p. 34.

<sup>9</sup> Krabill, *Hymnody of the Harrist Church*, pp. 365-372.

<sup>10</sup> James R. Krabill, "Scripture Use in AIC Hymnody: Fourteen Fields of Investigation," *Afro-Christian Religion at the Grassroots in Southern Africa*, edited by G. C. Oosthuizen and Irving Hexham, (Lewiston, N. Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 1991), pp. 293-331.

<sup>11</sup> Krabill, *Hymnody of the Harrist Church*, pp. 365-372.

origin and identity of Jesus.<sup>12</sup> Gradual learnings along these lines are expected in the context of Shank's itinerary, in which there are new apprehensions and appreciations toward the ministry of the word from a reliance on power signs.<sup>13</sup>

On the one hand, the Bible plays a central role in the functioning of the Harrist Church. On the other hand, by Western standards its role is limited by a rather shallow apprehension. The Bible is directly and practically applied to church life. For example, in a Harrist church there are typically 12 apostles, continuing with a tradition started by Harris and supposedly inspired by the Bible. Functionally, however, these apostles essentially fulfill the role of the village elder. Shank observes that "... they use the Biblical language, "apostle," as a description of who they [the Harrists] are without realizing that there is no real identity between those apostles [appointed by Christ] and these apostles." Despite using Biblical language, the leadership in the congregations is based on local realities. Although applied practically, the Bible is most frequently read and interpreted primarily on a surface and associative level.<sup>14</sup>

It must also be acknowledged that the Bible is not the only source of authority in the Harrist Church. AICs such as the Harrist Church draw freely on traditional sources of authority,<sup>15</sup> including founders, the ancestors, elders, and visions and dreams of people within this church who are perceived to have certain spiritual gifts.

#### *b) Use of the Bible in the Spiritual Healing Church of Botswana*

Within the Spiritual Healing Church, there is a similar trend toward desiring to follow the Bible without distinguishing between Biblical contexts and African contexts. Illiteracy is identified as a major component of the problem. The Prophet Mokaleng himself could not read, but he preached from the Bible either by using certain Biblical texts that he had memorized, or by having someone else read passages for him in a service.<sup>16</sup> Because some members are illiterate, they do not have direct access to the

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 370-372.

<sup>13</sup> Shank, "African Christian Religious Itinerary," pp. 147-153, 161.

<sup>14</sup> Or the Harrists would read Acts 15, about performing signs and wonders by the power of the Holy Spirit, and would get some modeling from that, without rationalizing an underlying christology and critiquing what they have appropriated beyond literalism. Shank, October 1, 1998.

<sup>15</sup> James Krabill, Elkhart, Indiana, to Andrew Brubacher Kaethler, St. Catharines, Ontario, April 6, 1999. Transcript in the hands of Andrew Brubacher Kaethler.

<sup>16</sup> Rachel Friesen, "Origins of the Spiritual Healing Church," p.44.



Bible on their own and would not be able to compare one interpretation with another. Even the literate members, however, would not be functionally literate enough to compare interpretations. As a result of illiteracy, there is a tendency to emphasize a limited number of passages and assume they represent the Bible in its entirety.

However, it can also be said that illiteracy has some benefits. When it comes to preaching, Jonathan Larson notes that illiterate preachers have the ability to meaningfully and creatively interpret specific parts of the Bible that literate preachers would tend to overlook. "Part of the genius . . . of the oral church is to read the Bible in that way [creatively exploring texts Western and Mission churches would tend to overlook], and see in it some larger meaning." Texts that relate to laws (Genesis, Leviticus, the prophets, *etc.*) or texts that have "lively, vivid images" (*e.g.* James) are used most often.<sup>17</sup>

Another major component is authority. A majority in the church are confident in the ability of a few in leadership positions to sufficiently comprehend the Biblical message whether they can read or not. The average member simply affirms that they believe what the Bible states as they have heard it from their leaders. It would be culturally inappropriate for them to publicly question the authority of leaders who have already made pronouncements on the Bible. This is not a matter of hermeneutical dictatorship on the part of a few leaders. It is rather a reflection on traditional society and a respect for authority, including both the authority of the Bible and the authority of leadership.

As a consequence, the need to continue studying the Bible or expanding knowledge of what the Bible teaches is perceived to be low. Some leaders argue, "we already know the Bible." Others contend that "God Speaks directly to the bishop" through the Holy Spirit.<sup>18</sup> Although there is an extremely high reverence for Scripture, from the outside it appears inconsistently applied to practices within the church and to personal life.<sup>19</sup>

This cursory affirmation of Scripture is particularly true of what the Bible states about Jesus Christ. Most members of the Spiritual Healing Church would boldly state

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<sup>17</sup> Jonathan Larson, interview by author, March 6, 1999, St. Catharines, Ontario, tape recording.

<sup>18</sup> Jim Egli, "Consultation of Southern African Mennonite Personnel Working with African Independent Churches," February 8, 9, 1983, Gaborone, Botswana.

<sup>19</sup> Larson, "Tenth Anniversary Reflections," p. 2.

that they agree with what the Bible teaches about the person and ministry of Christ, but they would not be able to reiterate the specifics themselves.<sup>20</sup> The Old Testament is generally not used in reference to Christ,<sup>21</sup> so any messianic expectations are found elsewhere. The Bible, especially the Gospels, is used in a narrative sense to tell the story about Jesus Christ.<sup>22</sup> However, given the traditional African understanding of history, that people and events dating back more than three or four generations are relegated to the realm of myth, one wonders whether the Christ story has more than mythical significance. This question may be further validated by the fact that the Epistles are seldom used in reference to Jesus Christ.<sup>23</sup> This is where one might typically expect to learn how the life and ministry of Christ can be applied to the lives of believers in the church.<sup>24</sup> The Gospels and Epistles are not seen as an important source on christology because the Spiritual Healing Church does not have an agenda which compels them to dig deeper into the Bible or into the life and ministry of Jesus outside their own worldview. In traditional African society, people become important when they die and become ancestors and spirits. Jesus has done this: now he lives on as the Holy Spirit.<sup>25</sup>

There are, however, hopeful signs that the Bible may increasingly be used as a meaningful source to learn about Christ. That the Scriptures are highly revered is a hopeful sign already. While some AICs may be described in Turner's terms as "Hebraist," focusing largely on the Old Testament and the Law, the Spiritual Healing Church is interested in the New Testament. Although it has focused on the pneumatological aspects, that the New Testament is taken seriously is a door opening to scriptural learning about Christ.<sup>26</sup> Further, progressive leaders within the Spiritual

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<sup>20</sup> Eugene Thieszen, Botswana, to Andrew Brubacher Kaethler, St. Catharines, Ontario, January 24, 1999. Transcripts of E-mail in the hand of Andrew Brubacher Kaethler, St. Catharines.

<sup>21</sup> Larson, March 6, 1999.

<sup>22</sup> Thieszen, January 26, 1999.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* Jonathan Larson notes that the narrative christological highlight of the year for the Spiritual Healing Church is unquestionably Easter, where the passion of Christ is relived with great enthusiasm. Larson, March 6, 1999.

<sup>24</sup> One must be cautious at this point about how much emphasis is placed on the use of Biblical texts to learn about AIC christologies. Gabriel Setiloane rightly criticizes G. C Oosthuizen, *Post-Christianity in Africa*, for being too "neo-Barthian" and assuming that "there is something final about western formulations of the Gospel as they have developed out of long contact with the Greek-Roman world and with western forms of rationality and individualism." Gabriel Setiloane, *Image of God Among the Sotho-Tswana*, (Rotterdam: A. A. Balkema, 1976), p. 228.

<sup>25</sup> Larson, March 6, 1999.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

Healing Church perceive a need for Biblical training. Apart from inviting Mennonite missionaries to work among them, the church has attempted to establish their own training schools. Archbishop Israel Motswasele recently established the Boikanyo Bible School for his younger pastors.<sup>27</sup> Hopefully, this will lead to a continued “growing experience with Scriptures and a fuller appreciation for their sweep.”<sup>28</sup>

*c) Use of the Bible in the Church of Moshoeshoe of Lesotho*

If the full name of this church is indicative of anything, one would expect that the Moshoeshoe Berean Bible Readers Church would place great emphasis on the Bible. To a certain degree, this is true. Scripture is prominent in the worship services in the Church of Moshoeshoe. At each service, a reading is taken from each the Psalms and the Gospels and another Bible reading is done responsively. The Ten Commandments are also read in each service, followed by the response “*O Molimo, O bokoang hararo,*” (“O God, thrice praised”) sung three times after the fourth and tenth commandments. Then, later in the service, families have the opportunity to share a comment on a Biblical text with a testimony or prayer request.<sup>29</sup>

Frequent reciting of Biblical passages, however, does not mean there is a firm grasp of the Gospel beyond its ritual use in services, baptisms, annual celebrations or funerals.<sup>30</sup> When Stan Nussbaum polled AIC members in Lesotho on their christology, including members from the Church of Moshoeshoe, he discovered that Jesus Christ is quite detached from what one would expect to learn in the Bible. The following examples of questions and responses illustrate this:

Question: Did David pray in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit?

Answers: Yes - 66%; No - 14%; Uncertain - 20%

Question: Was John the Baptist one of the twelve disciples of Jesus?

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<sup>27</sup> This school was just opening before his death in March of 1999. Tim Bertsche, “Senior AIC Leader in Botswana Rests with God,” *AIC Review* 10:1 (1999): 3. An earlier school was opened and closed due to lack of response. Egli, “Consultation,” p. 2.

<sup>28</sup> Larson, “Tenth Anniversary Reflections,” p. 2.

<sup>29</sup> Nussbaum, “Toward Theological Dialogue,” p. 31.

<sup>30</sup> Egli, “Consultation,” p. 13. The use of the Bible in these settings is what Oosthuizen refers to as “iconographic language.” Although the Bible may be used primarily as a symbol in these settings, it none the less “expands the field of vision of the adherents.” Cf. G. C. Oosthuizen, *Afro-Christian Religions*, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1979), p. 5.

Answers: Yes - 52%; No - 34%; Uncertain - 14%

Question: Is the lineage of Jesus recorded in the Bible?

Answers: Yes - 31%; No - 39%; Uncertain - 30% <sup>31</sup>

Nussbaum questions how much of the Bible has been internalized and rationalized. The glaring problem is a lack of historical perspective. The particular story of Christ seems to be lost within the larger Biblical story. The Bible is seen as one big concoction of people and events.<sup>32</sup>

In short, similar to the Harrist Church and Spiritual Healing Church, there appears to be great importance placed on the Bible. However, this does not necessarily translate to being able to personally or individually articulate an understanding of the person and ministry of Christ which is informed by the Bible.

### *Conclusion*

One important topic pertaining to the Bible and christology has been intentionally overlooked: law and the commandments of Christ. This will be covered below. Suffice it to say here that for each of these churches, the primary function of Bible is to help them establish proper modes of conduct. The question will be, are the parts of the Bible which discuss Christ and the Law used to do this?

To the Western observer, AICs do not sufficiently use of the Bible as a source of information on the person and ministry of Jesus Christ. In the words of Andrew Walls, "it is safe for a European to make only one prediction about the valid, authentic African Biblical theology we all talk about: that it is likely to either puzzle us or disturb us." But Walls goes on to say, "Perhaps it is not only that different ages and nations see different things in Scripture - it is that they *need* to see different things."<sup>33</sup> This is very true, and it is this approach that will help the Western reader understand and appreci-

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<sup>31</sup> Nussbaum, "Toward Theological Dialogue," pp. 228ff.

<sup>32</sup> "The head of a congregation preaches most often by focusing on a key word or phrase in the Scripture text which he believes is probably unfamiliar to his hearers and developing an analogy from village life which illustrates the point. At this he is brilliant, but the method does not lend itself to explication of the person of Jesus, or if it does, it has not yet been so employed." *Ibid.*, p. 231.

<sup>33</sup> Walls, "Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator," 102.

ate the good things that are occurring in AIC Biblical hermeneutics.<sup>34</sup>

Zablon Nthamburi and Douglas Waruta are convinced that Biblical hermeneutics are an important aspect of AIC life, subconsciously and unsystematically, but consistently occurring. If, as they suggest, the task of Biblical hermeneutics is to “bridge the gap between biblical meaning and contemporary cultural setting,”<sup>35</sup> then these AICs are trying hard to do this. They certainly do display “hermeneutical independence.” They treat the Bible as a community document, with a message relevant for the community today, even if it is not always the community that has ultimate authority in interpreting the Bible. They emphasize a contextual reading which is “linked to the contemporary needs and aspirations of the people.”<sup>36</sup> However successful these AICs have been at doing these things, when it comes to christology, the Bible could be used more thoroughly as a source for understanding the importance of Jesus Christ, yesterday and today.

## 2) Historical Understanding of Christ

Directly flowing from the above discussion of how these AICs use the Bible to learn about Christ is their ability to understand Christ in an historical perspective. Keeping in mind that the African worldview utilizes two main periods of time, the long past (extending beyond three or four generations and generally understood mythically) and the present (including the recent past and the near future), this understanding of time immediately sets up a challenge for members of AICs to understand Jesus Christ as a historical reality.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> This is a much more helpful response than that of G. C. Oosthuizen, who in early writings, was overtly critical of AICs for their emphasis on the Old Testament, which only “influences them to return to their past” and to develop an “ethnic” or “tribal” ecclesiology. Although Oosthuizen is correct in observing that to dwell on the Old Testament may lead to some practices contrary to the Gospel of Christ, particularly here its universal message, it would be more helpful to view this as a point of entry, addressing relevant “needs,” rather than a step backwards. Oosthuizen, *Post-Christianity in Africa*, p. 84.

<sup>35</sup> Nthamburi and Waruta, “Biblical Hermeneutics,” p. 40.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 43-55.

<sup>37</sup> However, Walls reminds the western reader that we have our own historical blinders. While we all, especially Protestants, want to connect our present Christian faith with Christianity in Jerusalem thousands of years earlier, we don’t always pay much attention to the many stages in between. Cf. Walls, “Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator,” 96.

*a) Historical Understanding of Christ in the Harrist Church of Ivory Coast*

The historical identity of Jesus Christ is not perceived to be an important issue in the Harrist Church. It is not very relevant what Jesus did or said in his cultural context 2000 years ago. Christ is generally not someone whom Harrists are encouraged to emulate and there is very little emphasis on the life of Christ being a model for today. Although detached from history, the words of Jesus are considered relevant. They are applied in an anthropocentric manner to current issues and crises. Christ represents a spirit of power which Christians can call on to help them confront evil spirits that afflict harm on them.<sup>38</sup> If there is any historical significance in Christ, it is contained in the story of the resurrection, where this power is magnificently displayed.

Krabill observes that the monthly and annual festivals of the Dida Harrists are very important in the life of their communities. These events, however, are not designed to strictly maintain a given set of practices. He observes that pre-Harris Dida religion was dynamic, not rigidly composed of “static beliefs and practices handed down in pre-packaged form from one generation to the next.”<sup>39</sup> A positive outcome of this dynamism and lack of historical perspective may be that there is enough fluidity and freedom within Dida practice to provide openings for Harrists to think creatively about Jesus Christ.

*b) Historical Understanding of Christ in the Spiritual Healing Church of Botswana*

The same “limited” understanding of history in general also applies to the majority of people in the Spiritual Healing Church. What happened beyond three or four generations back is considered “*mainane*” or traditional myth.<sup>40</sup> Links to the past are through genealogies, although even here the aspect of measured time is not important.<sup>41</sup> This does not mean that the church feels disconnected from God or Christianity as a whole. On the contrary, God has now come to speak to Africans. Biblical characters like Moses and Abraham, although likely understood mythically in the “historical

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<sup>38</sup> Shank, October 1, 1998.

<sup>39</sup> Krabill, Hymnody of the Harrist Church, p. 130.

<sup>40</sup> Thieszen, January 26, 1999.

<sup>41</sup> Larson, March 6, 1999.

present tense,” are appreciated as people of God who have important things to say to Africans today.<sup>42</sup>

Regarding an historical understanding of Jesus Christ, the Gospels fit into that “traditional story” mode of the Bible. Places and events from the past are generally “spiritualized.” Jerusalem, or Zion, for example, is a spiritual place, “not a place where you can actually drive your car into and park it.”<sup>43</sup> Even Easter, the most significant and highly anticipated celebration of the year in the Spiritual Healing Church, is understood as highly allegorical.<sup>44</sup>

It is partly because of the lack of historical understanding that a personal or intimate relationship with Jesus is not something that is pursued or discussed. Further, because Jesus is God,<sup>45</sup> and God in African Traditional Religions is rather distant, Jesus is not someone with whom one forms a close connection or a personal relationship.

It should be noted that there are a minority of members of the Spiritual Healing Church who are educated and who have developed an historical perspective. These individuals would not agree with the rest of the church on spiritualizing Jesus. Generally, however, they also do not make the issue a contentious one, and do not impose it on the church as a whole or overtly challenge the less educated ministers and leaders.<sup>46</sup>

### *c) Historical Understanding of Christ in the Church of Moshoeshoe of Lesotho*

The situation described above applies equally to the Church of Moshoeshoe. Members of this church may typically not know who came first, Moses, Jesus or Paul; nor may they typically be interested in such details.<sup>47</sup> The lack of concern is not due to callousness, but simply that chronologizing people and events is not important. Thus, in his thesis, Stan Nussbaum is not apologetic about placing christology at the very end

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<sup>42</sup> Thieszen notes that translations of the Bible into local languages often only reinforce the lack of historical perspective because the words are not there to add depth. Even when recent church history is relayed, beyond the Prophet Morolong, there is little reference to connections with Lesotho and South Africa, even though there are some tribal connections with this region. Walter Matitta, founder of the Church of Moshoeshoe, had been a great influence on Harry Morolong. Thieszen, January 26, 1999.

<sup>43</sup> Larson, March 6, 1999.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*; Thieszen, January 26, 1999.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Jonathan Larson, Taped interview, St. Catharines, Ontario, March 6, 1999.

<sup>47</sup> Nussbaum, “A Biblical Narrative Approach,” p. 182.

of his study. He does so because he follows the methodology set by AICs, as unintentional as it may be.<sup>48</sup>

The historical ambiguity of Christ is illuminated by Nussbaum's reminder that without an historical understanding of the purpose of the life and ministry of Christ, Christ's death is also a foreign concept "[T]he incarnation . . . provides a new answer (the death of Christ) to a new religious problem (the fear that one might not live on with others after death)."<sup>49</sup> The incarnation is acknowledged but not really understood in the Church of Moshoeshoe. "The theological truth of the incarnation is generally accepted, but what of the existential relevance, the ability to identify with Christ or to perceive him as a sympathetic representative (Hebrews 2:17-18)?" Jesus is often associated with the "whites", even by those who identify him as a Jew.<sup>50</sup> Given the history of relations with whites in southern Africa, this race association is generally distracting and negative.

### *Conclusion*

What does the lack of historical perspective mean for christology in these AICs? Nussbaum suggests that the "cause of weak Christology" is a "'flat Bible' hermeneutic" which reflects the lack of historical perspective.

In many cases one has the opinion that the biblical interpretations of independent church preachers would scarcely be affected if one were to remove the covers of their Bibles, shuffle the pages, and rebind them in random order. Each verse is interpreted without reference to the preceding or following page.<sup>51</sup>

It may certainly be the case that, as Nussbaum suggests, historical education is in order, but it is not the case that these churches are intentionally deviant or intentionally ignoring this dimension of christology. Perhaps the lack of historical perspective will allow them to continue developing christologies truly contextual and suitable in their

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<sup>48</sup> Nussbaum, "Toward Theological Dialogue," p. 223.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 234.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 232ff.

