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## CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDING OF THE HUMAN PERSON IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF AFRICAN CULTURES

**A b s t r a c t.** The article attempts to present a few perspectives from African cultures on the Christian understanding of man. The central thesis argued for is that the interpenetration of the universalizing Christian culture and the particularizing cultures of indigenous peoples need not always breed tensions of values. As always, there are common entry points for harmonization which facilitates evangelization in view of those salvific fruits which ‘grace’ always offers to ‘nature’.

It can thus be clear from the above that my overall aim in this article is to show how the African cultural perspectives on the being of man shapes the reception of the Christian gospel about the human person as redeemed by Christ. To be sure, the key questions to which this article responds present themselves as follows: In what light does the Christian understanding of human person appeal to the African? In other words, what is the African perspective of the being of man and how does it influence the African’s understanding of the Christian gospel of the redeemed humanity? Structurally, the article consists of three sections: First I shall present several entry points to the understanding of the human person, besides the chosen two perspectives — Christian and African — which we wish to harmonize. Next, I shall highlight the key principles which inform Christian anthropology on the one hand; as well as a few cultural generalities which are descriptive of a typical African anthropology. Finally, I try to present selected ‘anthropological’ elements which highlight comparisons and divergences between Christianity and African cultures.

**Keywords:** Christian anthropology; Igbo culture; Nri myth; relationality; Joseph Ratzinger; Richard Niebuhr; John Mbiti.

## INTRODUCTION

This article attempts a very delicate exercise, namely: to harmonize two anthropologies — the Christian and the African. No anthropology is devoid of cultural presuppositions and this applies to both Christian anthropology and ‘African anthropology’.<sup>1</sup> Notably, Richard Niebuhr’s five different models of the relationship between Christianity and Culture<sup>2</sup> reminds us that there is no one-to-one mapping of any particular culture onto the essentially revolutionary elements of Christian civilization. Thus, it is noteworthy that my attempt to harmonize Christian anthropology and African anthropology is a very delicate exercise, significantly because we are confronted not only with two different civilizations (the Christian and the African) but even more with two different levels of cultures, the one is a universalizing culture and the other is an indigenizing or particularizing culture.

Given the differences so noted, there is already implicated a disbalance that could at face-value appear confrontationally irreconcilable but as historical experiences attest, whenever a particular culture encounters the universalizing Christian culture, it only becomes more enriched, fulfilled, and salvaged from its limits, by the new and transformative vistas of transcendence which the Christian worldview offers. This is true of the ancient Greco-Roman civilization as well as for the more contemporary European civilization. In other words, the interpenetration of the Christian culture and particular cultures of indigenous peoples need not always breed tensions of values but, as always, can yield salvific fruits which ‘grace’ always offers to ‘nature’.

Nonetheless, the meeting of cultures is shaped by a certain dynamism of gift and reception. The Christian gospel offers something new to each culture but what is offered has to be received, and in this case, the reception of the Christian gospel of the redeemed man follows the age-long principle of genuine exchange of giving and receiving, often expressed by the Latin adage

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<sup>1</sup> In the strict sense, we cannot speak of a unilateral version of African anthropology that is common to all African societies. This is because Africa is a vast continent of 54 different countries. This means that Africa is so large and culturally diverse that we cannot speak here of one seamless cultural worldview, so to speak. Likewise, it is also a bit superfluous to speak of a European anthropology; given that the French, the Germans, the Polish, the British, the Italians do have different cultural worldviews, at least before the advent of Christian civilization. This diversity notwithstanding, one can still speak loosely of an African anthropology, to the extent that what one could, at least, refer to one particular living (contemporary) culture amongst the African societies fairly represents the main trends in most other African cultures.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1951).

— *‘quid quid recipitur ad modum recipientis recipitur’* — whatever is received is so received according to the mode of the recipient. The question does present itself — in what light does the Christian understanding of human person appeal to the African? In other words, what is the African perspective of the being of man and how does it influence the African’s understanding of the Christian gospel of the redeemed humanity? It can thus be clear from the above that my overall aim in this article is to show how the African cultural perspectives on the being of man shapes the reception of the Christian gospel about the human person as redeemed by Christ.

Accordingly, I shall proceed as follows: first I shall present several entry points to the understanding of the human person, besides the chosen two perspectives — the Christian and the African — which we wish to harmonize. Next, I shall highlight the key principles which inform Christian anthropology and a few cultural generalities which are descriptive of a typical African anthropology. Finally, I will try to present selected anthropological elements which highlight divergences and convergences between Christian and African understanding of man in the hope that these elements may serve as fodder for creative models of “inculturating” the Christian gospel of the redeemed man in Africa nations.

