The Mystery of God in Situations of Suffering: Toward the Universality of Christ and a Reconstruction of African Identity

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

THE MYSTERY OF GOD IN SITUATIONS OF SUFFERING:
TOWARD THE UNIVERSALITY OF CHRIST
AND A RECONSTRUCTION OF AFRICAN IDENTITY

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN CONSTRUCTIVE THEOLOGY

BY
LEOCRETIA L. MUGANDA
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS
DECEMBER 2012
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ABSTRACT

During the patristic era, theology dealt with the problem of how to explain the union of the two natures in Christ without losing the impassible nature of God. Today, the understanding of God as impassible is no longer absolute in light of present human suffering. To gain a better understanding of God as possible, the following areas will be examined: the patristic view and the contemporary critique of divine impassibility, the African context and the reconstruction of African Christology via inculturation and liberation. The concept of God as possible can make a significant difference in the lives of Christians. This possibility is revealed in the suffering Christ. Thus, a theology of a possible God is appropriate, not only for the African context, but also for the entire Christian world.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION: STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Statement of the Problem

Suffering is a common human experience and is, perhaps, the most puzzling aspect of humanity’s relationship with God. My work as a chaplain has revealed to me that suffering is the most difficult test of faith for a believer. To believe that God is there with the sufferer, especially when one is in extreme suffering, is hard for many to comprehend. It is difficult to recognize God’s hand acting in our broken world. During difficult times, human beings tend to seek God for immediate help. They want a God who can suffer with them and alleviate their pain. Although traditional Christian theology has long held the doctrine of divine impassibility, the passible God revealed in the suffering Jesus offers humanity strength, hope, and solace. The story of Jesus’ passion found in the Gospels suggests that the suffering Jesus, as the revelation of a passible God, is the basis of a more adequate Christology for Africa and, therefore, a more adequate theology for the Christian world.

Today, the enormity of suffering in our world makes it difficult to understand the concept of omnipotence in which God seemingly stands silently and apathetically above the world’s struggles. Today’s world does not value the idea of a God who is impassible. Impassibility was the effort on the part of the ancient fathers to protect God’s transcendence; however, it may have the effect of giving the impression that God is able
but unwilling to intervene in the face of social and political injustices. Looking to my own experience as a daughter of a continent that has been ravaged by war, famine, diseases, oppression, domestic violence, corruption, and fear of the presence of evil spirits, I believe that Africans, like other people in the world, are longing for deliverance. From where will this deliverance come?

The events of violence in Kenya and Zimbabwe after their presidential elections, the long-term suffering of the people in Darfur Sudan, in the northern part of Uganda, in the Republic of Congo, the Rwandan genocide of 1994, and the systemic oppression of women by African patriarchal culture are examples of overwhelming suffering. Sudan, for example, has been going through a long civil conflict that has left thousands of innocent people homeless and dead. There is an assumed superiority of certain ethnic populations over others that continues to fuel extreme injustice, leading to wars and violence. Ethnic tension and extreme poverty in Kenya result in children as young as ten years old being forced into streets by their parents to beg or into prostitution in order to earn money for the family to live.

The divisive hate among some African communities today raises this question: How deeply have the African Christians internalized the Gospel message? One particularly terrible instance of this was the 1994 Rwandan genocide. Historically, there had been disagreements between the majority Hutus and minority Tutsis, but the animosity between them grew substantially after the colonial period in the mid-nineteenth century. While it was at this time that Christianity was introduced into Africa, the power struggle between the two groups was encouraged, if not fed, by the colonial powers. In reality, the two ethnic groups are very similar. They speak the same language, inhabit the
same areas, follow the same traditions, and they are both Christian. The main challenge is to find a strong fundamental identity with Jesus Christ where “there is neither Jew nor Greek” (Gal 3:28), neither Hutu nor Tutsi, neither Black nor White, neither rich nor poor. How can Christian theology help people move beyond the constraints of their traditions and venture into the world of constructive thought? The historical reality in both Christianity and African traditional religion calls for a more nuanced analysis that recognizes the dignity of each individual human being and the reality of the universal Creator of all.

After so many decades of Christianity in Africa, African theologians still wonder how the Incarnate God can be received and understood within the African context. Robert Schreiter, in his book *Faces of Jesus in Africa*, made a comment on who Jesus is to the African people: “Despite missionary efforts to evangelize Africa, Christ is still largely a distant figure for many Africans. However, there are aspirations of who Jesus might become for them—walking with the suffering people and sharing their pain and struggles.”

What went wrong theologically and historically?