<sup>51</sup> Nussbaum, "A Biblical Narrative Approach," pp. 180f.



own settings, unencumbered by the history of Western interpretations. This is why in this paper, the term “nascent” is preferred to the term “weak:” there is great potential for these AICs to build on the christological foundations they already have.

Developing a sense of historical perspective also fits in with the religious itinerary that Shank has observed among African Christians. While moving toward a historical perspective may be perceived by some to be moving toward a Western perspective, this is not the intention of Shank’s itinerary. Shank observes that as African Christians move along the itinerary, they move from a “myth dominant” notion of faith in time to a “history dominant” one in which people understand the “story of God’s redeeming acts and promises in fulfillment.”<sup>52</sup>

### 3) Jesus Christ and Law

While much of what is said about each of the AICs below could be said for all of them, they will be treated individually to reflect the sources from which information is gleaned and to reflect minor differences in how christology and law are perceived in these churches.

#### *a) Jesus Christ and Law in the Harrist Church of Ivory Coast*

A helpful place to look for the understanding of law in the Harrist Church is Aké’s *Le harriste face a sa religion*, as presented by David Shank.<sup>53</sup> What is striking about this little booklet is the tone. While words and concepts such as “Christ,” “good news,” “freedom and liberation,” can be found within, the underlying tone is one that seeks to maintain uniformity and order in Harrist practice and belief and the notion of law and commandments prevails. For example, Aké writes, “The Harrist must be open, straightforward, peaceful and especially must have faith in God by scrupulously respecting *his commandments*.” He describes the mission of Prophet Harris in 1913-1914 as “teaching the good news of God and of Christ, teaching the word of God and *his com-*

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<sup>52</sup> Shank, “African Christian Religious Itinerary,” pp. 160-162.

<sup>53</sup> Alphonse Boyé Aké, *Le harriste face a sa religion*, (Anono, Ivory Coast: published by the author, 1980), is discussed in Shank, “An Open Window,” 56-59.

*mandments*, and recommending to pray to God and to observe *his commandments* so that they would come out of darkness.”<sup>54</sup>

While both Christ and the Bible are alluded to in this quote, neither are prominent throughout the booklet. Instead, the specific roles of church leaders are clarified and practices are explained in an instructive way (*e.g.* “the manner of praying,” carefully described in terms of appropriate times, forms, subjects, *etc.*). Harrist theology is set forth, using words like “respect,” “authorized,” and “honor.”<sup>55</sup> When the phrase “love your neighbour” is used, it is associated with God’s judgement and coming into the presence of the “All-Powerful God.”<sup>56</sup> From this booklet, one gets the impression that faith has little to do with Christ and much to do with following commandments. One also gets the impression that the source of the commandments is not important, as there are no references to Bible passages or the words of Christ.

Nevertheless, minor change is evident over time in Harrist christology. In analysing Dida Harrist hymns, Krabill observes that early hymns referred to the law and commandments in the context of fearing God. The commandments have become increasingly associated with God’s love and a “spirit of communion” with God,<sup>57</sup> even to the extent that God’s love and God’s order are one and the same.

#### *b) Jesus Christ and Law in the Spiritual Healing Church of Botswana*

Similar statements can be made about the Spiritual Healing Church. It is understood in this church that law is central in defining how Christians should behave. Laws are variously drawn from the Old Testament, from Traditional laws and from the founder. There are many laws that are implicit rather than explicit, such as prohibitions against wearing red, or chewing gum. Some are even overtly “unAfrican,” such as the surprising emphasis on starting worship services on time!<sup>58</sup>

Members of the Spiritual Healing Church are recognized by Botswanan society as having higher ethical standards than the average citizen. This explains why there are

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<sup>54</sup> Italics mine. *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 56-59.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>57</sup> Krabill, *Hymnody of the Harrist Church*, pp. 380-381.

<sup>58</sup> Larson, March 6, 1999.

a disproportionately high percentage of AIC members who are employed to handle the money in stores and shops in the towns and cities.<sup>59</sup> But does this higher ethical and moral standard originate in their faith in Christ?

Generally, the letter of the law is more important than the spirit of the law.<sup>60</sup> Jesus' pronouncements to the Pharisees and other listeners on following the spirit of the law have not been widely recognized or internalized. However, in a situation where carrying out the law would seriously threaten social harmony and permanently damage an important relationship the spirit of the law prevails. Maintaining relationships and social order is of paramount importance, constituting the reason for the existence of most of the laws. There is a potential tie to christology here, regarding Christ's desire for a loving relationship with God's children, but this is generally overlooked. The primary motivation for maintaining relationships is still most frequently the fear of having a sorcerer involved.<sup>61</sup>

*c) Jesus Christ and Law in the Church of Moshoeshoe of Lesotho*

The Church of Moshoeshoe treats law in much the same as the above two churches. Heavy emphasis is placed on laws, especially those from the Old Testament.<sup>62</sup> Nussbaum observes that AICs such as the Church of Moshoeshoe do not have an "aversion to the absolutes" when it comes to the concept of law. This is because law and morality are relationally driven:

The African concept of law is concerned with the relationship of persons to persons (or other more or less personal powers). . . The moral law of Africa is therefore not a set of specific abstract prohibitions such as "Thou shalt not kill" but rather a definition of a hierarchy which is worked out in laws and customs invariably conditioned by status . . ."<sup>63</sup>

It is imperative to understand law in the Church of Moshoeshoe under the rubric of the traditional African worldview and its emphasis on social order.

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<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> Thieszen, January 26, 1999.

<sup>61</sup> Larson, March 6, 1999.

<sup>62</sup> John and Tina Bohn.

<sup>63</sup> He goes on to complete this thought in comparing it with the western conception of law, which is "concerned with the relationship of the acts of persons to an objective standard." Nussbaum, "Toward Theological Dialogue," p. 226.

Nussbaum also finds that, when directly asked, the churches that he surveyed did in fact link the law with Christ's teaching ministry. Nussbaum recalls when a member of the Church of Moshoeshoe misquoted Matthew 5:17, stating that "Jesus did not come to destroy the law but to confirm it."<sup>64</sup> Given the traditional African worldview and its emphasis on social order, the Church of Moshoeshoe asserts that "Christ did *not* do what the mission churches say he did, *i.e.* he did not change the law God had given. Order is good . . . and Jesus would do nothing to endanger life by upsetting it." Hence, Jesus is the "great confirmer" of the law, clarifying it so that people may follow it correctly.<sup>65</sup>

### *Conclusion*

This last point leads one to wonder whether, if pushed, the other churches may come up with similar connections between christology and law. That it does not appear to happen naturally is a significant indicator in itself that this connection is not prominent in AIC thought. However, what all of the above does illustrate is that the negativism of traditional religions has not been fully overcome. The essentials of what Christ has done to free people from the bondage of sin is overlooked in favour of setting socially defined boundaries to prevent sin.<sup>66</sup> Further, one observes that law and morality in AICs have more to do with shame than with guilt. It is not so much that actions themselves are wrong, but it is the effects of these actions on others that is sinful.<sup>67</sup>

Both of these last two points, the role of Christ in freeing people from sin, and the way sin is understood as shame over guilt, are addressed in Shank's itinerary. About mid-way through the itinerary is when African Christians discover that God extends grace, not just laws, and that this grace is revealed in Christ. Along with this discovery is a shift that gradually leads Africans from a "shame dominant undercurrent" where morality is defined socially to a "guilt dominant undercurrent" where morality is defined internally.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 238.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 236-238.

<sup>66</sup> Schrag, October 2, 1998. Cf. also Rhoda M. Schrag, "Kimbanguist Beliefs: Law, Jesus Christ, Simon Kimbangu," Lusaka, Zambia, Mennonite Central Committee, 1992.

<sup>67</sup> Loewen, "Felt Needs in Africa," 411.

<sup>68</sup> Shank, "African Christian Religious Itinerary," pp. 160-162.

#### 4) Jesus Christ and the Trinity

While the Trinity itself is not frequently discussed in AICs, it does become an important setting in which Western observers can begin to sort out the relationship between God the Father/Creator, Jesus, the incarnate Son, and the Holy Spirit in these churches. It is also a helpful context in which to further explore the rather ambiguous position that Jesus Christ so often seems to fulfill in the practical theology of AICs.

##### *b) Jesus Christ and the Trinity in the Harrist Church of Ivory Coast*

The Trinity is a difficult concept for members of the Harrist Church to grasp in any depth. While Trinitarian formulas may be heard in scripture readings and recited in sermons and special events, the Trinity has little special meaning for the people. There are two aspects to the problem.

One part of the problem, as James Krabill explains, is the relative “newness” of Jesus. God and Spirit are well known to the Harrist Church through traditional beliefs. They are familiar figures with deep meaning and significance.<sup>69</sup> Jesus, however, is a new entity on the religious scene. He is someone who simply “fails to work” in the traditional religious worldview.<sup>70</sup> In Dida terminology, one is either a “Dida” or a “foreigner.” Since the incarnate Christ is certainly not “Dida,” he is automatically a “foreigner.”<sup>71</sup> In speaking of the Ebrié Harrists, a compounding problem is a stream of thought which promotes the idea that Christ came for the “whites,” Mohammed came for the Arabs, and the Prophet Harris came for the “blacks.”<sup>72</sup> In a culture where tribal identity and association is extremely important, allowing the person of Jesus into your tribe is very difficult.

Another part of the problem is the traditional pneumatological aetiology. God and the Spirits are known, but they are known primarily because of their power. In the traditional worldview, one does not have a relationship with God the Creator, who is generally quite distant. One has a relationship with the lesser deities, but it is often a

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<sup>69</sup> Krabill, April 6, 1999.

<sup>70</sup> Krabill, *Hymnody of the Harrist Church*, p. 379, in reference to a statement made by E. Sambou, *Rencontre et Altérité. Enjeu d'une christianisation en milieu Joola*, (Ph. D., Toulouse, 1983), p. xii.

<sup>71</sup> Krabill, April 6, 1999.

<sup>72</sup> Shank, October 1, 1998; Krabill, October 1 and 2, 1998.

negative relationship. Humans maintain these relationships by appeasing the ancestors and spirits so they will not allow evil things to happen. From this perspective, the divine Christ is then naturally unknowable on a personal level. The power of Christ remains what is most important, even though it is essentially a duplication of what the Holy Spirit represents.

When it comes to the Trinity, the Prophet Harris and the church as a whole may be at different places. Harris undoubtedly believed that God the Creator was incarnated in Jesus the Son who was then crucified. But Shank warns that this was not completely transferred to all the Harrists. Even today Ebrié Harrists have a harder time than other Harrists in accepting the incarnation.<sup>73</sup> In this and other ways, Harris was further along the itinerary than the average member of the Harrist church.<sup>74</sup>

#### *b) Jesus Christ and the Trinity in the Spiritual Healing Church of Botswana*

Within the Spiritual Healing Church, the Holy Spirit is unapologetically emphasized over Jesus Christ. This undoubtedly relates to the traditional religious attention to pneumatology.<sup>75</sup> Again, it is not only that there is a language and history of talking about God and the Holy Spirit and not to talk about Jesus Christ, the concept itself of Christ is difficult for the people in this church to grasp. The incarnation and humanity of Christ is problematic for the people.<sup>76</sup> It just does not fit into their worldview.

Speaking of the Sotho-Tswana as a whole, Setiloane indicates that there is room for growth in this area. Growth, however, will not be found in the Western way of thinking.

Although it has been suggested that the missionary insistence on God as 'person' implied a devaluation of the traditional Sotho-Tswana concept, the belief that 'God became man' is integral to the Gospel. It may be that a rethinking of this statement, in terms of a Sotho-Tswana rather than Greek understanding of man, would lead to new insights. . . . [I]t has to be asked whether - even if 'animism' is rejected on biblical grounds - 'dy-

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<sup>73</sup> Shank, "Review of *The Religious Revolution*," by S. Walker, 72ff. Shank warns that one can not generalize the christology of Harris from what one Harrist group believes, and you can not generalize the christology of one group to another, precisely because of christological issues like the role of Christ in relation to God and to the Prophet Harris.

<sup>74</sup> Shank, October 1, 1998; Krabill, October 1 and 2, 1998.

<sup>75</sup> Thieszen, January 26, 1999.

<sup>76</sup> Thieszen, January 24, 1999.

namism', so often used as a derogatory description of 'primitive religion', is not an integral face of biblical thought.<sup>77</sup>

Jonathan Larson similarly suggests that because people only become important when they die and when they enter into the realm of ancestors and spirits, Jesus can also be said to have done this, and living on in the Holy Spirit.<sup>78</sup> For a member of the Spiritual Healing Church, going back to the person of Jesus, Jesus incarnate, seems to be taking a step backwards.

*d) Jesus Christ and the Trinity in the Church of Moshoeshoe of Lesotho*

As with the previous two churches, the Church of Moshoeshoe generally recognizes and affirms a Trinitarian formula, but does not always know what to do with it. Christ's role in the Trinity is vague at best. Again, the incarnation is a stumbling block for members of the church of Moshoeshoe. For example, while all members could affirm the statement that "Jesus was born of a virgin," when queried about Jesus' death, they were not sure that Jesus was a "real person."<sup>79</sup> Nussbaum suggests that this church essentially functions with a "binitarian" model. In practice, they relate primarily to God and the Holy Spirit. While Jesus is understood as a separate entity, He is more closely associated with the work of the Holy Spirit than to God.<sup>80</sup> Nussbaum concludes:

Binitarian may be too strong a term for the independent church views, especially since the trinitarian formula is so deeply rooted in their prayer formula and so commonly used in their hymns, but the Son is definitely the neglected figure in the Trinity.<sup>81</sup>

The elevation of the Holy Spirit in the Church of Moshoeshoe may in part be related to feelings of alienation from Western churches. Emphasis on the Holy Spirit has in fact been an element in many independent splits from mission churches. Members of independent churches claim they feel uncomfortable in Western churches precisely because of the "apparent lack of the Spirit" in worship and in experiencing health

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<sup>77</sup> Setiloane, *Image of God*, p. 228f.

<sup>78</sup> Larson, March 6, 1999.

<sup>79</sup> Nussbaum, "Toward Theological Dialogue," pp. 228-232.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 256f.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 258.

and salvation.<sup>82</sup> Independent church leaders from southern Africa complain that people writing from outside AICs have left out “the work of the Holy Spirit throughout our history.” They believe it is the Spirit that directly founded the churches and called its leaders and members, and it is the Spirit who is “our teacher and our guide in everything.”<sup>83</sup>

### *Conclusion*

In general, AICs question how one person can be divided into three,<sup>84</sup> but do not ponder this question too much because at least two of the three figures in the Trinity make some sense to them. Paul Makhubu suggests this results from the majority of Biblical teachings coming from the Old Testament. The New Testament references to Christ, however, are prominent in three main areas in which the name of Christ is invoked: in baptism, in healing, and in Communion. “His name and power is recognized when performing these three sacraments.”<sup>85</sup> Yet, although the Holy Spirit may be naturally prominent, it is with increased Biblical literacy that there is hope for the role of Christ to become more prominent.<sup>86</sup>

### **5) Jesus Christ, Blessing and Salvation**

Gottfried Oosterwal asks the missiological question: “What is the relationship between (the message of) salvation in these messianic movements and the salvation in Christ witnessed to in the Holy Scriptures, and in the extension of the Christian churches and missions?”<sup>87</sup> This is a question which is now being taken seriously by the AICs, though indirectly, through blessing and healing.

When it comes to the notion of blessing and salvation the AICs can be very articulate. This is obviously a topic that consumes much of their mental and emotional

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<sup>82</sup> *Speaking for Ourselves*, p. 27.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 16, 26.

<sup>84</sup> Makhubu, p. 63.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> In relation to this, Nahashon Ndungu writes, “Time has come when Africa should not be proud of quantitative treasures of Bible translations but should also aspire for a qualitative understanding of the scriptures.” Nahashon Ndungu, “The Bible in an African Independent Church,” *The Bible in African Christianity: Essays in Biblical Theology*, edited by H. W. Kinoti and J. M. Waliggo, (Nairobi: Action Publishers, 1977), p. 66.

<sup>87</sup> Oosterwal, *Modern Messianic Movements*, p. 21.



time and energy. It is here that the role of Jesus Christ and the “Gospel of Salvation” *begins* to make sense. Blessing and salvation lie at the heart of the traditional African world view and teleology. The prime concern of the pneumatological aetiology is to ensure blessing and salvation for the people, personally and corporately. Healing and wholeness are recognized by African Christians as the most “basic needs” that Africans have.<sup>88</sup> Salvation means “not just salvation of the soul, but salvation in the widest sense.”<sup>89</sup> The vast majority of members in the AICs testify they associate with a given church because someone in that particular church was able to heal them from a physical ailment or bring wholeness to a broken relationship. The vast majority of leaders in AICs, especially founder-leaders, understand the central importance of healing and salvation in the African worldview. Replacing the diviner in traditional society, the founding leaders and heads of churches are most frequently recognized to have prophetic and healing gifts.<sup>90</sup>

*a) Jesus Christ, Blessing and Salvation in the Harrist Church of Ivory Coast*

Healing becomes the “port of entry” into the Harrist Church. This is true not only for adherents, who widely report affiliation with the church because of some kind of healing they have experienced there, but also for Jesus Christ, who is allowed into the lives of its followers through experiences of healing.<sup>91</sup> Yet, a Harrist who experiences healing in the Harrist Church would not necessarily say that they have had a personal encounter with Jesus Christ.

Salvation is not something Harrists are waiting for in the next world. It has to do with preserving wholeness in the present, in this world. Wholeness indispensably includes physical wholeness, social wholeness and spiritual wholeness. When this wholeness is lost, healing is necessary. As such, healing and wholeness are very concrete notions for Harrists. Yet somehow, Christ remains an abstraction.<sup>92</sup> Why is this? Perhaps the answer lies in the fact that for Harrists, ecclesiology and christology are only as

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<sup>88</sup> Loewen, “Felt Needs in Africa,” 408ff.

<sup>89</sup> Walter Hollenweger, *Marxist and Kimbanguist Mission*, (Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 1973), p. 8.

<sup>90</sup> For and in depth study of leadership and healing in the AICs, cf. Gerhardus C. Oosthuizen, *The Healer-Prophet in Afro-Christian Churches* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992).

<sup>91</sup> Krabill, April 6, 1999.

<sup>92</sup> Shank, “Review of *The Religious Revolution*,” by S. Walker, 69.

appropriate as they are functional in reinforcing social order.<sup>93</sup> Physical wholeness and spiritual wholeness are inextricable from social wholeness. Physical and spiritual malady are the symptoms of broken relationships. Christ, then, is generally understood as someone who can help heal physical, social and spiritual ills. While healing is a significant aspect of the life and ministry of Christ and should not be discounted, His ministry goes beyond this to include the transformation of lives. In the Harrist Church Jesus Christ is principally not someone to be encountered and to transform lives.<sup>94</sup>

There are signs that the notion of salvation is slowly changing in the Harrist Church. Shank notes that the healing ministry of Christ is not even mentioned in Aké's article.<sup>95</sup> Increasing numbers of Harrists are second generation Harrists, who do not necessarily participate because of a healing-conversion experience, and these are some of the Harrists toward whom Aké directs this polemic. But going further back than this, Sheila Walker suggests that the Prophet Harris initiated a shift in thinking among his followers which moves the "locus of responsibility of one's own fate" from the external toward the internal. Problems in relationships are not only about the neighbour who is harming someone, but also about faults within one's self.<sup>96</sup> What remains to be seen is if this shift will eventually allow for a more prominent role for Christ.

### *b) Jesus Christ, Blessing and Salvation in the Spiritual Healing Church of Botswana*

Blessing and salvation in the Spiritual Healing Church are understood largely in terms of being delivered from evil and finding physical and material prosperity.<sup>97</sup> These, of course, include the prerequisite strong relationships with humans and ancestors. As

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<sup>93</sup> Shank, October 1, 1998; Krabill, October 1 and 2, 1998.