## 1. THE HUMAN PERSON

The question — ‘what does it mean to be human’? — lies at the heart of many contemporary debates in Church and society. Accordingly, the attempt to present a systematic and coherent response to this question by accounting for the origin, essence, and dynamic potencies of the human being roughly describes what we call ‘anthropology’. Such an attempt can be undertaken from several perspectives hence we speak of philosophical anthropology, theological anthropology, social anthropology, cultural anthropology as well as Islamic anthropology, Christian anthropology or even European anthropology, African anthropology, and so on. Sometimes, we also meet an intersection of two or more perspectives from which a complementary anthropological account is woven together. Whichever perspective or inter-perspectival approach informs the responses we give entails specific consequences. From the

perspective of theological anthropology, we even meet the intersection of what has been referred to as systematic and anthropological trajectories.<sup>3</sup>

While I do not promise a systematic presentation of Christian anthropology or a comprehensive account of African anthropology, it is notable that what I shall attempt here will be akin to such intersectionality as described, precisely to showcase in what sense Christian anthropology is interpreted within the lens of the operative categories of African anthropology and vice versa. Key questions which could help to guide us in this regard will include: What is the Christian understanding of man? What is the African understanding of man? What are the points of convergence and divergence in these two anthropologies? What models of intercultural encounter will promote a better harmonization of Christian and African anthropologies? How is the mission of Christian evangelization in Africa facilitated or hindered by African thought patterns about the human being? The sections that follow will attempt to provide insights on how to respond to these questions.

## 2. PRINCIPLES OF CHRISTIAN ANTHROPOLOGY

The understanding of the origin, nature, destiny of the human person as well as man's relationship with God and the world, which is offered by Christian anthropology, is expectedly informed by biblical anthropology. Its most nucleic core is undoubtedly Christocentric. The man Jesus, who is God, thus shapes the Christian ideal of a perfect man. As the Last Adam,<sup>4</sup> Jesus realizes in Himself, the perfect ideal of what it means to be fully human. Note here that when we present Jesus, who is God, as the ideal of humanity, we are confronted with a paradox, which is essentially a mystery. A mystery whose truth can only be revealed rather than discovered by human logic. Theological anthropology attempts to make sense of this mystery. In his *Grund des Glaubens*, Karl Rahner raises the question whether God who 'is' can 'become'? To this question he also responds in the affirmative — "Yes, in Christ, God who 'is', 'became' man. God cannot change in Himself (Immanent Trinity) but He can 'become' in another (Economic Trinity). Where God 'becomes', there appears a man — Jesus Christ."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See Georg Langemeyer, *Anthropologie*, Texte zur Theologie: Abteilung Dogmatik, Band 8 (Graz–Wien–Köln, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> 1 Cor. 15:25.

<sup>5</sup> Karl Rahner, *Grundkurs des Glaubens* (Freiburg: Herder, 1976), 172-305.

On account of the fullest revelation of biblical anthropology in the revelation of Christ the God-man, one could say that Christian anthropology assumes a distinctively theological, and Christological standpoint on the being, person, nature, relations, and destiny of man. Christian anthropology's core principles can thus be understood only in the light of Christian revelation, even if it takes on data from philosophy, science or arts as the case may be. Accordingly, we can discern some of its key principles, the foundation of which is rooted in the economy of salvation, such that the human being is understood as being created by God, redeemed in Christ and sanctified by the Holy Spirit. Specifically, we identify these principles as follows:

**a) God as the source of human origin and dignity**

For Christian anthropology, the most central principle is that man's origin is from God. The human being is created by God and it is in God that man's dignity, as image of God, is fully realized. This principle is drawn from the data of revelation about the origin of man,<sup>6</sup> which also indicates that amongst all other created realities, the human being is uniquely the noblest, having been created as an 'image of God'. It is significant that several models have been proposed on how to understand the meaning of being created in the 'image of God'.<sup>7</sup> For Joseph Ratzinger, the understanding of man as an 'image of God' follows a three-fold anthropological relational pattern of being 'from', 'with', and 'for'. First, as created, the human being's **origin** is in/from God who calls each man into being but even more, God has taken human nature in Christ and as such unites Himself with all men and so in Him God becomes man, and man is raised to the lofty heights of union with God. The principle that springs from this Christocentric resonance of Christian anthropology is that of relationality. In the light of Christ man becomes a being *with* God, a being with the Other. This relational essence is not only vertically implicative but also flows horizontally into man's relationship with fellow men. The human being is a being with others, a being constituted as a 'mit-sein' (to use Heidegger's neologism). In Ratzinger however, this relationality with God and with others is manifest in the Christian as he is born and baptized into a community. Significantly, in the same manner as the man Jesus is God's self-gift *for* humanity, so also the human being is a being *for* others and in fact *for* all creation, for which man is a stew-

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<sup>6</sup> Gen 1:26.

<sup>7</sup> See, Claudia Welz, *Humanity in God's Image: An Interdisciplinary Exploration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 7, 15, 23-45.

ard. In other words, given that as the ‘crown of creation’ it pleased God to place man as the steward of his created universe. In all of these senses, we speak of man’s lofty **dignity** as deriving from his being the ‘image of God’—*from* whom man comes into being, *with* whom in Christ he fulfils his relational essence and thus his reason of being; in fact as ‘manus’ (worker, gardener), he is the steward of God’s creation, the servant of God whose works he tends, and *for* whom he is created. Moreover, thanks to the mystery of Incarnation, whereby the Son of God unites Himself with every man,<sup>8</sup> we already have the perfect ideal of what this principle implies, that is to say: the perfect ideal of a human being as an ‘*imago Dei*’ is realized in the man Jesus, the ‘Last Adam’<sup>9</sup> and ‘image of the invisible God’,<sup>10</sup> who is at once true God and true man. Christ Himself is the One who comes *from* God above, who is at once united *with* God the Father and *with* us, and who gives Himself as food *for* us and *for* our salvation. Thus, Christian anthropology within a Christological perspective grounds the notion of ‘*imago Dei*’ even more fully in our relationship with God through Christ.

