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Gospel and Culture

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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.

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Theology in Africa in the 21st Century: Essential Foundations

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African Instituted Churches: Some local histories



Gospel and Culture: Guest Editorial

Kwame Bediako

Akrofi-Christaller Memorial Centre, Akropong-Akuapem, Ghana

The articles in this issue were all papers given during a series of Gospel and Culture workshops held at Akrofi Christaller Memorial Centre, Akropong-Akuapem, Ghana, during 1998 and 1999. Participants were pastors, scholars and theological educators, drawn from a variety of denominations and from different regions and cultures within Ghana. Each had a commitment to engage intellectually and practically with the issues raised in the Gospel and culture encounter.

These papers, therefore, are not exhaustively researched articles; rather they are offered as fresh, innovative approaches to the debate, and relate to concrete contexts of ministry. They are thus invitations to dialogue and further debate. The first workshop was concerned with "Setting the framework" for understanding how the Gospel relates to culture. The second workshop explored the practical and contextual issues that arose out of the first. The third workshop moved on to focus on "Scripture as the interpreter of culture and tradition." The fourth workshop brought the series to a close, in seeing the interface of Gospel and culture as the arena for shaping tradition and the future of our cultures.

The meaning of the Gospel as revealed through mother-tongue Scriptures is an increasingly important area of investigation. Scripture becomes a fundamental meeting place, as it were, with culture, within the Gospel and culture encounter. We need to understand Scripture itself in the mother-tongue as hermeneutic, as interpreter of tradition and culture; so that increasingly, culture, cultural artefacts and cultural elements are seen through the prism of mother-tongue Scriptures, now perceived to be part of the heritage of a culture.

The Akan people can be used to illustrate this point. Interpreting Akan history, tradition, culture and identity, may not now be done apart from the Bible in Twi, which has become part of Akan culture by virtue of its translation into Twi. This can be applied to all languages. When the Scriptures come into a language, they become an element of the culture, and can, therefore, serve as the hermeneutic, the interpreter, of that culture. While in one sense, the Bible may be said to come from 'outside', in another sense, it comes from within. We may not, therefore, separate Gospel and culture when we consider the role of mother-tongue Scriptures.

It is in this respect that the series provided fresh insight into both the Gospel and culture, because the Gospel spoken in Twi, Ga and Kasem, sounds different from the Gospel spoken in English. It also gave each fresh impetus as the Gospel of Jesus Christ in which we have believed, was allowed to come into continuum and conscious engagement with our cultural traditions.

One possible immediate objection to the approach being defended here could well be, "What of the danger of syncretism? Might not this way of conceiving the relation of Gospel to culture lead to a blurring of their distinctives

with the consequent loss of the "uniqueness" of the Gospel? The response to this objection, in fact, is that by re-configuring the relation of Gospel to culture in terms of their interface within mother-tongue Scriptures, we have the opportunity to devise critical theological categories in the languages and the cultural worlds they express, for engaging with those worlds themselves. By locating the meeting of Gospel and culture in mother-tongue Scriptures, therefore,

...deep foundations are laid for a meaningful theological dialogue to take place... meaningful in so far as the dialogue would be in terms of categories, not of a foreign language and an alien culture, but rather of the local language and the local culture. (Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa, The Renewal of a non-Western Religion*, Edinburgh/New York: Edinburgh University Press/Orbis Books, 1995: 54).

By this same process the Word of God in mother-tongues becomes the route for engaging realistically with those subliminal forces which, by tending in the direction of ethnic exclusiveness, operate with devastating effect to manifest the demonic. Mother-tongue Scriptures therefore become one potent route by which to encounter the demonic in every culture with the redemptive mind of Christ. Over thirty years ago, John V. Taylor observed:

The sin from which Christ can save Man is not the sin of which others have convicted him, or the minor failings of his self-idealisation nor the exaggerated vices of his self-loathing, but the actual condition of need as he knows it when he faces himself in the presence of Christ, in the context of his own world of thought and experience. (*The Primal Vision - Christian Presence amid African Religion*, London: SCM, 1963: 166)

Therefore, through the Gospel, and through the interface with culture, we also gain fresh understanding of culture itself. It becomes a two-way process. This engagement between Gospel and culture becomes inescapable. It is not possible any longer to say, "This is culture and we cannot intermingle it with the Gospel." What is our identity? We cannot take ourselves out of our cultures and stand in sanitised, disinfected isolation from them. At the same time, this process need not cause anxiety. It need not terrorise us, because the engagement between Gospel and culture is what God has been about all along, and this will continue to be so, till the consummation of our redemption.

The first three papers draw out insights into the Gospel and culture encounter from the biblical witness itself. The remaining papers focus on different aspects of methodology for researching Gospel and culture issues. Finally, to undergird the whole, an initial select bibliography is provided of materials on Gospel and culture that are accessible at Akrofi-Christaller Centre. Further installments will be given in subsequent issues of the journal.