<sup>94</sup> That Christ is seen as a tool to achieve and maintain wholeness is further evident in the North American "theology of prosperity" which is finding expression in Harrist churches, where material wealth is seen as a sign of God's blessings for living life in a manner that pleases God. Shank, October 1, 1998; Krabill, October 1 and 2, 1998.

Although Aké does not use the words, "theology of prosperity", he also observes this trend and is critical of those who leave the Harrist church once they have found prosperity. Cf. Shank, "An Open Window," 56.

Also note that Harris himself seems to have contributed to the "theology of prosperity" by "prophesying" that Harrist would one day be able to have the same lifestyle as the Europeans. Cf. Sheila S. Walker, "Young Men, Old Men, and Devils in Aeroplanes: The Harrist Church, the Witchcraft Complex and Social Change in the Ivory Coast," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 11:2 (1980): 116.

<sup>95</sup> Shank, "An Open Window," 58.

<sup>96</sup> Walker, "Young Men, Old Men," 106ff. If this is the case, this would explain why Aké talks about the "condition of the heart," although Aké always seems to come back to the "exterior manner of practice." Shank, "An Open Window," 56-58.

<sup>97</sup> Thieszen, January 26, 1999.

the name of the church might indicate, blessing and salvation are closely tied with healing. Someone who is healthy has been blessed, has been delivered from evil, and has found prosperity.

Christ is generally understood to be “on the scene” in providing blessing and salvation, but not the source of it. Seldom a week goes by when a story of Jesus healing someone is not read from the Gospels. Jesus is also remembered as the one who commanded them to “go preach and heal” (Luke 9:2). Although these stories are understood allegorically, not as actual historical events but as reminders that God provides power to heal all forms of illness, they are consequential nonetheless. Christ is the one who has access to power to deliver the blessing and salvation that originates in God, perhaps even the most effective and efficient access. In the end, however, healing is done by the Holy Spirit.<sup>98</sup>

There are some other aspects of blessing and salvation in the Spiritual Healing Church. In a recent research study by a Mennonite missionary working with the Spiritual Healing Church and other AICs in Botswana, Tim Bertsche investigates what words like “sin” and “repentance” mean to the people who use them. Bertsche discovers four things: 1) that becoming a Christian has more to do with relations to “Christianity” than a relationship with Christ; 2) sin is defined as something that is done more against people than against God; 3) repentance has to do with regret as opposed to a change of life; and 4) Christ is not understood to transform us into “new creatures.”<sup>99</sup> These conclusions illustrate that although words like “Christ,” “sin” and “repentance” are not foreign to these AICs, the concepts behind the words are not particularly important, at least not in the same sense as they are in the West. Evil has more to do with social relationships than with God, and Christ is accepted chiefly as a power to maintain these relationships.

Another illustration can be found in the recent funeral of the Archbishop of the Spiritual Healing Church, Israel Motswasele. During the funeral, the “regular” references to Christ were made (*i.e.* that the Archbishop preached Christ, that he was now with Christ, *etc.*). But what stuck out in peoples minds was that it rained throughout

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<sup>98</sup> A significant development in thought from the traditional practice of healing is that ministers in the Spiritual Healing Church do not become wealthy through healing others. They do not accept payment because the gift of healing that they possess is a gift from God to be used but not exploited. Larson, March 6, 1999.

<sup>99</sup> Tim Bertsche, “Tswana Views of Sin and Repentance,” *AIC Review* 10:1 (1999): 12.

the funeral, a sign that God considered him a great person and was blessing the funeral.<sup>100</sup> The average person likely would have said Christ was part of the funeral, but that the real blessing was to be found in the rain.

Thanksgiving for blessing and salvation is expressed by performing sacrifices in African traditional religions. Many AICs continue with this practice. While the Spiritual Healing Church does not regularly practice animal sacrifice, it does so occasionally on Good Friday in recognition of strong relationships that God affords to humans. While this animal sacrifice and the sacrifice of Christ are associated, the significance of the latter seems to be to provide an occasion for the former than anything else. Although the New Testament speaks negatively about sacrifices offered to other gods, there is nevertheless an “innate understanding of sacrifice” that has the potential to be built on more effectively. People can be thankful that Jesus Christ came into this world to strengthen relationships.<sup>101</sup> The key is to help the people make the shift from traditional sacrifices to the sacrifice of Christ, while keeping the innate sense of awe.

*c) Jesus Christ, Blessing and Salvation in the Church of Moshoeshoe of Lesotho*

In the Church of Moshoeshoe, the notions of “life” and “wholeness” are key. They are unavoidably a part of blessing and salvation. The church’s healing ministry is very important to its members, attracting people from traditional religions and mission churches alike. The growth of this church can be largely attributed to healing.<sup>102</sup>

One needs to remember that “life” for these Africans does not end at death. “Other-worldly salvation” and eternal life do not constitute a problem in their thinking. In either the state of the “living” or the state of the “living-dead” life and wholeness are important. In fact, what is desired in “this life” is not an other-worldly salvation, but “some of that life from the unseen world to be injected into his or her present situation so that the dangers of this world may be overcome.”<sup>103</sup> If blessing and salvation are a “natural” God-given part of life in this church, what, then, is the human problem? According to Nussbaum, “The human problem is . . . not how one may be born or

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<sup>100</sup> Dirks, March 11, 1999.

<sup>101</sup> Larson, March 6, 1999.

<sup>102</sup> John and Tina Bohn.

<sup>103</sup> Nussbaum, “Toward Theological Dialogue,” p. 193.

adopted into God's family, but how to live obediently as a natural member of it."<sup>104</sup> Blessings and misfortunes come as "signposts" indicating whether or not the pilgrim is on the right track.<sup>105</sup> The human problem is how to correctly read and respond to these signposts.

What is the role of Jesus in finding blessing and salvation in the Church of Moshoeshoe? It appears to be a supplementary role, to assist the people in doing what they already know to be the way. When asked to agree or disagree with the statement, "The message about Jesus which the missionaries brought showed us a way to come much closer to God than we were before," it was unanimously agreed with.<sup>106</sup> While members of this church do not generally believe that salvation is offered through traditional religions, they do appear to believe that there is considerable overlap.<sup>107</sup> Jesus and the Bible get them "over the hump," so to speak.<sup>108</sup> While some AICs in Lesotho perform sacrifices,<sup>109</sup> the Church of Moshoeshoe strongly discourages it, believing that Jesus' death replaces the need to perform sacrifices today.<sup>110</sup> Traditional sacrifices, however, have little to do with sin and much to do with thanksgiving. This alters the christological significance of this church's testimony to the salvation that Christ offers. Although the words may be of "salvation" and "atonement," the meaning is of commitment to maintaining human relationships.<sup>111</sup>

## Conclusion

Given that blessing and salvation are still largely defined in terms of the traditional worldview, and that references to Christ are rather faded, this point of entry into

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<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 197.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 208-211.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 198f.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 200.

<sup>108</sup> An excerpt from Sunday morning communion sermon illustrates this: "There should be no sin in our mouths because that is what the Lord Jesus was killed for. There should be no sin in our feet because that is what the Lord Jesus was persecuted for. There should be no sin on our lips, because that is what the Lord Jesus was beaten for." Nussbaum, "Toward Theological Dialogue," p. 201.

However, although leaders may make this connection between Christ and the Holy Spirit in blessing, healing and wholeness, this connection is not always comprehended by the members of this church who more naturally associate blessing, healing and wholeness with pneumatology. John and Tina Bohn.

<sup>109</sup> For an interesting account of how Stan Nussbaum reflects on an experience with animal sacrifice, cf. Stan Nussbaum, "What do I Do Now?" *AIMM Messenger* 50:3 (1983): 7-9.

<sup>110</sup> Nussbaum, "Toward Theological Dialogue," pp. 151, 174f.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 174-178.

the AICs appears to be rather limited. But blessing and salvation provide an essential point of entry nonetheless, and a point which needs to be further explored and nurtured. As Andrew Walls has stated,

We are conditioned by a particular time and place, by our family and group and society, by 'culture' in fact. In Christ God accepts us together with our group relations; with that cultural conditioning that makes us feel at home. . . [but] it surely follows that he also takes us with our 'dis-relations' also; those predispositions, prejudices, suspicions and hostilities . . . which mark the group to which we belong.<sup>112</sup>

The Gospel of Christ is equipped to deal with these issues of universality and particularity. While these AICs appear to get easily hung up on the particularity of their traditions and agenda, one must remember that it is also through the particularity of the incarnation and ministry of Christ that blessing and salvation is offered to all peoples.

## 6) Jesus Christ and Power Media

If what is said above is true, that blessing and salvation are points of entry for christology, even in a limited way, then Christ's relation to the power media becomes the playing field in which Christ operates. Since pneumatological aetiology defines the *modus operandi* for the vast majority of AIC adherents, it flows naturally that a pneumatological christology is going to best engage this world view. Most African Christians, AICs members included, operate somewhere between Christianity and traditional religions in practice, but in terms of the worldview and "rules of the game," the AICs are solidly rooted in African soil.<sup>113</sup> In this soil, the notion of "power encounter" is extremely important.

It is at this point that Charles Kraft argues that the influence of traditional spiritual powers must be taken extremely seriously by African churches. "Nominal, superficial changes can be made without much disruption to the rest of one's cultural patterns. But major changes, such as embracing a brand of Christianity with real power, run into complications related to the complexity and comprehensiveness of one's cul-

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<sup>112</sup> Walls, "Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator," 97.

<sup>113</sup> An article by Levi Keidel, "A Diviner Comes to a Zairian Village," *Mennonite Life* 43:1 (1988): 8-12, wonderfully illustrates the encounter of African Christians, in this case Mennonites, with witchcraft and the ability of these Christians to be committed to Christ yet rooted in the world of unseen powers.

ture.”<sup>114</sup> Although the situation is complex, the role of Christ in the arena of the powers must be carefully considered.<sup>115</sup> It is here that the significance of Christ is most completely portrayed for AICs.

*a) Jesus Christ and Power Media in the Harrist Church of Ivory Coast*

When it comes to Christ's relation to the traditional powers that were associated with fetishes and witchcraft, the Harrists have made a radical break from African traditional religions. Indeed, one of the main components of the Prophet Harris' ministry was the destruction of fetishes.<sup>116</sup> Over half a century later, when Aké writes his booklet on the Harris church, fetishism is still an issue,<sup>117</sup> indicating that there is an extremely strong cultural pull toward powers perceived to rest in symbolic association with certain objects. Harris himself engaged the power media around him during his ministry. He replaced traditional power media with Christian symbols, such as the Bible, a pectoral cross, a cruciform staff, and a bowl for for baptizing.<sup>118</sup> He also actively engaged the traditional powers, exorcising and healing people. Harris was seen as a “spiritual leader,” blessed with the gift of tongues, the ability to interpret signs and the ability perform miracles.<sup>119</sup> He displayed these gifts primarily during worship services, indicating that worship and power display are mutually inclusive. In all of Harris's ministry activities, he saw himself as promoting the reign of Christ, as the prophet or messenger of Christ. All that he did was on Christ's behalf, by the authority of Christ.<sup>120</sup> On the one hand, Harris himself is christocentric in the way he reminded people that it is Christ he represents and serves. On the other hand, it is questionable whether those he converted were equally christocentric. Many would not have associ-

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<sup>114</sup> Kraft, *Christianity With Power*, p. 55.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 135-138.

<sup>116</sup> Krabill, “Neither ‘Reached’ Nor ‘Unreached,’” p. 3. Cf. also Shank, *Prophet Harris*, pp. 11-12, 18, 38. Interestingly, the degree to which fetishes have been removed from the lives of Harrists is far greater than the degree to which they have been removed from the average African Christian in the mainline churches. Shank, October 1, 1998; Krabill, October 1 and 2, 1998.

<sup>117</sup> Shank, “An Open Window,” 56.

<sup>118</sup> J. Stanley Friesen, “The Significance of Indigenous Movements for the Study of Church Growth,” *The Challenge of Church Growth. A Symposium*, edited by Wilbert R. Shenk, (Elkhart, Indiana: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1973), p. 84.

<sup>119</sup> Shank, *Prophet Harris*, pp. 176-188.

<sup>120</sup> David A. Shank, “Bref résumé de la pensée du prophète William Wade Harris,” *Perspectives Missionnaires* 5 (1983): 38-44.

ated Harris's acts with Christ. It was ultimately Harris, not Christ, that demonstrated the ability to take on the evil powers.

Still, it is the power of Jesus to deal with the surrounding evil powers, if not the specific acts of Jesus, that attracts people to the Harrist Church. Although Harrists have faith that Christ plays a role in helping free them from the traditional powers, this does not necessarily mean that they have a "Christ-centered faith."<sup>121</sup> For example, it is more difficult for adherents to associate Christ with a model for ethical living, apart from affirming the laws set out in the Old Testament. Similarly, it is difficult to view Jesus as someone with whom one has a personal relationship in a way that is different from the kind of relationship one has with the powers that rule the day.<sup>122</sup> The Christ most Harrists know is the Christ of power.<sup>123</sup> However, Christ himself is not necessarily the locus of this power. He is someone who knows how to access this power, or whose name is used by others in a formula to access this power.

While Christ may not be fully internalized, even in terms of power media, the problem of evil has been somewhat internalized. Due to Harris' ministry, there has been a shift away from victimization by evil and witchcraft, to discerning the evil within one's self that may be a cause of suffering or hardship.<sup>124</sup> This shift provides another "open door." As Aké's discussion of the "condition of the heart" associates power media with the heart of an individual, there is increased room to also associate Christ with one's convictions and commitments.<sup>125</sup>

#### *b) Jesus Christ and Power Media in the Spiritual Healing Church of Botswana*

In the Spiritual Healing Church, great attention is placed on people who have access to spiritual powers. In the context of the role of ancestors in accessing spiritual powers, Christ as "mediator" would seem to have potential as a culturally appropriate

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<sup>121</sup> "Shanks Report New Opportunities in West Africa," *Gospel Herald* 78 (1985): 362.

<sup>122</sup> Shank, October 1, 1998; Krabill, October 1 and 2, 1998.

<sup>123</sup> David A. Shank, interview by author, Tape recording, Sturgis, Michigan, on October 1, 1998; Krabill, October 1 and 2, 1998.

<sup>124</sup> Walker, "Young Men, Old Men," 112ff.

<sup>125</sup> Shank, "An Open Window," 56.



face of Christ.<sup>126</sup> However, the ancestors have not been fully reconciled with the power of Christ. In the Spiritual Healing Church, mediation between humans and God is often found elsewhere than in Christ.

The power to mediate is located also in the founder and leaders of the church.<sup>127</sup> This is illustrated by a comment made by one of the bishops of the Spiritual Healing Church, John Tshwene: "In the Spiritual Healing Church, we pray to the ancestors in the name of Jesus."<sup>128</sup> This statement indicates that people in this church *are* seriously trying to find a place for Christ, and *are* trying to do this in a very prominent area of faith and life in the African context. Speaking of Sotho-Tswana Christians in general, Setiloane recognizes that these powers have a direct impact on a person's somatic experiences, and that power and life are in unity.

The Sotho-Tswana still await the rediscovery that life is one - and that it is one no longer under the old customs, but in Christ. They will continue to wait till the demonstration can be made in Sotho-Tswana terms - no longer by encounter with foreign missionaries . . . but by dialogue with their fellow Sotho-Tswana who are aware of the dilemma and determined to resolve it in terms which are at once universal and local, at the same time Christian and Sotho-Tswana.<sup>129</sup>

In the Spiritual Healing Church, spiritual gifts are assigned to individuals in order to help the church cope with and utilize power media. Jonathan Larson observes that, "a central theme in all these churches is the variety of spiritual gifts and the desire that they should be given due place in the work of the church."<sup>130</sup> For example, the ministry of praying and healing is an important sign of confidence in God's power and the gifts of some to attune believers to this power. While in Western Churches people stay home from church when they are sick, in the Spiritual Healing Church that is

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<sup>126</sup> This has been widely explored in African theology. Cf. Douglas W. Waruta, "Who Is Jesus Christ for Africans Today? Priest, Prophet, Potentate," *Faces of Jesus in Africa*, edited by Robert J. Shreiter, (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1991), pp. 52-64; François Kabasélé, "Christ as Chief," *Faces of Jesus in Africa*, edited by Robert J. Shreiter, (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1991), pp. 103-115; François Kabasélé, "Christ as Ancestor and Elder Brother," *Faces of Jesus in Africa*, edited by Robert J. Shreiter, (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1991), pp. 116-127.

<sup>127</sup> Thieszen, January 26, 1999. Cf. also comments by Tim Bertsche, "Discussion Focus: Warm-up for Next Conference," *Rev of AICs* 8 :3 (1997): 3.

<sup>128</sup> Eugene Thieszen, January 24, 1999. A comment like that makes about as much sense to the Western Christian as Luther's statement on justification would make to a member of the Spiritual Healing Church!

<sup>129</sup> Setiloane, *Image of God*, pp. 222, 230.

<sup>130</sup> Larson, "Tenth Anniversary Reflections."

when people make it a priority to go to church, so they can experience and participate in God's power.<sup>131</sup>

Emphasizing spiritual gifts has two consequences, one social, the other christological. When spiritual gifts are opened up to the people, beyond a few select leaders or ancestors, a generational power struggle is set up. Younger members of the AICs want to have a say too, and feel empowered to make their views known.<sup>132</sup> Significantly, it also tends to be the younger members and leaders who are willing to recognize that access to the powers can go beyond the traditional leaders and ancestors. Some younger leaders are willing to teach that power comes through Jesus Christ, as presented in the New Testament, and that people do not need the ancestors as intermediaries.<sup>133</sup>

Another potentially fruitful field for discussion comes in relation to the "totem," the animal which symbolizes a tribe.<sup>134</sup> The totem characterizes the identity of the tribe, and conversely, members of a tribe may be perceived to pick up "traits" or "characteristics" of this animal. Perhaps, as Jonathan Larson suggests, something could be done to encourage members of AICs to think of Christ as their totem. In Christ, a "new tribe," a "new community," can be found. In Christ, the old totems and boundaries between tribes can be broken down.<sup>135</sup>

### *c) Jesus Christ and Power Media in the Church of Moshoeshoe of Lesotho*

Emphasis on pneumatology provides a strong drawing card attracting people to the Church of Moshoeshoe, especially attracting those from mission churches.<sup>136</sup> In exploring the experiences with power media in the Church of Moshoeshoe, Nussbaum suggests that, although there is a "fundamental similarity between the independent

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<sup>131</sup> Eugene Thieszen, "Ordained to Healing Ministry," *Review of AICs* 7:2&3 (1996): 35f.

<sup>132</sup> "Kuruman Consultation: AIMM Ministry with African Independent Churches," May 9-12, Kuruman Moffat Mission, Kuruman, South Africa, 1997.

<sup>133</sup> Tim Bertsche in "Discussion Focus," 3.

<sup>134</sup> The totem is roughly comparable to the mascot which symbolizes a sports team in North America. The totem animal usually gains its place according to a deliverance story, when at some point this animal is said to have "saved" the tribe from imminent disaster.

<sup>135</sup> Larson, March 6, 1999.

<sup>136</sup> John and Tina Bohn.

churches and the traditional religion. . . [there is] not a simplistic equation. . . ”<sup>137</sup>

While the framework for understanding power media is undoubtedly traditional, the specifics permit some room for the power of Christ to be experienced. Nussbaum explores power media under four categories: defilement, destruction, purification, and empowerment.

The major source of defilement in the Church of Moshoeshoe results from eating pork.<sup>138</sup> Defilement is also possible from eating other animals, from contact with corpses, and from young people eating eggs. The belief is that certain substances have the power to affect a person’s spirit (*moea*) and should thus be avoided.<sup>139</sup> Evidently, there is a strong body-spirit connection that is taken very seriously. The power and influence of Matitta is also demonstrated by the degree to which his pronouncements on this issue have been followed and obeyed.