#### **b) The composite unity of man’s body and soul**

From the relational principle, we move on to the entitative principle, which holds that the human being is at once embodied and ensouled. This is the principle of *corpore et anima unus* and it is common to all Christian anthropology. This principle is against all forms of dualism in the understanding of human nature. In this way, it counters all materialistic as well as spiritualistic/angelic conceptions of the human being. This principle is equally drawn from revelation about human nature<sup>11</sup> as simultaneously composed of corporeal and spiritual constituents. The noted Genesis account of human creation indicates that we are ‘formed from dust’ but also God breathed into us the ‘breath of life’, hence man became a ‘living soul’. Biblical anthropology thus indicates that man’s body and soul are co-principles of his essence. Neither a body without a soul, nor a soulless body could be said to be a living human being. The soul animates the body, and the body expresses the vegetative and sentient activities of the soul. The body is thus the soul’s language of expression and the soul is the body’s animating principle. The hu-

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<sup>8</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, 22.

<sup>9</sup> 1 Cor. 15:45.

<sup>10</sup> Col. 1:15.

<sup>11</sup> Gen. 2:7.

man soul is said to be rational because rationality is its highest capacities even though it also manifests both vegetative and sentient life.

### c) Human freedom

This principle follows from the spiritual powers of the human soul for intellective and volitive acts. Freedom in this perspective implicates the capacity to know the truth, to realize the good and to contemplate the beautiful. Hence, Christian anthropology upholds that man's soul is imbued with intellectual, volitional, and contemplative capacities facilitating man's pursuit of the truth and the good as well as man's capacity to love. Freedom is thus closely connected with the spiritual values of truth, good and beauty. As Ratzinger indicates, freedom cannot be divorced from the truth<sup>12</sup> nor can it be separated from the 'truth about the good'.<sup>13</sup> Hence, at the end of his creative activities, God looked upon all he had made and having confirmed the correspondence<sup>14</sup> of the realized natures with what His divine mind has conceived, He declared that it was very good.<sup>15</sup> Now, the good is spoken of with respect to an end realized (a satisfaction, a perfection of essential nature of created realities) but also with respect to alternative means to an end, hence we distinguish between *means-goods* (remote and proximate) and *end-goods* (final). With respect to 'end-goods', we can say that only two alternatives present themselves, namely we either attain it or we do not. But with regard to 'means-goods', there are always several alternatives, some of which will not lead to the desired end. In this way, we can speak of *true/right/correct means* good and *false/wrong/incorrect means* good. Now, if the

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<sup>12</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, "Truth and Freedom," *Communio* 23(1996), 1 (Spring): 16–35.

<sup>13</sup> Karol Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, trans by Grzegorz Ignatik (Boston: Pauline, 2013), 304; See also Karol Wojtyła, *Osoba i Czyn* (Kraków: Polskie Towarzystwo Teologiczne, 1969), 142, 148.

<sup>14</sup> A reference is here made to the correspondence theory of truth. Hence God's declarative expression of the goodness of creation is seen here as an instance where the 'truth about the good' (i.e. true nature of beings) shines out. To see the true nature of beings (truth about the good) is to see beings from all its causal principles — to recognize its formal and final ends and to see the capacities for attaining the intended final ends, on account of the adequate balance of its internal dynamisms towards its final end. When God expresses the goodness of creation, it implicates a certain confidence that He has in creation to realize its purposes. This has an anthropological implication for the human being who receives the mandate of care, of stewardship over creation. This means that God has entrusted man with something that is already good by nature, ordered towards a definite end, hence a cosmos. The human being can either distort or restore the creative dynamisms intended by God.

<sup>15</sup> Gen. 1:31.

end-good is to be realized, it follows that man has to choose the correct (true, right) means-good. But to choose the true/correct/right good presupposes a knowledge of which of the alternatives approximates to the true essence/nature of the good. In this way, truth (true knowledge) is said to be closely related to the good (good decision). So, human freedom is essentially the capacity to choose that true means (good), which will lead to an end in accordance with human nature. Hence sinfulness, wrongdoing, immoral behaviour is constituted by man's failure to utilize his freedom as the capacity to choose the true good. This is an abuse of freedom, but it does not imply an annihilation or obliteration of freedom in itself. The human person is always free to choose between alternatives: alternatives between action and inaction, alternatives between good and evil, and alternatives between various good means.

#### **d) Man's capacity for God**

Following the principle of freedom to choose between alternatives is equally the principle of man's capacity to choose the Highest Good, the *Summum Bonum*, namely God. This principle is equally drawn from the data of revelation about human longing for God.<sup>16</sup> Such a longing could not exist unless it can be fulfilled, hence man's capacity for God is already implicit in human natural longing for the infinite, for the eternal, for the inexhaustible source of all life. But even more spontaneously, we can equally derive it from what has already been said above in consideration of the principles of freedom and that of man's origin. Hence, since God is the highest good, it follows that union with God is the ultimate realization of human freedom. Christian anthropology insists that despite human sinfulness, every human person is redeemable and can satisfy the natural longing to be united with God. This principle emphasises the relational essence of man. Accordingly, Ratzinger argues from this principle of Christian anthropology that the explanation of the origin of every individual man is made possible only with the relational categories of 'being-from' (created) and 'being-with' (redeemed alongside all humanity). Hence, created by God the Father and sanctified in the Holy Spirit, through the salvific merits of Christ, a relational significance of the being of man is made manifest, such that the essence of each man is traced back to his or her origin as a creature (being from) but even more to the redemptive grace which efficaciously realizes in Christ 'through' whom and 'with' whom, each and all children of Adam, are made to share in the 'sonship' of the One Son of the Father.

