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The cover design is based on Adinkra symbols, which are found in West Africa, especially in Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana. Each symbol has a distinctive proverbial or religious meaning. Adinkra means "farewell" and so Adinkra cloth, that is cloth stamped with Adinkra symbols, is usually worn at funerals, as a way of bidding farewell to the deceased.

The Church in the African State: Ecumenical Perspectives from West Africa

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The Church in the African State: Guest Editorial

Kwesi A. Dickson

President, All Africa Conference of Churches

One of the refreshing facts of our time is that an increasing number of African Christian thinkers, men and women, have given us much material, through articles and books, on the Church in Africa—its beginnings, growth and development over the centuries—and have expressed the need for more relevant theological thinking to underpin its future advance. However the present theological developments, revealing as they are, have led to some frustration, because they have so far made little impact on both church ethos and theological education. There has been much church growth, giving rise to euphoric prognostications of further phenomenal growth; and yet there has been much tardiness when it comes to being challenged by the current theological developments.

It would be useful, therefore, to speculate on an agenda - a limited one, considering the space available - for further theological investigation as the century draws to a close and a new one approaches.

One significant fact is that the discussion of the past decades has virtually excluded the great majority of Christians, for the simple reason that it has proceeded almost entirely in the medium of the colonial languages, mainly English and French. Most Christians in Africa stand little chance of participating in it by reason of their not being literate in those languages. Here we have a fact which has not seriously engaged the minds of Africa's theological innovators. Is the Church in Africa going to produce the likes of Ngugi wa Thiong'o who wrote respected works of literature in Gikuyu?

As far as the beginnings of the Church in Africa are concerned, the available literature is extensive and impressive; John Baur's *2000 Years of Christianity in Africa* (second revised edition, 1998) is a worthy addition. There are, however, certain areas of the story that could bear further investigation. One could quickly mention three of them.

First, the story is often presented as revolving around the missionaries only. This in a sense is not surprising given the pioneering spirit that so many missionaries so strikingly demonstrated. However, there were Africans, "assistants" to missionaries, and others, men and women, who laboured with the missionaries but who remain largely unsung. It must be realised that in some instances the Gospel message had already been heard before the missionaries arrived.

Second, there is the need to analyse and evaluate more carefully those episodes of violent reaction against the

work of the missionaries. Was this mindless antagonism, as often portrayed in mission records, or were those Africans acting on the basis of their perception of an impending cultural clash? In other words, did they have good reason to be antagonistic? Third, how may one explain the fact that mission activity would often begin with much openness on the part of the missionaries, to be quickly followed by an exclusivist attitude as rules and regulations were imposed on the fledgling congregations?

To come to the present, issues concerning the Church's very integrity must exercise the minds of Christian thinkers. Increasingly, the Church in Africa runs the risk of neglecting its *raison d'être*, which is to preach the Gospel to those who do not know Christ. While talk of the imperative to evangelise is heard, the balance between proclaiming Christ and carrying out "projects" (schools, business ventures, etc.) is possibly tilting in favour of the latter. Is there a danger of preaching and teaching playing second fiddle to church projects?

The reference to teaching brings to mind another concern. Christianity has assumed a high profile, thanks partly to the increasing numbers of Independent Churches. However, serious questions are being raised about strange, so-called Christian teachings which seem to be gaining ground. Theological thought begins from the given of Christ and salvation in his name. Where this is distorted, Christians have difficulty becoming informed participants in the ongoing theological discussions.

There is yet another dimension to the integrity issue: where the Christian makes impeccable faith protestations (easy to make, regrettably!) without living the faith, then the faith is being truncated. One of the facts of our time (with biblical and historical antecedents!) is that some church leaders seem determined to give the Church a bad name, having surrendered themselves to a life of immorality, worldliness and faithlessness. The Church is the body of Christ, is it not?

Now to turn to ecumenism and politics. Ecumenism has come to play an increasingly visible role in the life of the Church, the denominations feeling a great deal more comfortable working together than ever before. Yet when it comes to the wider "ecumenism", embracing different religions, there seems to be little inclination to work together. Christians on a continent where various religions live in close proximity, and in some respects influence one another, have a wonderful opportunity to investigate the theology of religion.