Destruction is also a major concern. Destruction is associated with the power of sorcery. While only 25% of people polled in the Church of Moshoeshoe report that sorcery had been used against them, the stories that were conveyed demonstrate a deep “existential dimension of fear of sorcery.”<sup>140</sup> There are people of dubious character and intent “out there” who have the ability to manipulate the powers in a very real and damaging way.

Purification and protection are ways that people in the Church of Moshoeshoe can limit the harmful effects that evil spirits and undesirable powers have over them. Certain objects or substances are believed to provide purification or protection. Robes are also a symbols of power, particularly protection from evil power, which members of the Church of Moshoeshoe recognize.<sup>141</sup> “Living” or flowing water is the most commonly used purificatory substance, associated with baptism.

Despite the potential for Christ to be associated with the power of this “living”

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<sup>137</sup> Nussbaum, “Toward Theological Dialogue,” pp. 118f.

<sup>138</sup> This stems back to a vision that the great founder, Matitta, had in which pork was directly associated with evil. Prohibitions against pork and alcohol became a major part of Matitta’s preaching, and it has persisted in the Church of Moshoeshoe and other AICs in Lesotho as well. Biblical evidence from the Old Testament (especially Leviticus) is used to confirm Matitta’s vision and the strong beliefs of the church. *Ibid.*, pp. 119ff.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 120f.

<sup>140</sup> These stories often involved the teller being affected by some kind of illness or accident which was directly associated with a recent encounter with a person or event which they had unsure feelings about. *Ibid.*, pp. 122ff.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 129ff.

water, the water of baptism, Jesus is not prominently mentioned here. John 5:1-9, the story of healing at the pool of Bethesda, is sometimes read in conjunction with baptism and purification rites,<sup>142</sup> but the focus of the story appears to be on the substance of the water rather than on Jesus who handles it.

Finally, Nussbaum observes that members of the Church of Moshoeshoe are less concerned about “planning” than they are about “coping.” However, this does not mean that power media do not empower individuals. It means that the goal of empowerment is generally confined to immediate social and physical concerns.<sup>143</sup>

### *Conclusion*

The itinerary which David Shank has observed provides the reminder that power encounters, often expressed in healing, represent the beginning of the religious itinerary that African Christians undergo as they move toward a New Testament faith. He recognizes that for converts to AICs, the African pneumatological aetiology is not simply going to vanish. It will need to be challenged and reinterpreted through a long process in which the realities of Christ’s power are seen to be able to take on, and eventually take over, the local powers.<sup>144</sup> The question is: How far along the itinerary have members within these AICs come? <sup>145</sup>

It appears that the Harrists are slowly moving in that direction, the Prophet Harrist having laid the groundwork by removing the power of fetishes and pointing toward the “inner power.” The Spiritual Healing Church does not seem to be as obsessed with objects and substances as the Church of Moshoeshoe does, focusing instead on the power invested in roles and relationships. This leaves the door open for the role of Christ to be emphasized, and for a relationship of power to be established. The Church of Moshoeshoe, interestingly the church with the strongest roots in mission founded Christianity, seems preoccupied the most by the power media of objects and

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<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 132f.

<sup>144</sup> Shank, “African Christian Religious Itinerary,” pp. 160-162.

<sup>145</sup> Outside Africa similar experiences can be found with power encounter being the initial encounter of new believers with Jesus Christ. In these other settings, missionaries also express similar concerns for the growth of new Christians beyond these initial power experiences. Cf. Charles H. Kraft, “Allegiance, Truth and Power Encounters in Christian Witness,” *Pentecost, Mission and Ecumenism: Essays on Intercultural Theology: Festschrift in Honour of Professor Walter J. Hollenweger*, edited by Jan A. B. Jongeneel, et. al., (New York: Peter Lang, 1992), pp. 216, 219f.

substances, so that there is less room for Jesus to fit into the traditional worldview. It is in this church that traditional power media appear to instill and wield the greatest amount of fear over its adherents.

### 7) Jesus Christ and the Impetus for Missions

It is debatable whether AICs perceive missions to be an important part of church life or an important part of what it means to be a Christian in Africa. Some AICs actively and intentionally “evangelize”, inspired by Biblical passages such as Matthew 28:19<sup>146</sup> or Acts 2:17-21.<sup>147</sup> The vast majority, however, are engaged in missions by the very nature of their beliefs and practices.<sup>148</sup> When church members dance and chant through the streets on their way to church, they cannot help but invite people to “come and experience the power of God in their services.” Further, when they claim that “God has messages for particular individuals and that this power can be demonstrated in healing,”<sup>149</sup> they attract people who want to see if this is true.

The AICs have taken on a reconstructive mission in which the fundamental principle of traditional African religion [protecting social harmony from evil forces] has been analyzed and interpreted in the Christian context and applied in an urban, secularized world.<sup>150</sup>

While the mission of AICs may not always be intentionally articulated, Oosthuizen observes that they fulfill an important missiological function in modern Africa.

It is noted that many AICs have other “built-in” systems for propagating churches. These systems frequently stem from cultural and tribal practices. Some splits occur when space no longer permits members worshipping together, or when a critical mass has collected in an area some ways from the church and a new congregation appears to be more practical. Other splits are not so peaceful. These tend to occur when two leaders come into conflict and the followers are divided by loyalties.

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<sup>146</sup> Nthamburi and Waruta, “Biblical Hermeneutics,” p. 47.

<sup>147</sup> Ndungu, “The Bible in an African Independent Church,” p. 61.

<sup>148</sup> Loewen, “Felt Needs in Africa,” 418.

<sup>149</sup> Walls, “Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator,” 95.

<sup>150</sup> G. C. Oosthuizen, “Indigenous Christianity and the Future of the Church in South Africa,” International Bulletin of Missionary Research 21 (January 1997): p.9.

Personality conflicts and leadership quarrels are prominent causes for church splits.<sup>151</sup> Often, more than one of these factors is present.

*a) Jesus Christ and the Impetus for Missions in the Harrist Church of Ivory Coast*

The Prophet Harris had a clear sense of mission. It was driven by eschatological beliefs with clear messianic and christological foundations. Harris saw himself as a prophet in the vein of Malachi 4, resembling the prophet Elijah. He also confidently promoted the Kingdom of Christ as John the Baptist had done.<sup>152</sup> His mission was to convert people away from fetishism and prepare them for Christ's return and the reign of peace that would follow.<sup>153</sup> With this passion for mission, he was able to convert over 100, 000 people in 18 months, until the Ivorian authorities expelled him in 1915.<sup>154</sup>

While many would consider Harris christologically grounded in his mission focus, the Harrist Church itself is not always so clearly focused. There are two traditions about the relationship between Harris and Christ. Both suggest an impetus for missions, but they have different messages about Christ. The tradition which is closest to traditional Western thinking, that Christ came to save all people and that Harris was his prophet or messenger in Africa, gives prominence to both Christ and the task of missions. The other tradition, which suggests that Christ came to save the whites and Harris came for the blacks, also places emphasis on missions in Africa, but lays the onus on the Africans themselves and diminishes the role of Christ.<sup>155</sup> Nevertheless, Harris did impart a sense of mission to the church. This is echoed in Aké's booklet where he indicates that it is the apostles of the Harrist Church who are called to "snatch the faulty away from the wrath of God."<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Cf. Hennie Pretorius, "How AICs Multiply," *Review of AICs* 8:1 (1997): 10f.

<sup>152</sup> Shank, "Bref résumé," 38f.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, 49ff.

<sup>154</sup> Krabill, "Neither 'Reached' Nor 'Unreached'," p. 4.

<sup>155</sup> Shank, October 1, 1998; Krabill, October 1 and 2, 1998.

<sup>156</sup> Shank, "An Open Window," 57.

*b) Jesus Christ and the Impetus for Missions in the Spiritual Healing Church of Botswana*

In the Spiritual Healing Church the rough indications are that missions are not stressed as such, but inherently stem from the church's healing ministry. The church is growing and spreading, but not at the same rate that it once was. The Great Commission is used in sermons,<sup>157</sup> but it is not clear whether it is preached in the context of other laws and commandments coming from Christ and the Bible or if it is drawn out for special attention.

*c) Jesus Christ and the Impetus for Missions in the Church of Moshoeshoe of Lesotho*

Little information on the Church of Moshoeshoe and their stance toward missions is available. However, Nussbaum does ask members of this church about the mission of Christ. When asked, "What did Jesus come to teach?" the respondents mentioned things like doing God's will, repentance, and prayer. When asked, "What did Jesus come into the world to do?" the responses had to do with sin and salvation.<sup>158</sup> Nussbaum extends two helpful reflections. First, there is no reference to time or fulfillment or joy.<sup>159</sup> There is no sense that Jesus represents the "good news that we've all been waiting for!" to be gladly shared with others. Second, since the kingdom did not factor into the answers in any way, Jesus' mission is understood in a "remarkably individualistic and ahistorical way."<sup>160</sup> Again, there is no sense of a larger movement that one would want to be a part of or invite others to be a part of based on christology.

*Conclusion*

Having just discussed blessing and salvation and power media, where mission actually happens, and knowing that AICs are not concerned about theorizing and theologizing the finer points and motivations of faith, it is not surprising that our discussion of missions is brief. Yet this does not mean that missions do not happen in these AICs. What it means is that they happen for different reasons and in different ways

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<sup>157</sup> Thieszen, January 26, 1999.

<sup>158</sup> Nussbaum, "Toward Theological Dialogue," pp. 240f.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 240.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 241.

than missions do in the Western churches. If present trends for church growth continue in the direction they are headed, with Christianity significantly on the rise in Africa, diminishing in Europe, and at best holding its own in North America, it may not be long before AICs are sending missionaries to the West.

### 8) Jesus Christ and the Deification of Founders

Much has been said about the issue of the deification of founders and leaders in the AICs, most of it coming from the mouths and pens of Westerners. Obviously, this is more of a concern or a threat to christology from the perspective of Western theology than from the perspective of AICs theology.

A radical and alarmist way of looking at this topic comes from the earlier writings of Oosthuizen. In Post-Christianity in Africa, he asserts:

In the messianic movements, the prophet has developed into a messiah, and usurps the place of Jesus Christ, to become himself the Black Christ. Here the emphasis is usually on realised eschatology. The messiah is the sum and substance of the movement, the person in. . . [whom] its future lies.<sup>161</sup>

Certainly, some AIC leaders are divinized and have become messiah figures to the extent that they subsume the role of Jesus Christ. This is said to be the case with Simon Kimbangu in Zambian Kimbanguism<sup>162</sup> and with Isaiah Shembe in South Africa.<sup>163</sup> However, most AICs would not place their founder-leaders on the same level as Christ.

A more moderate and balanced perspective is offered by Oosterwal, who observes that crises situations can produce certain religious phenomena within a group. Special revelations or visions, a messiah, a forerunner-prophet, a charismatic leader, ecstatic tendencies can bring about a movement of "renewal and religious changes, reform and rebellion, syncretism and acculturation, etc."<sup>164</sup> These phenomena are not unique to

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<sup>161</sup> Oosthuizen, Post-Christianity in Africa, p. 75.

<sup>162</sup> Schrag, October 2, 1998. Interestingly, it appears that Kimbangu is divinized not into the figure of Jesus Christ, but is seen as the Holy Spirit incarnate. This adds another twist to christology and pneumatology in AICs.

<sup>163</sup> M. C. Kitshoff, "From Veneration to Deification of Isaiah Shembe: Reflections on an Oral History," African Independent Churches Today: Kaleidoscope of Afro-Christianity, edited by M.C. Kitshoff, (Queenston, Ontario: Edwin Mellen Press, 1996), pp. 283-298.

<sup>164</sup> Oosterwal, Modern Messianic Movements, p. 13f.



the African situation. Oosterwal notes that they were all present in the New Testament church, with revelations and visions to Saul and Peter, with Jesus the messiah figure, with John the Baptist as a forerunner-prophet, with Paul the charismatic leader, and with ecstatic tendencies expressed at Pentecost with speaking in tongues and great enthusiasm among the group of believers. What is preferable about Oosterwal's model is not only that it is based on wider Biblical themes, but that it provides a number of Biblical roles (some overlapping) in which to compare AIC leaders.

*a) Jesus Christ and the Deification of Founders in the Harrist Church of Ivory Coast*

It has been established that the Prophet Harris did not equate himself in any way as being on the same level as Christ. While he was driven by messianic and eschatological convictions, these convictions were not tied to any sort of self-perception that would lead one to question whether Harris deified himself. However, the two traditions circulating through the Harrist Church about the relative identities of Christ and Harris indicate that in some congregations and with some individuals there is confusion about Harris' status or Christ's status or both. When it is preached that the whites have Jesus, the Arabs have Mohammed, and the Blacks have Harris, one is not sure whether Harris is being deified or Christ is being diminished to the role of a prophet primarily. In any case, that they are placed on the same level, obviously restricts the role of Christ.

Leadership does become problematic in the Harrist church at times, even if leaders are not deified. Given cultural roles of leaders and emphasis on respect for elders and leaders, it is easy to misuse the influence that comes with these roles. Aké warns against the misuse of power and responsibility. Shank interprets Aké's "modestly critical" views on the leadership of the Harrist Church as "a serious call to a reform of spiritual authenticity and consistency of life based on a deep faith in God."<sup>165</sup>

*b) Jesus Christ and the Deification of Founders in the Spiritual Healing Church of Botswana*

Members of the Spiritual Healing Church generally hold their leaders in high regard. "Deification," however, is too strong a word to describe this respect. Founders

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<sup>165</sup> Shank, "An Open Window," 56.

and leaders certainly are not messiah figures, at least not in a way that compares them with Jesus Christ. They do have a mediatorial role,<sup>166</sup> however, such as has always been associated with the ancestors. This association of leaders with ancestors might in fact serve to protect the divine identity of Jesus.

Perhaps, as Eugene Thieszen suggests, a better comparison of the role of leaders would be with the “saints” of the Roman Catholic church. The saints, like the leaders, are fondly remembered, and even mentioned in prayer. This would be one way to understand how the prophet and founder Mokaleng is treated. He is in many ways “venerated:” his name is invoked in prayers to God, mentioned as the last in the line of Patriarchs, commonly after figures such as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph.<sup>167</sup>

The recent funeral of Archbishop Israel Motswasele demonstrates how the Spiritual Healing Church views its main leaders. Archbishop Motswasele was highly regarded by the church. He did not claim to have great spiritual gifts, but he had the gift of administration and inspired people with his presence.<sup>168</sup> The fact that it rained at his funeral made a special impression on the people of the church, signaling to them that this was a great man in the eyes of God, truly blessed.<sup>169</sup>

Replacing Archbishop Motswasele will be a challenge for the unity and resolve of leadership of this church. There appears to be an opening for change in the process of selecting leaders. Traditionally such a position is passed on from one generation to the next, and Motswasele had apparently been “grooming” his son for the position.<sup>170</sup> However, to the confusion of many, Motswasele named someone other than his son to replace him.<sup>171</sup> He reportedly stated, in the words of Jonathan Larson, that, “the church will only decline if old patterns are used to define leadership.”<sup>172</sup> This tension between traditional views of leadership and leadership for the future of the church was felt by Archbishop Motswasele, and will be increasingly felt by the entire church.

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<sup>166</sup> Thieszen, January 26, 1999.

<sup>167</sup> Larson, March 6, 1999.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>169</sup> However, Christians outside the Spiritual Healing Church interpreted comments about the rain and Motswasele's greatness as the church elevating him to the position of Christ. Dirks, March 11, 1999.

<sup>170</sup> The Spiritual Healing Church has been classified as “Apostolic” because of the general belief that leaders follow apostolic success along geneological lines.

<sup>171</sup> Larson, March 6, 1999.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*

Church splits can be related to the way the main leaders are perceived by AICs. The Spiritual Healing Church has had its share of conflicts and schisms, in part due to leadership issues. The Prophet Mokaleng himself left the St. John's Apostolic Faith Mission to found the Spiritual Healing Church. Leadership conflicts were involved in the formation of a number of "daughter churches." These churches appear to be more than new congregations, taking on new names and focusing on new leaders. A serious succession took place in 1973 due to a conflict between Mokaleng and Matlho Kapaletswe, one of the earliest ministers of the Spiritual Healing Church. Kapaletswe formed the Revelation Blessed Peace Church, and even changed his own name to M. K. Dichaba to distance himself from the Spiritual Healing Church.<sup>173</sup>

*c) Jesus Christ and the Deification of Founders in the Church of Moshoeshoe of Lesotho*

There is no suggestion that Walter Matitta, or any other leader of the Church of Moshoeshoe, has been deified or considered a messiah figure. One of the reasons for this may be that, as an Ethiopian-type AIC, its leadership structure and hierarchy remain very similar to the Lesotho Evangelical Church (LEC). Some congregational leaders are elected, including the treasurer, which reduces potential abuses in positions of power. The head of the church is elected at the annual conferences.<sup>174</sup> Tension among the leadership has not generally led to schisms in this church as it is prone to do in other AICs.<sup>175</sup>

*Conclusion*

The christological significance of the above discussion on deification of founders is not straightforward. There is no direct correlation between an elevated view of leadership and a prominent christology. In churches where leaders are deified, there is a tendency to confuse the role of leaders with the role of Christ. This is certainly the case with a segment of the Harrist Church. Howbeit, it cannot be said that churches with a lower view of leadership have an elevated christology. The church of Moshoeshoe,

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<sup>173</sup> Rachel Friesen, "A History of the Spiritual Healing Church," pp. 71f.

<sup>174</sup> Nussbaum, "Toward Theological Dialogue," p. 30.

<sup>175</sup> One congregation did split from the Church of Moshoeshoe, perhaps in part an issue of succession of leadership. Nussbaum only touches on the event, but it appears that after Matitta died, Moruti Matobako married his widow, and after this marriage the split occurred. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

patterned after leadership structures in Western churches, in some ways appears to have the least "orthodox" christology of the three AICs considered here, but the lowest view of leadership as well.

### 9) Christology and Westernization, Modernization, and Urbanization

The process of westernization, modernization and urbanization is having a profound impact on the shape of AICs. However, relatively little has been written about it, perhaps because writing about AICs is still a novelty to many.<sup>176</sup> Yet, cultural, social, political and economic changes in the contexts in which AICs operate will likely only accelerate in the decades ahead. These changes will undoubtedly affect AIC christologies.

#### *a) Christology and Westernization, Modernization, and Urbanization in the Harrist Church of Ivory Coast*

In the 1980s, Ivory Coast was known as the "miracle of Africa" for its economic development and growth.<sup>177</sup> Such growth undoubtedly accelerates trends toward westernization, modernization and urbanization. Issues pertaining to these trends and the future Ivorian society affect the Harrist Church.<sup>178</sup> Shank believes this is part of the reason that Aké wrote the booklet the way he did, concentrating on the practices of the church and the behaviour of Harrists. Aké is trying to establish uniformity in the Harrist Church in order to help it face the future. As such, the booklet is written for the present generation of literate youth, "appealing to them to take seriously their faith, life and responsibility for the future of the movement."<sup>179</sup>

However, it may also be in the present generation of literate youth that hope for growth in the life and thought of the Harrist church to grow is found. James Krabill observes that it is difficult for the illiterate to grow in their understanding of Christ: "

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<sup>176</sup> It may be similar to writing about the modernization and urbanization of the Amish. No one wants to read about that because the public has too many romanticized notions of how the Amish are able to keep culturally pure and separate.

<sup>177</sup> Gretchen Hostetter Maust, "The New Face of Mission," *Gospel Herald* 75 (1982), 489.