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<sup>16</sup> Psalm 42:2, Psalm 63:1, Psalm 84:2.

### e) Fellowship with men

This principle is drawn not only from the decalogue but also from the notion of Christian brotherhood. Our Lord Jesus Christ did sum up the commandments as Love of God and Love of Neighbour.<sup>17</sup> The first (love of God) is the hinge upon which the second (love of neighbour) hangs. This is so because of the common origin of all human beings in God as well as on account of the universal salvific import of Christ's Paschal mystery. It is in this way that we are to understand the notion of Christian brotherhood. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul exhorts all Christians to "do good to all men."<sup>18</sup> This is what the Scriptures also tells us about God's attitude to all mankind for He lets His sun shine and His rain fall on all people, both the good and the bad.<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps the above selected five principles serves to present a brief outline of the key elements of Christian anthropology. But then Christian anthropology is only one part of the story, we need also to take a look at the other part of the equation, namely a few cultural generalities which are descriptive of a typical African anthropology. Only then can we attempt the task of harmonization and the selection of which model of intercultural encounter facilitates the reception of Christian anthropology in Africa or put in another way, the selection of which model of encounter projects the categories of Christian anthropology to an African mind with regard to questions of the origin, nature, dynamisms and destiny of the human being.

### 3. ATTEMPTING A DESCRIPTION OF THE GENERAL CULTURAL INDICES OF A TYPICAL AFRICAN ANTHROPOLOGY

I imagine that this part of my article will be much more interesting to a non-African, given that it could offer insights that are less known outside of the African societies. Yet, given the dialectics between cultural unity and cultural diversity,<sup>20</sup> we note that what is particularly indigenous to specific cultures somehow find similar patterns of resemblance in other cultures, the peculiarities notwithstanding. It is however important to keep in mind that

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<sup>17</sup> Matthew 22:37-40.

<sup>18</sup> Gal. 6:10.

<sup>19</sup> Matthew 5:45.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Sanya Osha, *Kwasi Wiredu and Beyond: The Text, Writing and Thought in Africa* (Dakar: Cordesria, 2005); See also B. Hallen, "Kwasi Wiredu's Humanism and Impartiality," *African Studies Review* 49(2006), 3: 175-176.

our goal in highlighting these specifics is to consider how they can be harmonized with Christian understanding of the human person. So, let us take a look at some of the elements that are open to such harmonization and perhaps the one we can call ‘fertile seeds for Christian evangelization’, or put in another way, elements that can be considered as Africa’s indigenous ‘*preambula fidei*’<sup>21</sup> with respect to Christianity’s teachings on the revealed truth about man as an ‘*imago Dei*’.

#### a) African cultural myths on the origin of man

Many ancient cultures have their origin myths. Most of the myths are cosmogenic, that is they tell of the origin of the world. This is the case with creation myths such as the Babylonian Enuma Elish and Gilgamesh epic of the Ancient Near Eastern cultures, which most scholars<sup>22</sup> analyse as bearing significant background motifs for the biblical creation accounts. African cultures also have their own peculiar myths of origin. In Nigeria, where I come from, there is an Igbo origin myth, which also speaks about the origin of the human being. This is the Nri creation myth. The myth of Nri has it that in the beginning, Chukwu (God) who lived in the sky had sent therefrom a divine being called ‘Eri’ to the earth. When Eri descended from the sky to the earth, he built a temple at Aguleri. This temple is called the ObuGad, which serves as the link of communication between Eri and Chukwu (God). As instructed by God, Eri married two wives, by names Nneamaku and Oboli. Nneamaku had five children, four sons: Nri-Ifikwuanim-Menri (in brief ‘Nri’), Agulu, Ogbodudu, Onogu and one daughter: Iguedo; whereas the second wife, Oboli had only one male child, Onoja. Nri, being the first male child of the first wife of Nri, became the spiritual head or priest, serving the temple cult just like his father Eri. He however migrated from Aguleri to a nearby settlement where he combined his priestly functions with that of a establishing a kingdom where he doubles as the political head of the newly

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<sup>21</sup> See Ralph McInerny, *Preambula fidei: Thomism and the God of the Philosophers* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2006).

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Stephanie Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, the Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); see also Alexander Heidel, *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1963); Leonard King, *Enuma Elish: The Seven Tablets of Creation; The Babylonian and Assyrian Legends Concerning the Creation of the World and of Mankind* (New York: Cosimo Inco, 2010); Richard E. Friedman, *The Bible with Sources Revealed* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003); Richard J. Clifford, *Creation Accounts in the Ancient Near East and in the Bible* (Virginia: Catholic Biblical Association, 1994).

established Nri kingdom. Since Nri, the first son had migrated from the original homestead to a new area of settlement, it was the second son, Agulu — who took over the first kingdom of Aguleri, when their father Eri died. In effect, two kingdoms emerged from the Eri dynasty — the Agulu-eri (Aguleri) kingdom and the Nri kingdom and it is to these two kingdoms that all Igbos trace their ancestry. Note the following key elements of this origin myth: Eri was a diving being sent to earth. He thus serves as the bridge between heaven and earth, hence a priest who effects the union of the God of the sky and people of the earth. A play on numbers also was keyed into this myth: two wives, two kingdoms, four sons, five children. I am hesitant, however, to assert that there is some resonance here with biblical numerology; but it cannot be completely ruled out as this is common with ancient traditions including the Chinese, Sumerians, the Babylonians, and the Greeks (Pythagoreans, Gnostics). Each tradition however will privilege some numbers more than others for different reasons. For the Nri myth of origin, one could infer from the story of five children a reference to the five fingers of a human being. But then why five? One explanation could be that the man is a worker, a tiller of soil, hence the *man* is represented by the *manus* (hand) becomes as it were a symbol for man as homo faber. Still this same symbolism can as well stand for man as a wayfarer, the one who is on a journey, what the Igbo call ‘njem’ (ukwu ije — the foot of the wayfarer). Again, the human feet with its five toes implicates that man is on a journey. As *Eri’s* first son, ‘Nri’ migrated from the first settlement to another settlement in the origin myth, so also humanity as whole is on a progressive march of civilization. This myth thus contains in its inner thread a meaning for the historical progress of humanity, such that future generations can always look back to the beginning and identify themselves in Nri. Hence the Igbo origin myth supports a linear sense of history, which contrasts with the Greek cyclic sense of history. Perhaps, we shall come back to this but in the meantime, let us now turn to other elements of a typical African anthropology.

### **b) Constituent principles of human nature**

Whereas we have noted that Christian anthropology upholds man’s composite unity, as constituted of two co-principles of body and soul, the African cultural traditions — while also insisting on a composite unity — identifies more than two constitutive co-principles. For the African, it is not just body and soul but also spirit and character. There is a certain mix of both metaphysico-psychological and biogico-social constituents which come into the

understanding of human nature for the African mind. African cultures have different concepts in their languages which express these basic constituents of human nature. Having presented the Igbo culture for exemplification of a typical African origin myth, I shall now sample out the Akan culture of the people of Ghana in West Africa. In this culture, we have such principles as *nipadua*, which means ‘body’, *okra* which means ‘soul’, *sansum* which means ‘character’, *ntoro* which refers to one’s inherited paternal (or patrilineal) characteristics, which is usually a recessive trait and then *mogya*, which refers to one’s inherited maternal (or matrilineal) identity, usually considered to be a dominant trait. In this culture, the *mogya* becomes *saman* (ghost) at death. In summary, it could be said that this culture has five co-principles of each individual human nature: the body, the soul, the personal character, patrilineal traits, and the matrilineal traits. One could say that this culture does not so much distinguish between metaphysical and psychological co-principles of human nature. Its sense of unity is not restricted to the body-soul unity of European categories. Most African culture have similar concepts of four or five co-principles of human nature. In Igbo culture for instance, there is *ahu-mmadu* (body), *mmuo-mmadu* (spirit), *mkpuruobi-mmadu* (soul), and *agwa-mmadu* (character). One could speak here of a richer appreciation of the constitutive principles of human nature than is not limited to the material body and the spiritual soul. For most African cultures, the soul is distinguished from the spirit. I shall try to harmonize this later on with Christian anthropology but in the meantime, let us go on to account for other principles, which also highlight the richness of African cultural anthropology in its own rite.

### c) Man’s relationship with spiritual beings

Relationship with spiritual beings in Africa takes the form of religious appeasements of traditional gods<sup>23</sup> as well as what is referred to as ancestral worship.<sup>24</sup> We can simply lump these two trajectories into one, namely African religious practices. It is notable here that the African understanding of the human being is so infused with African religiosity and spiritual life, that the epithet ‘homo religiosus’ passes as it were to be the most significant one for an average African. To be sure, Africa’s religious sensitivity is ex-

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. E.C. Ekeke and C.A. Ekeopara, “God, divinities and Spirits in African Traditional Religious Ontology,” *American Journal of Social and Management Sciences* 1(2) (2010): 209–218.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Meyer Fortes, “Ancestor Worship in African,” in *Religion, Morality and the Person: Essays on Tallensi Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 66–83.

pressively pervasive and is noticeable in virtually all aspects of culture. Most personal names in Africa are taken from religious phenomena, agricultural feasts are mostly celebrations in honour of local deities, market days are named after traditional gods, and so on. John Mbiti had remarked that in Africa relationship with spiritual beings “permeates all the departments of life, that there is no formal distinction between the sacred and the secular, between the religious and non-religious, between the spiritual and material areas of life. Wherever the African is, there is his religion, he carries it to the field where he is sowing seed or harvesting a new crop, he takes it with him to the beer party or to attend a funeral ceremony, and if he is educated, he takes religion with him to the examination room, if he is a politician, he takes it to the house of parliament and religion accompanies the individual from long before his birth to long after his physical death.”<sup>25</sup> For the African, man’s relationship with spiritual beings is a given. There is no absolute distinction between the spiritual and the secular spheres and the human person is bound up with this continuum which constitutes his world.