<sup>178</sup> Harold Turner notes that the reverse is true as well. Harrist teachings have had small but direct economic implications, especially in establishing a Christian week with six days of work and one day of rest. Cf. Turner, "Development and New Religious Movements," p. 91.

<sup>179</sup> Shank, "An Open Window," 55.

For the illiterate, if you can't drink from the source it's a hard job."<sup>180</sup> The younger, literate, urbanized generations are much more open to learning about non-traditional expressions of faith.

Urbanization brings ideas from other ethnic groups and even other cultures in closer proximity to the practices of the Harrist Church. While this is an opportunity for growth and learning, it also leads to competition. With the globalization of the evangelical-pentecostal churches, their influence can be felt in Harrist churches, especially urban churches.<sup>181</sup>

*b) Christology and Westernization, Modernization, and Urbanization in the Spiritual Healing Church of Botswana*

Westernization, modernization, and urbanization also impact the Spiritual Healing Church of Botswana. Political, social and economic changes occurring in Botswana and globally have a disruptive effect on the stability and life of the church. For some in this AIC, the future brings a big question mark.<sup>182</sup> For example, one AIC bishop in a rural congregation has a son studying astrophysics at an American university. When the son comes home to the village, what are father and son going to talk about?<sup>183</sup> Although the Spiritual Healing Church is in no way a static church, the "march of modernity" is felt. The traditional worldview is being shaken and new realities are emerging.<sup>184</sup> The task of the church is now to make the gospel story a significant part of this new reality.

The growing gaps between urban and rural churches and between young and old members are a concern for some. As Jonathan Larson observes, "In some ways, the great cultural gap comes not between New York and Gaborone, but between Gaborone and Mogoditshane, the small village 10 kilometers outside the city center."<sup>185</sup> There is a "cleft" between urban and rural, young and old, that needs to be dealt with. This

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<sup>180</sup> Krabill, April 6, 1999.

<sup>181</sup> Krabill, April 6, 1999.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>183</sup> Larson, March 6, 1999.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>185</sup> Larson, "Tenth Anniversary Reflections."

cleft has left some pastors, especially the older, uneducated ones, with a sense of desperation.<sup>186</sup> The younger, more educated, urban members are theologically more akin to Western Pentecostalism. The rural churches are in a state of flux too, anxious about leadership issues and the void that the recent death of the late Archbishop Motswasele has left.<sup>187</sup>

*c) Christology and Westernization, Modernization, and Urbanization in the Church of Moshoeshoe of Lesotho*

Little relevant information is available on how the Church of Moshoeshoe is responding to westernization, modernization and urbanization. G. C. Oosthuizen has studied this situation in South Africa, and some of what he discovers there with AICs can be said to be true in Lesotho, as well, there are many social, economic and religious connections. He concludes that the AICs on the whole represent an attempt to cope with modernization.

The whole AIC movement is thus a movement towards adaptation to a modern secular society without discarding the deep religious roots which were basic to the traditional African world. Progress here goes hand in hand with religion but a religion inculcates a positive disposition towards development.<sup>188</sup>

This being the case, Nussbaum notes that changes in Lesotho society will still have an disrupting affect on the Church of Moshoeshoe, which he observes in three areas. First, he observes that the more charismatic AICs will influence the Church of Moshoeshoe through members in urban areas. Second, he suggests that employment opportunities in South Africa will continue to drain the Church of Moshoeshoe of young male leadership. Third, notwithstanding a drain of young leaders, a generational change is under way. Few present leaders can remember the founder, and the younger leaders who remain in Lesotho have a more Westernized experience. How all this will affect christology in this AIC is unclear. The Church of Moshoeshoe may look back-

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<sup>186</sup> Larson, March 6, 1999.

<sup>187</sup> Thieszen, January 26, 1999.

<sup>188</sup> Gerhardus C. Oosthuizen, "The AIC and the Modernisation Process," *Africana Marburgensia* 20:1 (1987): 81.

ward to the "revival meeting" style the founder used, emphasizing personal repentance. Or the church may look outside itself to either the Zionists of South Africa, who maintain a heavier emphasis on the Holy Spirit, or to an American-style evangelical approach, which is decidedly more "orthodox" on christology.<sup>189</sup> In any case, it appears that significant change is going to occur in the Church of Moshoeshoe in the decades ahead.

## *Conclusion*

Westernization and the importing of values from the West brings a "crisis of the soul" as cultural and religious systems meet and frequently clash. This crisis, illustrated by Nigerian author, Chinua Achebe, not only affects the soul of the individual, but also of the entire community. The entire worldview in which Africans live is being shaken.<sup>190</sup> This crisis has slowly been surfacing for more than a century within the African church. One of the reasons AICs began in the first place was so that African Christians could worship in a setting where the old value system was still at work. However, with the recent influence of Western pentecostalism in AICs, and especially in urban churches, the AICs are increasingly trying to mediate not only between Christianity and African culture, but also between Western culture and African culture.

Modernization brings literacy and education. On the positive side, education and literacy are considered by many to be essential in promoting access to the Bible, and thus also to Biblical christology. On the negative side, education and literacy may also bring with them a loss of particularity.<sup>191</sup> Modernization tends to bring a western brand of institutionalization to the AICs. The benefits of such institutionalization include the material betterment of the younger generation, efficiency in decision making, greater mobilization of people and ideas, and theological maturation. The dangers,

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<sup>189</sup> Nussbaum, May 27, 1999.

<sup>190</sup> Chinua Achebe, *The African Trilogy: Things Fall Apart, No Longer at Ease, Arrow of God*, (London: Picador, 1988.) Cf. also Willene P. Taylor, "The Search for Values Theme in Chinua Achebe's Novel, *Things Fall Apart: A Crisis of the Soul*," *Understanding Things Fall Apart: Selected Essays and Criticism*, edited by Solomon O. Iyasere, (Troy, N. Y.: Whitston Publishing Company, 1998), pp. 27-39.

<sup>191</sup> Rick Derksen, "The Impact of Universities on AICs," *The Review of AICs* 9:1 (1998): 4.

however, include a loss of vision, self-maintenance rather than goal-setting, inflexibility, and increasing emphasis on programs over people.<sup>192</sup>

Urbanization poses its own challenges to the social and economic situation of AICs. Inter-ethnic associations do not necessarily result in new cultures, but the re-shaping of traditional ones. Up until now, AICs have been relatively successful at maintaining their ethnic character, even in urban centers,<sup>193</sup> but this is beginning to change, again evident in the rise of charismatic-pentecostal type AICs.

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<sup>192</sup> Paul Hiebert, "Missions and the Renewal of the Church," Exploring Church Growth, edited by Wilbert R. Shenk, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983), pp. 160f.

<sup>193</sup> Cf. Aylward Shorter, The Church in the African City, (London: Chapman, 1991), pp. 25ff.



## Conclusion

The itinerary that Shank has outlined is a helpful tool in evaluating the christologies of these three AICs. We see with all of these AICs that there has in fact been for the adherents a “radical, symbolic break from a religious past, [which] marks the beginning of a new religious itinerary,”<sup>194</sup> and that this “break” has been perceived primarily in the area of blessing and salvation and in the area of power media and power encounters. Such encounters represent the first stages of the itinerary. One widely observes “conversion to [an] all-powerful God” who is “known through acts of power and protection for health, prosperity, fertility, success in this life.” Also apparent is a sense of “struggle to abandon old sources of power and protection” in favour of “one true God . . . tested over and over again.” The next step, replacing fetishes and taboos with the “Law of God and Bible and cross,” is not so clearly identified. While the Law and the Bible are important, they are not important so much to explicate the cross, as to form a link with the traditional emphasis on laws and social order. Further, the authority of the Bible is still shared with traditional sources of authority. The fourth step, discovering “personal responsibility before God and fellow humans,” is not widely articulated.<sup>195</sup>

What the itinerary tells us is that these churches are just embarking on the christological journey. They are just beginning to learn about the significance of Jesus Christ in their lives. Most would associate Christ with some kind of power encounter, but would not normally internalize this experience, or consider it a “life transforming event.” A number of conclusions can be made about this reality.

First, although this entry point represents a limited christology, it is a valid one nonetheless.<sup>196</sup> The people in these churches are discovering Christ in ways that make sense to them; in ways that resonate with the pneumatological aetiology which characterizes their world view and their life experiences. Christ meets them where their needs are.

Second, as a whole, new understandings of the life and ministry of Christ can be

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<sup>194</sup> Shank, “African Christian Religious Itinerary,” p. 143.

<sup>195</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 143-162 for further clarification of the itinerary.

<sup>196</sup> Krabill, April 6, 1999.

observed in these AICs. These AICs are not static institutions: much is in flux.<sup>197</sup> The situation is complex, and it is not a smooth journey from traditional religions to New Testament appropriations and appreciations of Christ.<sup>198</sup> To a certain extent, hesitance on the part of some to change their thinking (often on the part of the older, less educated people in the rural churches) represents resistance to change rather than resistance to Christ. However, there is hope for these churches as they change; even minor changes bring new opportunities to discover Christ. There is a sense of youthfulness and energy in many of these churches which cannot be disregarded.<sup>199</sup>

Third, as dynamic institutions, AICs display a multiformity of christological thought. Within a given AIC, some individuals are further along the itinerary than others. Some churches as a whole, depending in part on geographic situations and demographic compositions, are farther ahead than others. There may also be incongruity between the leadership and the average church member. In these three AICs, the founding leaders and the present heads appear to be much further along the itinerary than the average members of their churches, expressing a wider understanding of in many of the categories discussed above.

Fourth, “christology” as a category of thought is simply not important to the vast majority of people in these AICs. Systematizing and categorizing life experiences is a Western preoccupation, totally foreign to AIC members who do not see a need to do this.<sup>200</sup> The fact that individual members cannot necessarily articulate theological statements about Jesus Christ does not mean that faith in Christ is unimportant. Most AIC adherents will readily attest to the power of Christ in powerful, heartfelt testimonies, based not on head knowledge, but what they would consider concrete experiences of healing and salvation.

Fifth, the designation “weak” is often prefixed to “christologies” when discussing AICs and their understanding of Jesus Christ. This term suggests an “intentionality,” as if AICs deliberately play down the role of Christ.<sup>201</sup> To ask most of the leaders of these

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<sup>197</sup> Larson, March 6, 1999.

<sup>198</sup> Krabill, April 6, 1999.

<sup>199</sup> Larson, March 6, 1999.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>201</sup> Krabill, April 6, 1999.

churches, “Do you feel your church has a “weak” or “deficient” christology?” would most likely solicit a blank stare. Only educated members, or members who had joined from mission church, might understand the question.<sup>202</sup>

Sixth, combining the fourth and fifth points, christology cannot be detached from pneumatology in AICs. The following statement by Jesus is taken very seriously:

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age. (Matthew 28: 19, 20)

What is underscored in this passage is not so much the missiological command, but the ambassadors which Christ has left behind. These ambassadors are namely the Holy Spirit and the laws which are to be taught and obeyed.

Seventh, critiques must go both ways between Western churches and AICs. Any Western critique which suggests AIC christologies are “weak” must similarly then conclude that Western pneumatologies are likewise “weak.” The conversation needs to go two ways. AIC leaders will challenge Western and mission church leaders, asking why the Holy Spirit is frequently depreciated in Western theology.<sup>203</sup> Mark 3:28, 29 is sometimes quoted by AIC leaders: “I tell you the truth, all the sins and blasphemies of men will be forgiven them. But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; he is guilty of an eternal sin.”<sup>204</sup> Reference to this passage suggests that to the AICs, the low pneumatology of many Western churches should be a conspicuous concern.

The ultimate question, then, is one of growth. If the itinerary is used as a model, the question is, “Are AIC members proceeding towards a New Testament understanding of, and experience in, Jesus Christ?” The answer to this question is hesitant “yes,” but not a “resounding yes.” The process is slow, and measurable in different ways in different churches. The Church of Moshoeshoe, despite its foundations in the mission churches, appears to be most hesitant to christological growth. The Spiritual Healing

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<sup>202</sup> Larson, March 6, 1999.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>204</sup> This is more of a christological statement than it may sound initially. The context of the passage is that Jesus himself is being blasphemed, accused of being possessed by the Beelzebub (Mark 3: 22).

Church is generally open to being challenged to grow in understanding the significance of the life and ministry of Christ for Africans today. The Harrist church demonstrates that some segments of the church have been moving faster in this regard than others.

This is where Mennonite mission agencies enter the picture. Mennonites were invited to work with these churches by their leaders, not because of a sense of a deficiency in christology, but because of a desire to learn from the Bible. Mennonites are one of the very few Western denominational groups who have been blessed with the opportunity to stand with the AICs at the “crossroads of change.”<sup>205</sup> For various reasons, historical and theological, these AICs have not felt “cowed into silence” by Mennonite missionaries,<sup>206</sup> but have experienced the opportunity to interact together and learn from each other as children of God.

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<sup>205</sup> Larson, March 6, 1999.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*

### Chapter Three

#### The Mennonite Mission Experience: Theological Reflections

##### **1) Introduction to the Work of MBM and AIMM with AICs**

There has been a lot of talk about how rapidly the church has grown and keeps growing in this part of the world. Our concern is that the center of these churches be always and only the living Lord Jesus who died for our sin. Worship practices and the way one cares for the need for healing can be different, but God's Word and the Gospel of Christ must always be central to the life and witness of the church.<sup>1</sup>

This quote by Edwin Spruth, Mennonite Board of Missions (MBM) worker in West Africa, concisely summarizes past and present attitudes and objectives of Mennonite missions toward AICs in Africa. It highlights the desire of Mennonite mission agencies to help foster within the AICs a christocentric faith, based on both the Bible and on the culturally and contextually defined experiences with Christ these Christians profess. It also explicitly recognizes that "growth" in the AICs is not just evaluated numerically, but also in terms of understanding and appropriation. While these attitudes and goals of MBM and Africa Inter-Mennonite Missions (AIMM) have been quite consistent over the past four decades, ascertaining growth within the AICs and mutual learnings within both the mission agencies and the AICs is a complex task.

##### *a) Introduction to the Relations between the Mennonite Board of Missions (MBM) and the Harrist Church*

The story of MBM's relations with AICs begins in 1958 with a request for mission assistance from a number of divergent and grass-roots AIC-cum-Mennonite<sup>2</sup> churches in Uyo, Nigeria.<sup>3</sup> Edwin and Irene Weaver arrived in Uyo in 1960. Discerning that Uyo did not need a new denomination, they instead focused on establishing a Bible teaching center, on leadership training, and on fostering better relations amongst

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<sup>1</sup> Edwin Spruth, "Christology Problems Remain," The Review of AICs 7: 2&3 (1996): 43-45.

<sup>2</sup> These were largely churches that had splintered from mission churches, and had bounced from one denomination to another. Many were Mormon just before claiming the Mennonite name. Cf. Edwin and Irene Weaver, The Uyo Story, (Elkhart, Indiana: Mennonite Board of Missions, 1970), p. 13. They apparently chose to become Mennonite after listening to a number of radio broadcasts produced by Mennonites in other parts of Africa. Krabill, October 1 and 2, 1998.

<sup>3</sup> David A. Shank, "A Survey of American Mennonite Ministries to African Independent Churches," Mission Focus 13:1 (1985): 1.

AICs and between AICs and mission planted churches.<sup>4</sup> The Weavers had already served with MBM in India between 1935 and 1956, and the geographic shift in ministry from Asia to Africa was also accompanied by an ideological shift. They had “learned how much more effective it was to work *with* people instead of *for* them.”<sup>5</sup> They developed a different vision for missions with AICs than MBM had had with missions in India: one that focused on establishing relationships instead of establishing institutions; one that sought to encourage local Christian movements instead of transplanting foreign ones;<sup>6</sup> one that relied on the Holy Spirit as “the most important strategy in mission.”<sup>7</sup>

In 1969, MBM began exploring mission opportunities with AICs in French speaking countries in West Africa. After making significant contacts with the Harrist Church in the Ivory Coast, MBM received an invitation from the “spiritual head” to become the first Western missionaries to work with the Harrists.<sup>8</sup> James and Janette Krabill began work teaching in the Ivory Coast, followed shortly afterwards by David and Wilma Shank in 1979.<sup>9</sup> Although the Krabills and Shanks had been invited to teach among the Harrists and were warmly welcomed into their churches, most Harrists responded reservedly to their teaching initiatives. They remembered that most of the young people who had been educated in Protestant and Catholic schools earlier in the century had not returned home.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* Cf. Edwin and Irene Weaver, *The Uyo Story*, pp. 27ff, 41, 47ff, 73ff.

<sup>5</sup> Irene Weaver, “I Would Do It Again!” *AIMM Messenger* 49:1 (1981): 8.

<sup>6</sup> Krabill, October 1 and 2, 1998.

<sup>7</sup> Irene Weaver, “I Would Do It Again!” 9. This “new way” of thinking about missions, as it was applied to the AICs, was done in conversation with prominent Mennonite thinkers and leaders in North America, such as John Howard Yoder and Marlin Miller. Cf. Shank, “Survey,” 2. This “radical shift in missiology” was not just expressed by a few individuals, but represented the thinking of the larger mission board as well. Cf. Krabill, “Neither ‘Reached’ Nor ‘Unreached,’” pp. 11-15; “Mission in Transition: An African Conversation,” *Canadian Mennonite*, 3:6 (1999): 6, 7.

<sup>8</sup> “Shanks Report New Opportunities,” 362.

<sup>9</sup> Shank, “Survey,” 3.

<sup>10</sup> Phil Richard, “Suspicious Africans Respond to Teacher,” *Mennonite Weekly Review* December 5, 1985, p. 6.

*b) Introduction to the Africa Inter-Mennonite Missions (AIMM) and the Spiritual Healing Church and the Church of Moshoeshoe*

AIMM<sup>11</sup> and MBM share at least three significant elements of their missions endeavours in Africa. First, AIMM, originally Congo Inland Mission (CIM),<sup>12</sup> experienced a geographical shift of focus when it moved beyond the borders of the Congo to explore relations with AICs in Botswana, Lesotho, Swaziland and South Africa. Second, AIMM made an ideological shift in deciding to work with existing Christian groups rather than planting and supporting Mennonite churches only. Third, AIMM invited Edwin and Irene Weaver to share their experience and expertise of initiating relationships with AICs.<sup>13</sup>

In Botswana, visits by the Weavers were preceded by AIMM representatives Jim Bertsche and Don Jacobs. In consulting with existing denominational mission agencies in Botswana and sharing AIMM's vision for working with AICs, response was overwhelmingly negative. The Mennonites were encouraged to stick with the valued relief and development work that Mennonite Central Committee was already doing in Botswana. Besides, the mission churches and agencies were puzzled by the very concept of trying to relate with the renegade AICs: "[w]ho ever heard of a mission agency sending people halfway around the world for reasons other than the planting of their own churches?"<sup>14</sup>

Nevertheless, the Weavers arrived in Botswana in 1975, ready to apply here what they had learned about relating with AICs in West Africa. They wanted to "simply adopt a stance of availability." Early contacts were made with the Spiritual Healing Church and Israel Motswasele. While churches and leaders warmly welcomed the Weavers, there seemed to be little interest in Bible teachers. Within a month, however, Israel Motswasele, hoping to establish his own Bible School, requested that the Weavers give Biblical training to a trusted minister, Mr. Tshwene. "I give him into your

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<sup>11</sup> Africa Inter-Mennonite Missions (AIMM) is a joint mission venture supported by the following Mennonite conferences: the General Conference Mennonite Church; the Mennonite Brethren Church; Evangelical Mennonite Missions Conference; Evangelical Mennonite Church (U.S.); Evangelical Mennonite Conference (Canada). In Botswana, AIMM works together with the Mennonite Central Committee under the national umbrella, "Mennonite Ministries." Cf. Jim Bertsche, *CIM/AIMM*, pp. 491ff.

<sup>12</sup> For an exhaustive history of AIMM, cf. Jim Bertsche, *CIM/AIMM*.