#### **d) Man’s relationship with kith and kin**

Across all African cultures, a noticeable community spirit is evident. The relationship with kith and kin is part and parcel of the elements of personal identity. Individualism is foreign to African cultural sensibility rather we can speak of African communalism or even African communitarianism.<sup>26</sup> No doubt, there are ‘pros’ and ‘cons’, but the sense of community remains a strong factor in the understanding of man in Africa. No one comes from nowhere; every individual person is a ‘son of someone else’, a ‘daughter of someone else’. Relationship with kith and kin is extensive even to the dead hence the boundaries between the living and the dead are not so absolute but relational. There is a relational link with ancestors which begins and extends from the primordial father of a family, to the clan and the community. There is a continuity of generations which traces their identity to one man, hence no individual African is identified without a reference to his or her clan or

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<sup>25</sup> John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Ibadan: Heinemann, 1999), 2.

<sup>26</sup> To appreciate more the sense in which African scholars like Ifeany Menkiti and Kwame Gyekye distinguish both terms from African humanism, see K. Horsthemke, “African Communalism, Persons and the Case of Non-Human Animals,” *Filosofia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religions* 7(2018), 2 (May-August): 60–78; See also Desmond Tutu “Social Philosophy in Postcolonial Africa: Some Preliminaries Concerning Communalism and Communitarianism,” *South African Journal of Philosophy* 27(2008), 4: 332–339.

community. Identity for the African is relational rather than individual. In the classical formulation of this principle as expressed by a several African scholars, John Mbiti articulates it as follows:

the individual does not and cannot exist alone except corporately. He owes his existence to other people, including those of past generations and his contemporaries. He is simply part of the whole. The community must therefore make, create, or produce the individual; for the individual depends on the corporate group [...] Only in terms of other people does the individual become conscious of his own being, his own duties, his privileges and responsibilities towards himself and towards other people. When he suffers, he does not suffer alone but with the corporate group; when he rejoices, he rejoices not alone but with his kinsmen, his neighbours and relatives, whether dead or living [...] Whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual. The individual can only say: "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am." This is the cardinal point in the understanding of the African view of man.<sup>27</sup>

Having presented a sample of key principles which characterize African anthropology across the many cultures of the African societies, let us now move on to the next task, which is the search for a harmonization of Christian and African anthropologies with an eye on the reception of the Christian understanding of man from the African perspectives.

#### 4. AFRICAN UNDERSTANDING OF THE HUMAN BEING VIS-À-VIS CHRISTIAN ANTHROPOLOGY

The task of search for entry points for a propagation of the Christian vision of man from an African perspective can only be made easier, if we settle for a specific model of encounter between Christianity and African cultures. Helmut Richard Niebuhr did suggest at least five models: Christ against culture, the Christ of culture, Christ above culture, Christ and Culture

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<sup>27</sup> John S. Mbiti, John Samuel, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1989), 106; See also Ifeanyi A. Menkiti, "Person and Community in African Traditional Thought," in *African Philosophy: An Introduction*, ed. Richard Wright (New York: University of America Press, 1984), 171–181, esp. 171, 179; Ggadegesin, 295; Kaphagawani, 337; Manguena Fainos, "Towards a Hunhu/Ubuntu Dialogical Moral Theory," *Phronimon* 13(2012), 2: 1–17, esp. 11.

in Paradox and Christ the Transformer of Culture.<sup>28</sup> We can assume that in deciding for any of the models, one had to bear in mind that a harmonious encounter can be facilitated only if the cross-cultural cleavages between Christianity and African cultures are reduced. What is thus paramount is to highlight such cleavages and crisis flashpoints by identifying not only common (comparisons) and uncommon (divergencies) elements but also those borderline elements (e.g. rationality vs relationality) as well as elements that blend so harmoniously as to account for obvious meetings points. This initial task is what I embark on in the paragraphs that follow:

#### a) Comparisons

It can be safely claimed that both Christian anthropology and African cultural understanding of man attempt to account for the origin of man from above. The human person comes from a divine being who not only brings man into existence but also unites himself with man in a most intimate way (i.e. incarnation of Christ in Christianity; marital union of Eri to two wives in Igbo-Africa). A second point of comparison is the unitary conception of the human being (*corpore et anima unus*) irrespective of a discrepancy in the number of co-principles. Thirdly, we can indicate common values in the sense of relationality as accounting for the being of man with respect to the divine and to fellow humans.

Of these mentioned common features, let us single out just one for a closer analysis, namely the principle of *corpore et anima unus*. In both anthropologies, we note that this unitary conception of man is evident. In the African understanding, the elements are certainly much more than just body and soul but it remains the case that these elements (body, soul, spirit, character, etc) are not taken to be separate substances rather they are co-principles of the one human substance. Notably, Christian anthropology over the years has been shaped by the ontic categories of body-soul unity which were drawn from Greek philosophy of Plato and Aristotle. Conversely, African cultures acknowledge more than two co-principles as can be noted from the various sampled cultures of the African people. What is however common to both Christian and African understanding of man is that the whole human being is regarded a composite unity. The difference however is to be noted in the multiplicity of co-principles. African cultures identify not only body and soul but consider spirit, character, as co-principles as well. Hence

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<sup>28</sup> Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1951), vii–viii.

whereas misinterpretations of Christian understanding of man could lead to a duality, we do not notice such a danger in the African understanding of man because there are not just two co-principles but four or five depending on the culture. There is however the question of whether ‘spirit’ (Hebrew: *ruach*, Greek: *pneuma*, Latin: *spiritus*) is a different co-principle with respect to the soul (Hebrew: *nephesh*, Greek: *psyche*, Latin: *anima*) or does it refer simply to the nature of the soul? For the African, this would be different whereas for Christianity, it will be correct to speak here of ‘spirit’ as the ‘immaterial’ nature of the soul, in which sense it is opposed to ‘flesh’, ‘matter’. Howsoever, it is not a problem for the African to identify with the Christian principle of ‘corpore et anima unus’ — i.e. unity of the co-principles of the human being’s essence irrespective of how many distinct co-principles constitute man.

#### **b) Divergences**

Let us also continue with our selected aspect of consideration, namely the way in which the unitary elements are identified in both anthropologies. As there are commonalities, we also find divergencies. Every analogy usually reveals these two aspects, hence this is not something totally strange. Now, as noted, the understanding of man in African cultures implicates several co-principles besides the body, soul, spirit elements in Christian anthropology. The Akan culture of Ghanaians for instance, include what could be called individual traits inherited from parents, ‘*ntoro*’, and ‘*mogya*’. Certainly, these are not universal principles of human essence like the body, the soul or the spirit but the African understanding of man teaches that no individual existing human being is bereft of those specific characters, even if they be different for each person. In other words, the abstract man does not exist anyway, only concrete human beings, each of whom carries his or her character as part and parcel of his or her identity. Christian anthropology seems to play down on this individual character peculiar to every human person in a bid for a universalization of rationality, corporeality of the body, or spirituality of the soul. In this way, I consider the anthropological perspectives of most African cultures as being richer and as such even much more receptive to Christian anthropology.

#### **c) Borderline principles**

Aside commonalities and divergences, we also meet certain borderline principles which do not present us with an easy way of distinguishing Chri-

stian and African anthropologies. One of the prominent in this category is the rationality versus relationality characterizations of both anthropologies. Of course, we can say that rationality and relationality also present a certain dynamic of comparisons and divergencies in Christian and African anthropology respectively. In any case, it remains a spurious claim to insist that either of both cultures highlights man's rationality more than relationality or vice versa. Hence, the question of whether rationality or relationality highlights the specific identity of the human being in Christian anthropology or in African anthropology is not easy to resolve. We can at best say that those Christian anthropologists who are oriented towards Greek philosophical categories of Platonic as well as Thomistic leanings will easily argue for the priority of man's rational nature whereas those inclined towards Hebraic dialogical categories of Martin Buber and Franz Rozenzweig will argue rather for relationality. From the African perspective however, relationality seems to be prior to rationality. Without doubt, relationality remains at the center of the African understanding of man. This is evident in the Africa's communal sense of personal identity. For the African, what is central for understanding the human being is 'ubuntu' — a Zulu (Nguni Bantu) concept which translates 'humanity' to literally mean 'I am because we are', hence individual identity is rooted in belongingness to a community for human cannot exist in isolation. We are all rooted in belongingness as sons or daughters, of someone else. In my opinion, Christian anthropology is more relational in its outlook given that the ideal man — Jesus Christ — is eternal Son of God, in the sense of His eternal relationship to the Father. In this way, Christian anthropology is in tandem with the African perspective on the human being.

#### **d) Meeting points but from different emphasis**

From the standpoints of the European and African leanings on the centrality of rationality vs relationality respectively, we come to appreciate the corresponding emphasis on the quest of personal freedom and communal identity. For me, the human being is one whose dignity implicates both aspects. On the one hand, personal freedom is the route to the full actualization of human potentials. Sometimes, social conditions may pose an obstacle to the full realization of personal freedom and in such a situation, we come to appreciate the European emphasis on individual space. Yet, individualism is not to be taken to its extreme as it obfuscates the relational essence of what it means to be human. On the other hand, communal identity attempts to emphasize the relationality of man's being as a creature, who exists right from birth in the family up to the

larger society and till his death, as one who is dependent on others and one upon whom others depend. The African understanding of the human being tries to emphasize this relationality which also tallies with the Christian anthropology as rooted in the person of Christ, whose entire being is constituted by relation as Son of God and as the Last Adam.

### CONCLUSIONS

Our considerations so far on Christian anthropology from an African perspective have highlighted several common elements but also indicated specific entry points from which the African understanding of man can access the richness of Christian anthropology and vice versa. What I wish to indicate in the concluding notes however are the consequences of the African perspectives on Christian anthropology, particularly as it affects Christian belief systems, participation in worship and general moral conduct. In other words, if the average African understands the Christian teaching on the being of man in the way described above, how does it affect what he or she believes about human salvation? Secondly, how does this understanding shape his liturgical practices? And finally: In what way does it become a guide to morality in the African experience of being a Christian?