<sup>13</sup> Shank, "Survey," 3; Jim Bertsche, *CIM/AIMM*, pp. 479ff.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 481.

hands . . . ” Motswasele said. “Teach him how to study the Scriptures so that he, in turn, can teach others.”<sup>15</sup> From the perspective of AIMM, a relationship with the Spiritual Healing Church had been forged.

AIMM’s involvement in Lesotho actually began with the Lesotho Evangelical Church in the early 1970s, working with educational institutions. While this involvement was short lived, it did give AIMM the opportunity to come into contact with Sam Mahono, who was involved with the African Federal Church Council (AFCC). After some time, Sam Mohono shared with AIMM workers that he was the son of a founding leader of the Moshoeshoe Berea Bible Reading Church, R. M. Mohono.<sup>16</sup> Sam Mohono, through his involvement in the AFCC, was aware of the educational needs in AICs. He dreamed of establishing a Theological Education by Extension (TEE) program which would eventually lead to an AIC Bible School, and asked AIMM to assist him in setting these up.<sup>17</sup> Again, through patience, careful listening and a desire to assist existing Christian groups in Bible and leadership training, AIMM was able to forge a relationship with a number of AICs, including here the Church of Moshoeshoe.

### *c) Historical and Theological Factors in Mennonite Mission Relations with AICs*

Given the history of agitated relations between AICs and Western mission agencies and mission founded churches, it is incredible that AIMM and MBM have been afforded the opportunities to work with these AICs. If one were to delve deeper into the above stories of how these two Mennonite mission agencies were permitted into the lives of these Christians, a number of historical and theological predispositions for such a relationship can be discerned.

At the roots of the Anabaptist/Mennonite movement and with sixteenth century leaders such as Menno Simons there is a concern for “context.” While Mennonite missions have certainly been guilty of imposing Western culture on other cultures, there is a sense of reviving Menno Simons’ vision which recognizes that the dominant culture is not necessarily the best vehicle to promote faith in Jesus as Lord and Saviour, inner

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* ,p. 482.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 462ff.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 484f.



life, community and peace.<sup>18</sup> A second factor is that Mennonites represent a “third way,” neither Protestant nor Catholic,<sup>19</sup> allowing them to relate as partners with groups such as the AICs who also do not fit into the dominant Western denominational molds.<sup>20</sup> Theological issues include a keen sense of the Holy Spirit and expectations of the coming Kingdom of Christ. It is really “Kingdom theology,” recognizing the messiahship of Christ, that defines Mennonite missiologies.<sup>21</sup> Another historical similarity between Mennonites and AICs is oppression by both governments and dominant denominations for strongly held religious beliefs that are considered radical and unorthodox. This is coupled with a desire in recent decades to be accepted by local cultures and communities.<sup>22</sup> Further, theological themes such as emphasis on service, discipleship, ecclesiocentric polity, and “incarnational” missions are quite evident in Mennonite missiology.<sup>23</sup> Using a discipleship model has allowed Mennonite missionaries to focus on the leadership.<sup>24</sup> As the Mennonite Encyclopedia states, “Equipping leaders through biblical instruction has been the major Mennonite thrust in most of these ministries.”<sup>25</sup>

In essence, a strong sensitivity to the cultural context has developed within MBM and AIMM as a result of the above historical and theological predispositions. A position statement by MBM recapitulates the above succinctly:

Every culture is a context for the Holy Spirit to do his work of re-creation.  
We are called to identify with another people through careful study of

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<sup>18</sup> Graham Cyster, “Mennonite Discipleship in the Twenty First Century,” Discipleship in Context: Papers Read at the Menno Simons Symposium, Elsopeet, Netherlands, 1996, Occasional Papers #18, edited by Alle Hoekma and Roelf Kuitse, (Elkhart, Indiana: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1997), pp. 3-8.

<sup>19</sup> Walter Klaassen, Anabaptism: Neither Catholic nor Protestant, rev. ed. (Waterloo, Ontario: Conrad Grebel Press), pp. 1-9.

<sup>20</sup> Nussbaum, “New Religious Movements,” p. 12.

<sup>21</sup> Wilbert Shenk, “Kingdom, Mission and Growth,” Exploring Church Growth, edited by Wilbert R. Shenk, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983), pp. 207-217.

<sup>22</sup> Jacob Loewen suggests that many AICs desire to put an end to the isolation that comes with a “double existence” when faith and culture are not fully integrated. Loewen, “Felt Needs in Africa,” 417.

<sup>23</sup> Excellent articles that expand on these theological and historical themes in Anabaptist missiology can be found in, A Relevant Anabaptist Missiology for the 1990's, edited by Calvin E. Shenk, (Elkhart: Council of International Ministries, 1990). Cf. especially: Hans Kasdorf, “Toward an Anabaptist Missiology for the 1990s: A Missiologist's Perspective,” A Relevant Anabaptist Missiology for the 1990's, edited by Calvin E. Shenk, (Elkhart: Council of International Ministries, 1990), pp. 3-18; Wilbert R. Shenk, “A Developing Missiological Vision for Anabaptists,” A Relevant Anabaptist Missiology for the 1990's, edited by Calvin E. Shenk, (Elkhart: Council of International Ministries, 1990), pp. 43-61; Calvin E. Shenk, “Essential Themes for an Anabaptist Missiology,” A Relevant Anabaptist Missiology for the 1990's, edited by Calvin E. Shenk, (Elkhart: Council of International Ministries, 1990), pp. 63-92.

<sup>24</sup> Larson, “Tenth Anniversary Reflections,” p.1.

<sup>25</sup> Krabill, s.v. “African Independent Churches.”

their culture and language, learning to appreciate their folkways and wisdom, recognizing that God communicates his love to each people through their own culture. We are not called to change other peoples' cultures but to serve them as they seek to respond faithfully to the gospel in the context of their culture.<sup>26</sup>

Importantly, at the center of these historical and theological predispositions lies christology. Christology is a central tenant of Mennonite missiology and needs to be elevated in this discussion of contextual missions. The words "incarnation" and "mission" are not used together coincidentally or lightly.<sup>27</sup> Calvin Shenk describes the nexus of these words as follows:

Our understanding of the person and work of Jesus Christ is foundational to all mission theology. Such understanding will determine what kind of gospel we announce as we witness to the kingdom. . . . A whole Christ offers comprehensive salvation. When persons respond to the saving lordship of Jesus Christ they experience personal transformation and personal relationships.<sup>28</sup>

It is because of the incarnation that Mennonites have sought to share a "whole Christ" and a "whole salvation" which is practical and relevant to people. It is because of the incarnation that Mennonite missions often include the dimension of social development. While this thesis only glosses over this dimension of Mennonite mission, it must be recognized as being part-in-parcel of Mennonite missiology and christology.<sup>29</sup>

It is because of the incarnation that Mennonite missions have sought to support local Christian initiatives instead of only planting Mennonite churches outside the West. Under the clever title, "A Declaration for Independents," MBM outlines their involvement with non-Mennonite churches, such as the AICs in West Africa.<sup>30</sup> Knit-

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<sup>26</sup> "Ministry Among African Independent Churches," Overseas Missions Committee, Mennonite Board of Missions, Elkhart, Indiana, January 30, 1999.

<sup>27</sup> This is not to suggest that other missiologists take the connection lightly. Cf. David J. Bosch, "The Structure of Mission: An Exposition of Matthew 28: 16-20," *Exploring Church Growth*, edited by Wilbert R. Shenk, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983), pp. 241ff.

<sup>28</sup> Calvin Shenk, "Essential Theme," p. 67.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. *Cloud of Witnesses: Facing the Powers*, produced by Jerry L. Holsopple, 49 min., Mennonite Media Productions, 1996, videocassette.

The AIDS epidemic in certain African countries has become a major concern for Mennonites working there. Cf. Bryan and Teresa Born, "AIDS Taking its Toll," *The Review of AICs* 7:2&3 (1996): 49; Stan Nussbaum, "AIDS - Battling as the Worst Case Scenario Comes True," *The Review of AICs* 9:2 (1998): 35; Stan Nussbaum, "Heart Cry for a Dying Nation," *The Review of AICs* 10:1 (1999): 9-11.

<sup>30</sup> "A Declaration for Independents," *Missions Now* (Summer, 1998): 3-7.

ting together an emphasis on discipleship and contextuality in the incarnation, MBM asserts that, "this 'declaration for independents' is a conscious strategy to create radical disciples and build communities of faith in the name of Jesus."<sup>31</sup>

In response to the above, one can observe the application of these historical and theological factors in a three-fold emphasis in ministry with AICs. Bible teaching is almost always the initial and most tangible point of contact with AICs. Few AICs leaders, if any, would say, "We have a poor understanding of Jesus Christ. Please tell us who Jesus is." Some leaders, however, have said, "We want to better understand what the Bible teaches." This opens up the door for teaching and learning on a variety of subjects, including christology. The second area of emphasis is leadership training, and this is often done in the context of Bible training, at least initially. The third area that MBM and AIMM have been actively involved in is relationship building and reconciliation. This occurs on many levels: between Mennonites and people attending AICs; between AICs and mission-founded churches; among different AICs (AICs can be just as suspicious of each other as they are of churches associated with Western missions); and within individual AIC churches and congregations.

## 2) Bible Teaching

For both MBM and AIMM, providing Bible training has consistently been the first point of contact with AICs and subsequent program focus.<sup>32</sup> While these agencies have sought to work with AICs in order to assist those freed by certain traditional powers to establish a "Christ-centered faith," and Bible training has been the key focus in doing this, there is a clear acknowledgment that Bible training cannot be done in a vacuum. "Walking the way of Jesus," as the Bible describes cannot be divorced from the daily activities of people's lives.<sup>33</sup> Can AICs be rooted in both African culture and

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Edwin and Irene Weaver, *The Uyo Story*, p. 56; Jim Bertsche, *CIM/AIMM*, pp. 474ff, 482ff. Bible training extends beyond MBM's and AIMM's work with AICs and Mennonite churches in Africa. They cooperate with other Interdenominational groups as well. Jean Isaac describes the formation and function of "Umtata Women's Theology Group" which has published 7 Bible study booklets for women in southern Africa. Cf. Jean Isaac, South Africa, to Andrew Brubacher Kaethler, St. Catharines, Ontario, April 1 and 21, 1999, transcripts of E-mail in the hand of Andrew Brubacher Kaethler, St. Catharines, Ontario. Cf. also Rodney Hollinger-Janzen, "A Biblical Teaching Program by the Interconfessional Protestant Council of Benin with Mennonite Cooperation," *Ministry of Partnership With African Independent Churches*, edited by David A. Shank, (Elkhart, Indiana, 1991), pp. 161-170.

<sup>33</sup> "Kuruman Consultation," p. 12.

the Bible at the same time? The answer must certainly be yes!<sup>34</sup> The question, however, is one of growth.

Using the religious itinerary that Shank outlined, the question becomes: How do Mennonite missions encourage the growth of AIC members as they move “from the faith of African traditional religion(s) to that of the New Testament?” How do Mennonites encourage “new apprehensions” and “new appreciations” of the ministry and teaching of the Word? How do Mennonite missions encourage new apprehensions and appreciations of Christ, as presented in Word in the Scriptures, but living incarnate in the lives of churches and individuals?<sup>35</sup> How do Mennonite missions encourage members of AICs to encounter Jesus Christ in the context of the African worldview so that Jesus’ life and ministry, as recorded in the Bible, offer guidance to living with and understanding such power encounters?<sup>36</sup>

#### *a) Goals and Methods of Bible Teaching*

Given the religious itinerary and the limitations of illiteracy, the goal and challenge is to assist people in progressing to the next step.<sup>37</sup> The methods that are used in Bible teaching have a profound impact on the ability of AIC members to learn. Jonathan Larson recalls early Bible teaching visits with AIC leaders:

The minute I opened my briefcase and took out my papers for our studies, it was like they were transformed into helpless children. . . . I just wished all those . . . bubbly things that were going on in their lives . . . could be brought into the context of the Scriptures. But it never did because something about . . . the study or work together that was based on reading and writing was so alien to them, it’s like their lives got shut down . . . and they didn’t have anything to say.

It was not until Larson realized that, “If I was to be any use to them, I’d need to go to the village and leave my papers behind.” When he pursued “Bible connection” rather

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<sup>34</sup> Loewen, “Felt Needs in Africa,” 405.

<sup>35</sup> Shank, “African Christian Religious Itinerary,” pp. 160-162.

<sup>36</sup> Kraft, “Allegiance, Truth and Power Encounters,” pp. 220ff.

<sup>37</sup> Krabill, April 6, 1999.

than “Bible study” most of the AIC participants felt more secure and “amazing things happened then.”<sup>38</sup>

It is important to know and understand the needs of the communities in which MBM and AIMM seek to increase Biblical literacy. The involvement of Mennonites in local community activities acts as a catalyst for growth and increased Biblical understanding, establishing a sense of trust and mutual caring. Eugene Thieszen, working with the Spiritual Healing Church and other AICs in Botswana, explains that as a Bible teacher he is called not only to lead Bible seminars, evening classes, and to attend Sunday morning worship services in various AIC churches, but also to teach AIDS/HIV seminars, attend funerals, pray for the sick and for the deliverance of individuals from sorcery and witchcraft.<sup>39</sup>

David Shank, working with the Harrists, employed the method of teaching the Harrists what their own leader, the Prophet Harris, believed about Jesus Christ and about the Bible. Shank’s article, “*Bref résumé de la pensée du prophète William Wade HARRIS*” was originally published in a journal, but has been reprinted for members of the Harrist church.<sup>40</sup>

Jim Egli reports that the Theological Training by Extension program (TEE), which had worked well in other parts of Africa, had not been working well among the AICs in Lesotho, such as the Church of Moshoeshoe. A major shift in Bible teaching methods was sought, and the weekend conferences were found to be much more effective. Here, the leaders wanted materials and handouts that could be used later.<sup>41</sup> In short, Mennonite missionaries have found that flexibility is an important aspect of sharing the Bible. The methods that work in the predominantly literate urban churches will not necessarily work in the predominantly illiterate, rural churches.

#### *b) Bridging Biblical and Contextual Topics*

The Mennonite work with AICs is a practical implementation of what is some-

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<sup>38</sup> Larson, March 6, 1999.

<sup>39</sup> Eugene Thieszen, “What Does an AIMM Bible Teacher Do?” *AIC Review* 8:3 (1997): 8.

<sup>40</sup> Shank, October 1, 1998; Shank, “Bref résumé,” 35-54; Maust, 489-491.

<sup>41</sup> Egli, “Consultation,” pp. 2-8.

times called “contextualization” or “inculturation.” The topics that are pursued in the Bible studies are always intended to be relevant to the cultural and social contexts of the AICs and are intentionally developed with extensive involvement from local participants. Stan Nussbaum helped develop a Bible Survey course called “Yahweh’s Tribe”, which outlines 156 lessons covering Biblical texts from Genesis to Revelations. Nussbaum draws on Basotho customs and history to relate Biblical stories and teachings to everyday life in Lesotho. For example, he explains the birth and lineage of Jesus (Luke 1&2; Matthew 1&2) as follows: “Just as the King of the Basotho must be from the Bakoena clan, so the King who Yahweh’s tribe was waiting for had to be from the clan of Judah . . . and specifically from the family of David.”<sup>42</sup> In making a strong connection between Jesus Christ and the “tribes,”<sup>43</sup> Nussbaum then proceeds to help AIC members discern Jesus’ teaching on the law,<sup>44</sup> or on missions and relations with groups “outside” their ethnic and denominational folds.<sup>45</sup>

Another example of how AIMM has approached Bible training is found with the Umtata Women’s Theology Group and Umtata Women’s Bible Studies. This interdenominational women’s group in South Africa seeks to provide Biblical training for all churches who are sensitive to local culture and social dynamics.<sup>46</sup> One of the Bible studies which is christologically relevant is entitled, “The Other Disciples of Jesus: Women in the New Testament.” Using passages from the Gospels, the study focuses on “those women who travelled with Jesus and supported him in his ministry, women who were present with him on the way to and at the cross, and women who were present at the tomb for his burial and after his resurrection.”<sup>47</sup> The study provides a practical, historical link between the role of women in African churches today and the women who were “disciples” of Christ. It initiates discussion about symbols (*e.g.* water)

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<sup>42</sup> Nussbaum, “Bible Survey Course.”

<sup>43</sup> Nussbaum uses “tribes” reservedly. “It may be objected that the word ‘tribe’ is exclusive and derogatory, but the whole story of Yahweh’s tribe shows that it was never intended to be exclusive.” It further corrects a misnomer about the “Twelve Tribes of Israel;” “There was one ‘tribe’ of Israel which consisted of twelve ‘clans.’” *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, “Lesson 105: The Law-Giver Breaks Free From the Law of Moses (Matthew 9:9-26).”

<sup>45</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, “Lesson 118: New Wisdom Concerning the Mission of Yahweh’s Tribe (Luke 15:1-32),” and “Lesson 132: The Apostles Suspend the Old Sign of Tribal Membership (Acts 15).”

<sup>46</sup> Isaac, April 1 and 21, 1999.

<sup>47</sup> “The Other Disciples of Jesus: Women in the New Testament,” Umtata Women’s Theology Bible Study Booklet No. 3, (Umtata, South Africa: Umtata Women’s Theology Group, 1992), p. 2.

or elements of faith and life (*e.g.* worship) which are prevalent in both Biblical and Southern African contexts.<sup>48</sup>

An example of MBM's approach to Bible training is spelled out by Rodney Hollinger-Janzen in reference to an annual Bible Seminar held in Benin. Here, MBM cooperated with the Interconfessional Protestant Council of Benin (IPCB) to provide Bible training for a wide variety of churches, including AICs. MBM was involved primarily in the teaching.

MBM's role, in the person of David Shank, was to provide the teaching. The IPCB made it clear that such outside intervention was necessary because, in spite of the openness to the biblical message of Christian unity shown by the establishment of the IPCB, mutual confidence was not yet at a level which would allow such teaching to be done by members of already-existing church communities. . . . It also offered a generally "conservative" biblical theology which is attractive to both evangelical and some AIC groups in the IPCB, along with an emphasis on holistic salvation/social gospel which is part of many AICs as well as attractive to the mainline Methodist church.<sup>49</sup>

MBM was then invited to provide direct input in formulating the following topics: "The Priesthood of the Baptized Believer," "The Mission of the Church," and "The Sermon on the Mount and the Kingdom of Heaven."<sup>50</sup> What this opportunity demonstrates is that Mennonite missions have been afforded unique opportunities to provide biblical training because of a perception that they are politically and denominationally neutral and could thus offer biblical training that was respected and relevant in the social and cultural context of Benin. The topics MBM was invited to help develop indicate a desire on both the part of MBM and the IPCB to be more rooted in the parts of the Bible that are relevant to the life and teaching of Jesus Christ.

Taking contextualization seriously, MBM and AIMM recognize that the Biblical texts chosen to be studied by the AICs would not necessarily be chosen by Western churches. For example, from the New Testament the Epistle of James is very popular among AICs, as are Hebrews and the Gospel of Luke. James and Hebrews are used

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 17f.

<sup>49</sup> Hollinger-Janzen, "A Biblical Teaching Program," p. 161.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 161-163.

because they emphasize laws and orderly conduct within the church, while Luke is a favourite of the Gospels because of the way it treats foreigners. Other favourite books include: Nehemiah, Amos, Genesis, Exodus, Psalms, Proverbs, Acts, Colossians, and I and II Corinthians.<sup>51</sup>

While the goal of Bible training is certainly to assist AIC members to develop a "Christ-centered faith,"<sup>52</sup> it has been noted that most AICs seek Biblical teaching not just on christology, but on pneumatology and soteriology as well. Mennonites involved in Bible teaching try to stress the comprehensive nature of God's saving work throughout the Bible, culminating in Christ, but extending to the lives and issues of Africans today.<sup>53</sup> The AIDS crisis, for example, is now consistently being addressed through Biblical teachings, especially regarding human sexuality and marriage.<sup>54</sup> Reflecting on one Bible conference, AIMM workers in Botswana report: "First, we give thanks for the way God has brought together people in Selebi Phikwe who have a burden to reach the lost and dying. . . . The 40 pastors who attended heard solid biblical teaching and learned the facts of AIDS/HIV."<sup>55</sup> Other longstanding issues that relate to AIC christology, such as the role of ancestors *versus* the role of Christ, continue to be discussed in the context of the Bible as well.<sup>56</sup>

### 3) Leadership Training

Bible teaching and leadership training are inextricably bound together. Since AICs tend to be "prophet driven" or "leadership driven", it makes sense that one way to increase Biblical literacy in AICs is to "upgrade the prophets in their knowledge of the Word of God."<sup>57</sup> While AIMM and MBM have struggled at times whether they should

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<sup>51</sup> Stan Nussbaum, "African Bible Guides: Preliminary Findings of an Experiment with African Christianity in Microcosm," Christianity in Africa in the 1990s, edited by Christopher Fyfe and Andrew Walls, (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh, 1996), pp. 129.

<sup>52</sup> "Shanks Report New Opportunities," 362.

<sup>53</sup> Bryan Born, Hennie Pretorius, and Hans-Jurgen Becken, "Discussion Focus: AIC 'Doctrine' of the Holy Spirit," Review of AICs 7:1 (1996): 2-5; "Bible Teaching Emphasis (Four Reports)," Review of AICs 8:1 (1997): 6-8.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. God, Our Loving Parent: Bible Study on AIDS, Umtata Women's Theology Bible Study Booklet No. 5, (Umtata, South Africa: Umtata Women's Theology Group, 1992); Bryan and Teresa Born, "AIDS Taking its Toll," 48-50.

<sup>55</sup> Teresa and Bryan Born, "Christians Come to Grips With the AIDS Crisis," Review of AICs 8:1 (1997): 8f.

<sup>56</sup> D. M. Hostetter, "Disarming the Emadloti: The Ancestors," Empirical Studies of African Independent/Indigenous Churches, edited by G.C. Oosthuizen and Irving Hexham, (Queenston, Ontario: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), pp. 111-127.

<sup>57</sup> Loewen, "Felt Needs in Africa," 423.



relate primarily with leaders or with the congregation as a whole,<sup>58</sup> leadership training is certainly considered an area of need.<sup>59</sup> The philosophical and theological approach of MBM and AIMM has been to encourage discipleship and discourage co-dependency, both within AICs and between AICs and outside groups.<sup>60</sup>

As mentioned in previous chapters, for cultural reasons and due to an emphasis on pneumatology, not all leaders feel that they need Biblical training. The experience of AIMM in Lesotho was that the lay people responded more enthusiastically to Bible training programs than leaders. The leaders were hesitant to have their knowledge and authority questioned.<sup>61</sup> Since most AICs rely to varying degrees on traditional sources of religious authority the Bible is not the sole source of religious guidance. Further, access to Biblical knowledge comes not only through personal knowledge, but also through the direct leading of the Spirit.

How have MBM and AIMM responded to this tendency to place the authority of the Bible within the context of traditional sources of authority? How have they sought to nurture AICs in learning about Christ when the Bible is not necessarily recognized as a primary source for understanding the life and ministry of Christ? AIMM and MBM have dedicated much time and energy assisting AICs to establish Bible training centers. Here, those AIC leaders who desire to grow in their understanding of the Scriptures and the relevance of the Bible in the life of their churches can do so. Through these centers, Mennonite missions have thus been also able to nurture these leaders toward a Biblically informed understanding of Jesus Christ.

AICs have discovered that when they send their younger people to Bible schools run by non-AICs, these students rarely return to serve in their churches.<sup>62</sup> Mission-run institutions tend to derogate the AICs, and further isolate AIC students from their own churches by not connecting Bible and leadership training closely enough with African

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<sup>58</sup> Cf. Egli, "Consultation," pp. 9-12.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>60</sup> MBM's involvement in setting up the Good News Training Institute in Ghana for AICs exemplifies these goals. Cf. Thomas Asante Oduro, "The History and Pedagogy of the Good News Training Institute (Accra)," Ministry of Partnership With African Independent Churches, edited by David A. Shank, (Elkhart, Indiana, 1991), pp. 132-160; Edwin Weaver, From Kuku Hill, (Elkhart: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1975). Cf. also, "A Declaration for Independents," 3-7.

<sup>61</sup> One example of this is the "Feed My Sheep" Bible Program that John and Tina Bohn were involved with. John and Tina Bohn.

<sup>62</sup> Isaac Dlamini, "Faith Bible School for Independent Churches in Swaziland," Ministry of Partnership With African Independent Churches, edited by David A. Shank, (Elkhart, Indiana, 1991), pp. 129-131.

culture.<sup>63</sup> Establishing AIC-run Bible schools lessens this risk, but there remains a distrust of education because of these experiences. However, these cultural and theological obstacles are slowly being overcome. The recent establishment of the Boikanyo Bible school for the Spiritual Healing Church leaders in Botswana stands as a sign of hope that interest in Biblical literacy and training leaders is on the increase.<sup>64</sup>

The negative experiences surrounding the training of AIC leaders indicates that there is a lack of understanding about AICs. MBM and AIMM have consciously tried to understand the specific leadership needs of the AICs they relate with. One way understanding has been developed is to recognize that flexibility is essential. Programs that are effective in some areas are not useful in others. Theological Education by Extension (TEE), conferences, informal meetings, book ministries, weekly Bible studies are all options, but not all good options in a given situation.<sup>65</sup> For example, rural leaders in Botswana are intimidated by papers and briefcases, and do not place value in receiving certificates. Urban leaders, however expect these things.<sup>66</sup> Understanding is also necessary in recognizing and appreciating the pressures and tests that AIC leaders face.<sup>67</sup> These leaders need to be encouraged to faithfully face the challenges that arise in their specific local contexts which often involve a combination of political and spiritual dynamics.

There is also at times a lack of self-understanding within the AICs. While AICs clearly want to be defined as "African" churches, employing specific cultural components, one senses at times that their overall identity is in limbo. AIC leaders are at different places on their religious itinerary. Leaders closer to a New Testament faith will need a different emphasis in training than those closer to traditional religions.<sup>68</sup> One way that MBM has responded to the question of leadership and self-identity was in the article that David Shank published on the prophet Harris, "*Bref résumé de la pensée*

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<sup>63</sup> Nussbaum, "African Bible Guides: Preliminary Findings," pp. 128f.

<sup>64</sup> Tim Bertsche, "Senior AIC Leader," 3.

<sup>65</sup> James Egli, "Different Strands of One Rope: Using Various Methods of Theological Instruction," *Mission Focus* 13:1 (1985): 6-9. Cf also Egli, "Consultation," p. 8.

<sup>66</sup> Larson, March 6, 1999.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. Entz, "Challenges to Abou's Jesus," 46-50.

<sup>68</sup> For example, cf. Levi Keidel, "Diviner," 8-12.

*du prophète William Wade HARRIS.*"<sup>69</sup> The thousands of off-prints from this article have assisted Harrists to better learn about themselves and their founder, and provide them with some basic principles for living as a church in the current Ivorian settings.

Finally, there have been some very practical ways that Mennonite missions have sought to develop leadership in AICs. In Lesotho, for example, AIMM workers assisted AIC leaders to get the proper training so that they could legally perform marriages. It is important for AIC leaders to be recognized as legitimate leaders in the eyes of the government and society as a whole.<sup>70</sup>

#### 4) Relationship Building and Reconciliation

In addition to Bible teaching and leadership training, a third major focus of MBM and AIMM's involvement with AICs is in the area of relationship building and reconciliation. While the goal of MBM and AIMM is to encourage Christ-centered and Biblically informed faith within these churches and Bible teaching most often represents the first formal role of Mennonite missions in these churches, developing relationships is seen to be a necessary informal but foundational step. A statement by MBM on ministry with AICs lists the following as the first point in outlining a basis for dialogue:

*The Gospel of Jesus Christ as the focal point for ministry.* In Jesus Christ we receive the full revelation of God as loving Creator and Redeemer. We experience the power of the gospel as that which reconciles us to God and to one another, healing us and restoring wholeness (Ephesians 2, 3). We are called to share this gospel with all peoples by testifying to that which we have seen, heard, touched and experienced (I John 1).<sup>71</sup>

The christological basis for establishing relationships is clearly set out here. Relationships take priority over efficiency and programs.<sup>72</sup> Great work is involved in developing mutual trust, but when it is achieved, it is a wonderful expression of faith in Christ.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Shank, Interview given to the author on the Harrist church of West Africa, at his residence in Sturgis, Michigan, on October 1, 1998; Shank, "Bref résumé," 35-54; Maust, 489-491.

<sup>70</sup> John and Tina Bohn.

<sup>71</sup> "Ministry Among African Independent Churches."

<sup>72</sup> Tim Bertsche, "Discussion Focus," 3.

<sup>73</sup> Larson, "Tenth Anniversary Reflections," p. 4.

Achieving positive, enduring relationships between Mennonite missions workers and AIC leaders and members involves great commitment and effort in communication, where both language and cultural differences can easily prompt misunderstandings and frustration.<sup>74</sup> In reflecting on the relationship between Western churches and AICs, one AIC pastor comments: "Relationship is the key word in any venture men undertake, . . . People must know the fears, worries, concerns, needs, goals and objectives of each and be seen building the life of each other."<sup>75</sup> MBM and AIMM workers struggle at times in balancing relationships with raising theological issues and challenges. Knowing how to respond to issues around the practice of sacrifice,<sup>76</sup> polygamy, or around the roles of ancestors in AICs<sup>77</sup> involves more than just a christological challenge on a theological level. It involves a challenge of relationships, which of course has its own christological dimension: how does one respond faithfully in Christ to situations and practices which one finds contrary to faith in Christ? When strong relationships have been formed between Mennonite mission workers and AIC leaders and members, and this has occurred in numerous settings,<sup>78</sup> mutual encouragement and challenges can strengthen faith in Christ on both sides.

Promoting Christian unity within AICs is not an easy task. AICs are naturally suspicious of Western organizations and of each other.<sup>79</sup> AICs tend to function in a somewhat isolated fashion as the splits that lead to the formation of new groups, often over leadership issues, leave wounds that are slow to heal.<sup>80</sup> Although most AICs desire to be recognized by others as *bona fide* churches, they do not readily express a desire to be reconciled with each other.<sup>81</sup> Attempts to form national bodies do not often result in effective organizations. The primary exception would be the Organization for African

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<sup>74</sup> For an example of both intentional and unintentional results of communication barriers within the early Harrist context, cf. Shank, "The Problem of Christian Cross-Cultural Communication," 211-231.

<sup>75</sup> Kudzerema, p. 19.

<sup>76</sup> Stan Nussbaum, "What Do I Do Now?" 7-9.

<sup>77</sup> Hostetter, "Disarming the Emadloti," pp. 111-127.

<sup>78</sup> "Kuruman Consultation," p. 13.

<sup>79</sup> "Shanks Report New Opportunities," 362.

<sup>80</sup> Doctrinal issues play only a small role in such splits, although "what the Bible teaches" versus "heathen practices" employed by leaders can be used to justify a split. Cf. Pretorius, "How AICs Multiply," 10f.

<sup>81</sup> Katy Penner, "Principles Relating to the Africa Independent Churches and Serving Them," Mennonite Brethern Board of Missions and Services, January, 1977, p. 23.

Independent Churches (OAIC) which was formed in 1978 and is concerned mostly with educating leaders.<sup>82</sup> Nor is it an easy task with mission-founded churches and Western organizations, who generally hesitate to associate with these “renegade,” “backwards,” or “syncretistic” groups. Despite a strong desire to be recognized by outside groups as authentic churches,<sup>83</sup> AICs are seldom recognized by the mainstream churches’ councils.<sup>84</sup> Only in December of 1998 was the OAIC accepted into the WCC.<sup>85</sup>

AIMM and MBM have responded by promoting conferences and inter-church dialogue on both local and international levels. Four continental conferences have been sponsored by Mennonite missions agencies, including the Conference on Ministry of Missions to African Independent Churches in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, 1986;<sup>86</sup> the Conference on Ministry in Partnership with African Independent Churches, Kinshasa, Zaire, 1989;<sup>87</sup> the Conference on Ministry in Partnership with African Independent Churches, Johannesburg, South Africa, 1993;<sup>88</sup> and the Conference on AICs and Missions, Nairobi, 1998.<sup>89</sup> On local levels, Mennonite missions have organized ecumenical workshops and conferences, designed not only to address practical issues facing local churches, but to bring together leaders from both AICs and mainline churches. Although some mainline church leaders refuse to attend such meetings, and some attend only to offer input, when mainline leaders and AIC leaders do meaningfully interact,

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<sup>82</sup> Baur, 2000 Years of Christianity in Africa, p. 352.

<sup>83</sup> Loewen, “Felt Needs in Africa,” 421.

<sup>84</sup> John Baur reports that by 1985, only seven of tens of thousands of AICs in Africa had been admitted into the WCC, 15 to the AACC, and a small number to the national councils. Baur, 2000 Years of Christianity in Africa, p. 352.

<sup>85</sup> Cf. Stan Nussbaum, “High Visibility for AICs in International Media,” Review of AICs 10:1 (1999): 4f; Jerry Van Marter, “50 Million Members and Growing Fast - African Instituted Churches,” Harare, December 10, 1998, WCC Press Release, <http://www.eni.ch/assembly/0573>.

<sup>86</sup> Cf. Ministry of Missions to African Independent Churches, Papers Presented at the Conference on Ministry to the African Independent Churches, July, 1986, Abidjan, Cote d’Ivoire, edited by David A. Shank, (Elkhart, Indiana: Mennonite Board of Missions, 1987).

<sup>87</sup> Cf. Ministry in Partnership with African Independent Churches, Papers Presented at the Conference on Ministry in Partnership with African Independent Churches, July, 1989, Kinshasa, Zaire, edited by David A. Shank, (Elkhart, Indiana: Mennonite Board of Missions, 1991).

<sup>88</sup> Cf. Freedom and Independence, Papers Presented at the Conference on Ministry in Partnership with African Independent Churches, April 1993 - Johannesburg, South Africa, edited by Stan Nussbaum (Nairobi, Kenya: Organization of African Instituted Churches, 1994).

<sup>89</sup> The collection of papers from this conference has not yet been released. Cf. “Special Report: 4th Continental Conference on AICs and Missions Nairobi, 22-26 August 1998,” Review of AICs 9:3 (1998): 43-46.

there are benefits for both.<sup>90</sup> Here, reconciliation and relationship lead to mutual respect and understanding.

### 5) Challenges to AICs in the Future

Based on all the above, there are a number of challenges that present themselves to AICs in terms of their belief in and understanding of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. Although the challenges to AIC christology are many, listed below are six challenges, three that relate directly to AIC christology, and three that relate indirectly.

First, AICs need to carefully consider what it means to believe in and call upon the power of Jesus Christ. It has been established that the power encounter between Jesus Christ and the spiritual powers that negatively influence people is articulated as being extremely significant in the life of AIC members and their faith in Jesus. The significance of power encounter is comprehensible in the pneumatological aetiology which defines the worldview still relevant for the vast majority of AIC participants. In this worldview, pneumatological christologies make the most sense, as has been observed above.

Charles Kraft asks the question: "Is it possible to change our worldview perspectives and really believe in God's Power?"<sup>91</sup> He suggests it is "Jesus' perspectives or paradigms," "Kingdom perspectives or paradigms," and "biblical assumptions" that all Christians should strive for.<sup>92</sup> Perhaps it is not so much an issue of worldviews, but of norms and standards. A more relevant question for AICs would be: "Is it possible to change our understanding of how God in Jesus Christ functions within this worldview?" The question as Oosterwal asks is, "Can it be said of AICs that Jesus Christ is the 'creative center,' that there is no other norm than the Person, the life, the mission of Jesus Christ?"<sup>93</sup> It is arguable that in the worldview of African Christians, nothing is impossible for God to accomplish. Yet, it is not always clear how Christ fits into God's accomplishments. This is a solid starting point, nonetheless. "The Christian apologist or theologian in Africa may see a theological peg here to hang the hat of the Christian

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<sup>90</sup> John and Tina Bohn.

<sup>91</sup> Kraft, Christianity with Power, p. 92.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 104, 107ff.

<sup>93</sup> Oosterwal, Modern Messianic Movements, p. 30.

faith in order to make Christ more real and less strange to the African convert.”<sup>94</sup>

The fullness of the power of Christ needs to be further emphasized in the context of the entirety of the life and ministry of Christ. The death of Christ needs to be more seriously visited, because in the larger context, the power of Christ that was displayed in the resurrection could not have happened without the entire life and ministry of Christ that led to the cross. To reduce Christ to power display, either in the resurrection or in Christ’s ability to deal with the spiritual forces that harm Africans, is to deny Christ the ability to transform lives and to provide AIC members with the confidence that Christ is not just one of many powers, but that all powers are under Christ’s power and that God is ultimately sovereign.<sup>95</sup> “For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities. . . in him all things hold together.” (Colossians 1:16, 17, NIV)

Second, then, what the challenge of power encounter points to is the larger question of christological growth. Power encounter, expressed most often in Christ’s ability to deliver people from evil powers that prevent health and wholeness, is certainly an essential and important point of entry for Africans into the AICs and the Christian faith. However, it should not be the final destination as well. Asking the question, “Who is Christ?” (Matthew 16:14) should be asked and reasked to continually encourage growth in understanding Christ’s relationship with Africans. If the tendency is to view Christ primarily as a healer, then AICs should not be satisfied with simply maintaining existing christologies.<sup>96</sup> Progressing along the religious itinerary is not a matter of adopting traditional African conceptions any more than adopting foreign ones, but of sequestering Biblical ones to the African context. In relation to understanding Christ, whether traditional practices act as *preparatio evangelica*, *vehiculum evangelicum* or *impedimentum evangelicum*,<sup>97</sup> is not as important as if there is growth in authentic Christian faith and life.

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<sup>94</sup> Yusufu Ameh Obaje, “Theocentric Christology,” *Exploring Afro-Christology*, edited by John Samuel Pobee, (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1992), p. 50.

<sup>95</sup> Brant, pp. 14-17.

<sup>96</sup> Obaje, “Theocentric Christology,” p. 45.

<sup>97</sup> Oosterwal, *Modern Messianic Movements*, p. 47.

A prominent area where christological growth needs to occur with understanding the incarnation. Justin Ukpong suggests "Immanuel Christology," based on Matthew 25:31-46, has the potential to help Africans better understand Christ in their context. Christ can be not only the One who provides healing, salvation and blessing, but also the One who walks with them through the trials of life.<sup>98</sup> Christ does not only periodically deliver humans out of a crisis situation, but transform humans as well. Thus, the simultaneous "indigenizing" and "pilgrim" principles need to be emphasized more prominently.<sup>99</sup> Christ is indigenized to walk alongside Africans on their pilgrim journeys.

A third challenge to AICs is to continue developing Biblical christologies that are relevant and comprehensible in the various African contexts in which AICs operate. A pertinent question to ask of all churches, whether AICs or Western churches, is how Scriptures are used. Ideally, the Bible should be approached as a whole work, studied in its entirety.<sup>100</sup> Although many who accuse AICs of focusing on certain "peripheral" Biblical texts could also be accused of the same thing, the question is a valid one nonetheless. AICs need to be free to select texts to study which are relevant to their contexts, even if their selections sound strange to the Westerner,<sup>101</sup> but challenged to select texts from the entire Bible.