First and foremost, we begin from the common elements of corporeality and spirituality in the Christian understanding of the body–soul unity of the human being, which also find resonances in African cultures. It is evident that the notions of corporeality and spirituality of the human being facilitate the catechetical explanation of the doctrine of incarnation. To say that Jesus, who is God, have become man, is no doubt to propose a mystery acceptable only by way of faith but already this mystery is not altogether closed to the indigenous rationality of the people as they already have within their creation myth, the idea of a divine being (e.g. Eri) who is maritally bonded to human beings (his wives). On such a background (i.e. *preambula fidei*), it is meaningful for the African mind that hear that God enters into human history, united Himself with humanity. Such a theandric common ground also opens the path for other anthropological principles, such as the unitary constitution of the human being irrespective of the number of co-principles.

Hence the African can easily understand the Christian teaching that man is at once embodied and ensouled having already accepted that man is not just embodied and ensouled but also spirited. A Christocentric anthropological ideal in Jesus is already presented by the Christian vision but this is not altogether

unimaginable for the African mind. Jesus being the perfect image of the invisible God becomes as it were the model which resonates with African worldview about man, who as Christianity teaches is created in the image of God.

From this background, Africans — already accepting the divine origin of man in 'Eri' — are able to grasp the implication of the teaching about the dignity of man as derived from his lofty status as 'imago Dei' but even more to draw from their cultural values of respect for human life an even more congenial acceptance of what Christianity teaches about human dignity. Following from this also is the implication that man is God's steward, who is charged with the duty to take care of God's creation.

Furthermore, regarding worship and liturgy, we come to see that the Christian revelation that the baptized African shares in the membership of the mystical body of Christ, becomes a reality. Hence, the eternal and incarnate Word of God (Jn 1:1–14), who becomes the 'image of God' (Col. 1:15) is felt to be the One Head who unites in Himself, the baptized African for whom the liturgical worship offered by Christ to the Father, becomes accessible and proximate, thanks not only to the intellectual propositions of the doctrine but also more concretely thanks to his or her own embodied humanity. To be sure, embodiment underscores as it were, the sacramental economy which makes the encounter with God possible. Corporeality (materiality) and embodiment becomes as it were channels of symbolic significance expressed in the human faculties of feeling, reasoning and operating. Certainly, African liturgical activities find expressions more in the faculty of feeling which is given to the corporeal aspect of the human being, but also spirituality retains its place in Christian worship for in the fullness of time, true worshippers will do so in spirit and truth (Jn 4:23–24).

Finally, we underscore the moral consequence of African perspectives on Christian anthropology. According to Western categories, moral actions are those springing from the spiritual faculties of the intellect and will. From the African perspective, this is not denied but the emphasis lies more on the will and the passions than on the intellect. One can say that African cultural morality is more voluntaristic than intellectualistic. The moral end of Christian anthropology tendentially aims at the attainment of holiness, which is a function of grace, but this grace is to be rooted in nature. For the African the good man is one with a good will much more than one who understands the rational principles of morality. In my opinion, this is also in consonance with Christian morality as inspired by Christian anthropology, which considers the righteous man, as one who shows a conscientious dose of good will for the things of God as well as towards neighbour. This we have to

agree, is the sense in which Jesus Christ summarized the ten commandments as love of God and love of neighbour.

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#### CHRZEŚCIJAŃSKIE ROZUMIENIE OSOBY LUDZKIEJ Z PERSPEKTYWY AFRYKAŃSKIEJ

##### S t r e s z c z e n i e

Artykuł dąży do przedstawienia chrześcijańskiego rozumienia człowieka z kilku perspektyw kultury afrykańskiej. Główną tezą argumentacji jest to, że wzajemne przenikanie się uniwersalnej kultury afrykańskiej i partykularnych kultur lokalnych nie musi prowadzić do konfliktu wartości. Jak zawsze istnieją wspólne punkty wyjścia, ułatwiające ewangelizację w perspektywie zbawczych owoców, które łaska zawsze oferuje naturze.

W świetle powyższego, głównym celem artykułu jest pokazanie, jak afrykańska perspektywa kulturowa, dotycząca rozumienia człowieka, kształtuje recepcję Ewangelii o człowieku zbawionym przez Chrystusa. Główne pytania badawcze stawiane w artykule brzmią następująco: w jakim świetle chrześcijańskie rozumienie człowieka przemawia do Afrykańczyka? Jaka jest afrykańska perspektywa człowieka i jak wpływa ona na afrykańskie rozumienie orędzia chrześcijańskiego o odkupionej ludzkości? Artykuł składa się z trzech części. W pierwszej przedstawione są punkty wyjścia do zrozumienia osoby ludzkiej, poza tym zostają zestawione dwie wybrane perspektywy: chrześcijańska i afrykańska. W drugiej części artykuł pokazuje główne zasady, które kształtują antropologię chrześcijańską, jak i kilka kulturowych wymiarów, które oznaczają specyfikę antropologii afrykańskiej. Wreszcie, tekst dąży do przedstawienia wybranych elementów antropologicznych, które naświetlają zbieżności i rozbieżności między chrześcijaństwem a kulturami afrykańskimi.

**Słowa kluczowe:** antropologia chrześcijańska; kultura Igbo; Nri mit; relacyjność; Joseph Ratzinger; Richard Niebuhr; John Mbiti.