Stan Nussbaum submits that AICs need a "new idea of the Bible," one which challenges them to see the Bible as more than just a haphazard collection of God's instructions. Nussbaum proposes that the Bible should be seen more as a narrative, focusing on the theme, the "People of God." In introducing this theme, Abraham becomes a key figure, and Genesis 12:1-3 a key text. This would allow a new and relevant way for Africans to understand Jesus Christ:

If the Bible is the narrative about the people of God, then the first question one should ask about Christ is not "How does he relate to me?" but rather "Where does He fit in the flow of the story?" We try to place

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<sup>98</sup> Justin S. Ukpong, "The Immanuel Christology of Matthew 25:31-46 in African Context," *Exploring Afro-Christology*, edited by John Samuel Pobee, (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1992), pp. 55-64.

<sup>99</sup> Cf. Walls, "Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator," 98ff; Kalling, "Inside, Outside, Upside Down," 52-56.

<sup>100</sup> Oosterwal, *Modern Messianic Movements*, p. 45ff.

<sup>101</sup> Nussbaum, "African Bible Guides: Preliminary Findings," pp. 129ff.



Christ in the biblical perspective before placing Him in systematic theological perspective.<sup>102</sup>

Christ then takes on two important roles for Africans: he came in a “once-in-a-lifetime moment” into the history of the People of God to “alter it forever,” and he came as the “bridegroom for whose return the People of God eagerly waits and prepares.”<sup>103</sup> Nussbaum’s “new idea” places Christ into the center of the Biblical story, and directly ties AICs in with the story of God’s people and the life and ministry of Christ.

The fourth challenge, stemming directly from the need to promote Biblical christology, is the challenge of illiteracy. People who cannot read well will understandably have a harder time accessing the Bible for themselves. Education budgets are being widely cut in Africa. Simultaneously, the impact of AIDs is being felt as it consumes not only financial resources and social energy generally, but is also taking a heavy toll on the number of teachers. It is likely that the number of illiterate Africans will increase rather than decrease in the foreseeable future.<sup>104</sup>

However, the challenge of illiteracy provides opportunities for doing theology within AICs which do not automatically present themselves to literate churches. John Mbiti’s suggestion that more emphasis needs to be placed on recording oral theology may find practical applications in AICs.<sup>105</sup> Intentional collaboration between those who can read and write and those who cannot will allow a broader hermeneutic base. It is not surprising that those who are most literate tend to also be those who are least in touch with oral society and oral traditions,<sup>106</sup> so this process must be intentional to be mutually beneficial.

The connection between literacy and historical perspective has already been suggested. A fifth challenge, then, arises in suggesting that AICs need to develop some sort of historical understanding in order that the life and ministry of Christ is not mythologized and that the Biblical hermeneutics are elevated from a “flat” format. Again,

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<sup>102</sup> Nussbaum, “A Biblical Narrative Approach,” p. 184.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 184.

<sup>104</sup> Nussbaum, “African Bible Guides: Preliminary Findings,” pp. 132ff.

<sup>105</sup> John Mbiti, “Cattle Are Born with Ears, Their Horns Grow Later - Towards and Appreciation of African Oral Theology,” *All African Lutheran Consultation on Christian Theology in the African Context*, edited by Alison Bares (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 1979), quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 132.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 132ff.

the narrative approach that Nussbaum offers has potential as a “pedagogical tool for non-historical thinkers.” Seen as an unfolding story of the People of God, it becomes significant for AIC members that Abraham and the prophets came before Jesus, that Jesus’ ministry preceded that of Paul, and that John the Baptist could not have written the Gospel of John.<sup>107</sup> Developing historical perspective will also assist AICs in becoming more forward looking, so that instead of simply coping with situations and being “problem oriented,” they can turn some attention to being future oriented and toward positive developments within the churches.<sup>108</sup> Addressing the issue of historical perspective will undoubtedly involve the contribution of teachers from outside AICs, which brings challenges and opportunities of its own.

A sixth challenge concerns divisiveness within AICs. Divisiveness is rooted in racism, tribalism, nationalism, ageism, and sexism. It pits one group against another. Whether the division is between one AIC and another, between AICs and mission-founded churches, between men and women or between young and old, it compromises unity in the Body of Christ and can prevent AICs from meaningfully dealing with the many pertinent issues that members of their church face in their daily lives.

Picking up specifically on the division between AICs and mission-founded churches, it is apparent that cultural imperialism continues in unsubtle ways. This is evidenced recently by the rejection of an AIC from the WCC over the issue of polygamous clergy.<sup>109</sup> To put the decision in perspective, “imagine the furor that would have erupted from some Western churches in the Assembly if the Committee had postponed a membership application from a church because it allowed its clergy to be homosexual!”<sup>110</sup> While AICs face challenges in bridging gaps among themselves, it appears that they also face continuing challenges in bridging gaps with Western churches. Transcending tribal barriers is not something that just AICs need to concern themselves with. It is no wonder that some AICs are hesitant to better understand a Jesus associ-

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<sup>107</sup> Nussbaum, “A Biblical Narrative Approach,” pp. 181ff.

<sup>108</sup> Nussbaum, “African Bible Guides: Preliminary Findings,” pp. 134ff.

<sup>109</sup> Stephen Brown, “WCC Delays Decision on Membership for Church with Polygamous Clergy,” Eighth Assembly of the World Council of Churches, 3-14 December, 1998, Harare, Zimbabwe, Ecumenical News International (ENI) Release, <http://www.eni.ch/assembly/0553.html>.

<sup>110</sup> Stan Nussbaum, “Clearest Evidence of Cultural Imperialism in the WCC,” *Review of AICs* 10:1 (1999): 8f. Nussbaum continues: “It does not take a rocket scientist to see what the real issue is. Churches in a pluralistic, homosexual-tolerant, polygamy-intolerant culture are muddling that culture with Christianity, exporting it and expecting people in any culture to agree with it - exactly what many 19th century missionaries did with their culture in their day.”

ated with the Western churches when they do not understand the seemingly hypocritical actions of Western churches.

## 6) Challenges to Mennonites Missions and Western Churches

Challenges to MBM, AIMM and other Mennonite missions agencies are also numerous. Although these challenges pertain primarily to groups that relate directly with AICs, they do also pertain to the larger Western Mennonite church, the "sending church, and perhaps to all Western churches in general. Below are six areas in which AICs can challenge Mennonites to further growth.

First, Western Mennonites need to hear that they *can learn* from non-Western groups such as the AICs.<sup>111</sup> According to missiologists David Bosch,<sup>112</sup> Wilbert Shenk<sup>113</sup> and David Shank<sup>114</sup> there are shifting paradigms in the way Western missions relate with non-Western cultures. However, cultural insensitivity still persists in the "modern missionary enterprise."<sup>115</sup> Western Mennonites can learn more about listening to non-Western groups. It is only when we stop giving advice and start to simply listen that we realize that Western categories and debates are of little interest to AICs.<sup>116</sup> Further, it is then that we realize that the AICs have something to offer in the larger arena of theological discussion,<sup>117</sup> and that learning can go both ways.<sup>118</sup> Taking the time to listen to each other is essentially about building relationships. According to AICs, such relationships are an end in themselves.<sup>119</sup> Most often, however, it is only when relation-

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<sup>111</sup> David A. Shank, "What African Indigenous Churches Can Teach Western Churches," Mission Focus 3:1 (1985): 8.

<sup>112</sup> Cf. David Bosch, Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission, (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1991), pp. 181ff, 349ff.

<sup>113</sup> Cf. Wilbert Shenk, "Mission Agency and African Independent Churches," International Review of Mission 63 (1974): 475-491; Shank, "Kingdom, Mission and Growth," pp. 207-217.

<sup>114</sup> Cf. Shank, "Mission Relations," 24-44.

<sup>115</sup> Jesse Mugambi observes this happening in five areas of Western missionary assumptions: the unsuitability of African heritage, cultural superiority of sending churches and agencies, the notion that "novelty" is "good news," the hermeneutic authority of missionaries, and a persisting "need" for missionaries, leading to paternalism and condescension of missionaries. Cf. J. N. K. Mugambi, "A Fresh Look at Evangelism in Africa," International Review of Missions 87 (1998): 343-347.

<sup>116</sup> Nussbaum, "New Religious Movements," p. 9.

<sup>117</sup> Daneel, "Towards a Theologia Africana?" 64-89; J. Stanley Friesen, "The Significance of Indigenous Movements," pp. 79-106; Wilbert Shenk, "The Contribution of the Study of New Religious Movements to Missiology," Exploring New Religious Movements, edited by A. F. Walls and Shenk, W. R., (Elkhart, Indiana: Mission Focus, 1990), pp. 194-199; Turner, "Studies on Religion in Africa," pp. 169-178.

<sup>118</sup> Thieszen, "Ordained to Healing Ministry," 35f.; Don Rempel Boschman, "Learning to Pray from AICs," Review of AICs 7:2&3 (1996): 42f.; John and Tina Bohn.

<sup>119</sup> Nussbaum, "New Religious Movements," p. 12.

ships are established, when postures of listening and trust have been made clear, that true, mutual learning begins to happen. Following the model of listening and relationship building is not only a matter of following the model of Christ, who placed great emphasis on listening and building relationships as part of His life and ministry, it is also a matter learning about christology from AICs.

A second is in the area of pneumatology and power. Western Mennonites need to be reminded of the tension between the power of Christ and the powers of this world and need to be asked which powers they rely on. The source of power affects the manner in which Western Mennonites relate with Non-Western Christians. David Shank writes,

The very existence of AICs is a constant reminder that mission and domination, so tied together in Western Christianity and experienced by Africans as a "failure in love," are a horrible distortion of biblical mission tied with servanthood as it is in the christological perspective.<sup>120</sup>

We are in danger of falsely placing power in nationalism and cultural imperialism, instead of placing ultimate power in Christ. While Mennonites question the locus of the spiritual powers that AICs use for things like healing, we seldom question the source of the powers that we rely on for healing.<sup>121</sup>

A lack of consciousness about the source of power also dulls us to the general area of power encounter and the constant struggle against occult powers.<sup>122</sup> Third, then, liberation is a concept which AICs take very seriously and Western Mennonites have come to take less seriously. We need to be reminded of the ongoing physical and social liberation and victory in Christ. One Mennonite missions worker writes:

How often do we talk about that victory we have in Christ? Is that victory solely applicable to the victory that we have in gaining salvation and eternal life. . . ? Or are there daily situations in which we should be look-

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<sup>120</sup> Shank, "What African Indigenous Churches Can Teach Western Churches," 6.

<sup>121</sup> AIMM worker Rudy Dirks tells of the mutual challenges that occur when discussing power encounter and traditional faith healers with AIC pastors. After Rudy encouraged a group pastors to take a Biblical approach to the source of power in healing, using John 4, these pastors asked: "Who do Western Mennonites take their ill to when they get sick?" and, "Is Christ the ultimate source of power that these medical doctors rely on?" Rudy Dirks, "Issues in Pastoral Ministry with AICs," presentation to a Mennonite Ministerial on May 12, 1999, St. Catharines, Ontario.

<sup>122</sup> Shank, "What African Indigenous Churches Can Teach Western Churches," 6.

ing for victory in Christ rather than the other things that we put our trust in?<sup>123</sup>

The AICs can help Western Mennonites learn how evil is a pervasive reality in our world, how liberation extends beyond spiritual salvation and eternal life, and how God is active in all aspects of life. Shank suggest that AICs are “better prepared to critique . . . the new forms of Mammon, Caesar, and Mars. . . .”<sup>124</sup> AICs can help us take prayer, boldness in faith, and healing seriously within our churches.<sup>125</sup> They can help Western Mennonites continue to find liberation in maintaining an intimate relationship with God, an understanding of Christian fellowship which takes seriously the fullness of salvation, and a message of hope and assurance not only in the next world but in this one as well.<sup>126</sup>

Fourth, despite the critique that AICs need to be more thorough in their use of Scripture, there are areas that AICs can teach Western Mennonites about Scripture use. Because AICs take different passages seriously than Western churches do,<sup>127</sup> they can help Western Mennonites discover passages and sections of the Bible that are normally ignored or undervalued. Further, they can help us understand the ability of Scripture to relate to specific, non-Western contexts, and that Western Christians are not the only ones who can meaningfully pursue hermeneutics.<sup>128</sup> As Andrew Walls suggests, “. . . since none of us can read the Scriptures without cultural blinkers of some sort, . . . the crowning excitement which our own era of Church history has over all others is the possibility that we may be able to read them together.”<sup>129</sup>

Fifth, AICs demonstrate that there are gifts of laity, especially spiritual gifts, that can be effectively utilized. While AICs may be prophet/leader driven, and the leaders may have the final say, the leaders are very willing to share various tasks of the church with the laity. People who are garbage inspectors, salespersons, business owners, etc. by

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<sup>123</sup> Phil Lindell Detweiler, “Learning ‘Victory’ from AICs,” *Review of AICs* 7:1 (1996): 17.

<sup>124</sup> Shank, “What African Indigenous Churches Can Teach Western Churches,” 6.

<sup>125</sup> “Kuruman Consultation,” p. 13.

<sup>126</sup> Oosterwal, *Modern Messianic Movements*, pp. 35-43.

<sup>127</sup> Turner, “Studies on Religion in Africa,” pp. 170f.

<sup>128</sup> Shank, “What African Indigenous Churches Can Teach Western Churches,” 6f.

<sup>129</sup> Walls, “Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator,” 105.

day become congregational leaders, spiritual counselors, preachers and moral advisors by night and on Sundays.<sup>130</sup> Mennonite churches can be reminded of what the priesthood of all believers can mean and learn from AICs that untrained members do have God-given gifts to be shared with the congregation. In conjunction, Mennonite missions need to continue to struggle with balancing appropriate roles for expatriate versus local leadership.<sup>131</sup>

Sixth, and finally, Mennonite churches can learn from their experiences with AICs about dynamics of continuity and discontinuity between culture and Christianity. What makes AICs unique is their radical insistence on a marked continuity with African culture. The pneumatological aetiology of the traditional African worldview clearly persists within AICs, suggesting that to ignore this worldview is to impose a form of cultural amnesia on African Christians. Western Mennonites and those working with AICs need to remember that African Christians must set their own theological agenda. Walls maintains, "it is useless for us to determine what we think an African theology ought to be doing: it will concern itself with questions that worry Africans, . . . and it needs an answer, and an answer related to Christ."<sup>132</sup> The result, Charles Nyamiti indicates, is that new ways of thinking of christology will emerge from the African setting that do not fit the traditional Western patterns.<sup>133</sup>

Walls also reminds readers that there are points of continuity between the growth of Christianity in Africa and previous "stages" of development in the world. There are historical connections with Africa, there is Jesus Christ himself, there are sacred writings, and a sense of Christian consciousness and community that connect us all with the people of Israel. "[T]he continuities," Walls submits, "are cloaked with such heavy veils belonging to their environment that Christians of different times and places must often be unrecognizable to others, or indeed even to themselves, as manifestations of a single phenomenon."<sup>134</sup> Western Mennonites need to be reminded to

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<sup>130</sup> Shank, "What African Indigenous Churches Can Teach Western Churches," 8.

<sup>131</sup> Larson, "Tenth Anniversary Reflections," p. 3.

<sup>132</sup> Walls, "Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator," 105.

<sup>133</sup> For example, Nyamiti proposes that "African Traditional (non-Christian) Christologies" and "African Nonsystematic Christologies" will be the categories of the future for African Christians. Nyamiti, "Contemporary African Christologies," p. 67.

<sup>134</sup> Walls, "Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator," 96f.

take a macroscopic look at AICs. In terms of the broader strokes of Christian history, the ministry of Jesus Christ, and the movement of the Holy Spirit, Mennonites should recognize the same God at work in the newness and fresh relevance of this movement as was at work in the newness and fresh relevance of the early Anabaptist movement.

While there is continuity between African culture and the larger Christian tradition, it must also be remembered that the AICs represent significant discontinuity with both of these as well. That AICs have an African agenda means that it is clearly not a Western one. This has been painfully hard for many Western Christians to come to terms with as Western Christianity has assumed a central position in the life and work of the church for centuries. However, AICs also demonstrate departures from African traditional religions. Many of these revolve around new understandings of Jesus Christ. The Harrists, for example, unapologetically condemn the use of fetishes and objects which are understood to contain power outside the power of the God of Jesus Christ. Western Mennonites can learn that, while from the outside there appears to be more continuity than discontinuity, from the perspective of AICs, the discontinuity is just as significant. Further, Western Mennonites can be reminded that it is possible to criticize the dominant culture, and take counter-cultural stances, in order to proclaim faith in Jesus Christ.

## Conclusion

As demonstrated in this chapter, Mennonite missions such as MBM and AIMM have been permitted a unique place in the story and life of the Harrist Church, the Spiritual Healing Church, and the Church of Moshoeshoe, as well as numerous other AICs. There may be certain historical and theological predispositions that factor into these ties, but it is in the three areas mentioned above that these ties have become strong and enduring. The desire to learn how the Bible can be meaningfully interpreted and applied in African contexts is a mutual concern of Mennonite missions and AICs, leading slowly to new apperceptions of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. On the part of MBM and AIMM, the desire to see growth and maturity in the leadership of AICs has required a sensitive and gently encouraging approach, with the goal of strengthening both individuals and congregations in their faith in Christ. It is ulti-

mately, however, the formation of relationships that has allowed these ties to remain and mature.

The desire to be led directly by the Holy Spirit in learning and mutual encouragement has also been paramount. Both Mennonite missions workers and AIC leaders realize that growth in relationship with Jesus Christ involves growth in relationships with Christian brothers and sisters within congregations and between denominations.



## Conclusion

It has been demonstrated in this thesis that the christologies of the Harrist Church, the Spiritual Healing Church, and the Church of Moshoeshoe are at early stages of growth and development. The criteria used to make this evaluation include Biblical standards, the standards of some AIC leaders, the standards of Mennonite missionaries working with these AICs, and the standards of African theology. The term “nascent” is intentionally used over a term like “weak” because it is the intention of the author to demonstrate that these AICs are, with varying degrees of rapidity and intentionality, progressing along the religious itinerary.

The nine categories in which christology is explored indicate that Jesus Christ is best known to Christians in the African Independent Churches through healing and through encounters with power media. In the context of the pneumatological aetiology which defines the African worldview, such power displays are extremely significant and cannot be underestimated or berated in terms of the meaning they have for members of the AICs. What can be asserted is that growth beyond these expressions of christology is desirable. While Western categories for christology such as Jesus’ role in the Trinity, the historical Jesus, christological impetus for missions, etc. may never rank high as concerns for members of the AICs, they may have some features that can assist AICs in the continuing process of becoming familiar with the person and ministry of Jesus Christ. Ultimately, however, it is not a Western Jesus, but the Jesus of the New Testament, risen and living through the Holy Spirit, that AIC members ought to get to know.

Finally, I have shown that Mennonites, through the Mennonite Board of Missions and the Africa Inter-Mennonite Missions, have been given a unique role in the lives of a number of AICs, a role that few other Western related agencies have been granted. These missionaries consistently seek to be culturally sensitive as they encourage christological growth in these AICs through Bible teaching, leadership training, and the strengthening of relationships within and between churches. They value and respect the strength and vitality of the AIC relationship with Jesus Christ.

The challenges for the AICs and for Mennonites working with AICs are great, but these challenges are matched only by the energy and enthusiasm that these AICs

display. The Holy Spirit is certainly moving in many of these churches, and will undoubtedly in all its divine wisdom and with its divine timing, lead these AICs ever closer to the Jesus Christ who came also for Africans. The challenge to come closer to certain aspects of Jesus Christ is not a challenge that extends in one direction only. Westerners can learn much from AICs about the power of the living Christ who is relevant in our everyday lives.

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\* Transcripts and tape recordings available upon request.