African theologians respond to the issue of human suffering by focusing on the need for an adequate Christology for Africa, a theology that recognizes a suffering God in the person of a suffering Jesus. They criticize traditional Christian theology and the missionary approach that introduced Christianity to Africa from the Western point of view, one that did not address the African experience. The missionary method of evangelization did not allow for dialogue between African traditional religion and

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Christianity. This lack of dialogue between old and new expedited the efforts by the missionaries to introduce the concept of a Christian God as different from the God the African people worshiped. Africa was Christianized with traditional Christian doctrine, where old notions of divine impassibility are central to theology. But in the African tradition, the deity is always present and felt by humanity. This concept of God was condemned by missionaries as animism.² Paul VI corrects this misrepresentation of African traditional religion as “animism” when he wrote, “Here we have more than the so-called ‘animistic’ concept in the sense given to this term in the history of religions at the end of last century.”³ The “God” found in African beliefs, the God with the people, was interpreted as an idol and the Christian God was introduced as “true God.” People were forced to abandon the inherited beliefs that shaped their relationship with God in order to embrace the principles of a new religion.

Africa’s problems of poverty, racism, political and social injustice were not fully addressed by Christianity either. For example, when life becomes painful and challenging, African Christians will quickly fall back to traditional beliefs for help. This is because there has been limited integration of tradition and Christianity. Converts often find more comfort from the familiar and ingrained cultural structures of their society. As the 1994 African Synod stated, “African Christians live in two separate worlds: the world of the traditional religion and the world of the Christian faith.”⁴ Between these two


³ Paul VI, no. 8, p. 73.

worlds, there is a gap that needs to be bridged in order to make Africans fully Christian without losing their African identity.

The Catholic Church had been using its schools as a means of evangelizing the native people of Africa. Drawing the tribal people out of their villages into the catechism classrooms, the Church aimed to reform, rename, and return them to their tribes. At first glance this approach to evangelization seems to be an efficient way to create mass “conversion.” What was really happening, however, was that the school children would graduate from school and return to their tribes, retaining little more than their Christian names; they were absorbed back into their cultural milieu. I ask: how can the African people connect to the reality of Jesus Christ so this reality affects their daily lives? How can Christian theology reflect the African experience and the role this experience plays in African Christology? Ultimately, I will argue, a theology of a passible God is appropriate not only for the African context, but also for the entire Christian world.

There is a need to bridge the gap between traditional Christian theology and contemporary developments in theology as reflected in the growing need for an African Christology. The Second Vatican Council insisted that the updating or reconstructing of theology requires a return to the sources of the Christian tradition for wisdom. Given that the concept of impassibility is rooted in patristic thought, one must seek to understand the theology of the patristic time in order to critique this idea of divine impassibility. In this dissertation, I will use as sources the works of selected fathers to

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understand the origins of the concept of divine impassibility, which was applicable to their time. I will use the works of contemporary theologians to show how present situations of suffering have necessitated a change in the understanding of God. The study of the church fathers as the primary source of Christian tradition will allow for the understanding of both their wisdom and deficiencies relative to contemporary theology. This will enable a deeper understanding of Christian thought and practices, how the concept of divine impassibility developed, and how theology deals with the problem of God and human suffering. One’s understanding of God is of critical importance given its function as the foundation of the entire Christian faith. God came to the world as Jesus Christ and experienced human suffering. It is through Christ that humanity finds salvation. Therefore, the suffering of Christ conveys a passible God who redeems humanity from their own suffering. With a suffering, yet, at the same time, a transcendent God, humanity can hope to transcend their suffering.

The understanding of God as impassible is no longer sufficient in light of present human suffering, nor does it make for an adequate theology of God.6 When one returns to the patristic sources of the concept of God as impassible, it is apparent that the fathers insisted upon divine impassibility in order to protect God’s transcendence. For contemporary theology, particularly African theology, the concern is how to make God more present and tangible. Suffering humanity, exemplified by the people of Africa, can not only relate to the passible God, but can experience the hope God offers, a hope for salvation through the suffering Jesus even in the midst of their own suffering. However,

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the transcendence of God does not change because of our human understanding and naming of God. God’s being present to humanity and its suffering does not affect God’s transcendental nature.

I will argue that the idea of a passible God, revealed in the suffering Jesus, is a more adequate understanding of God and, therefore, a key to a more adequate Christology. This study, therefore, will seek to reconstruct the concept of God from an African perspective in order to develop a relevant African Christology. In essence, I propose to present a theology of a suffering God who has the ability to suffer with a suffering humanity. I will criticize as insufficient the traditional doctrine of divine impassibility, the idea that God cannot suffer. I will claim that the reality of a transcendent yet passible God is a crucial aspect of an adequate Christology. This understanding of God will help to make Jesus Christ more relevant to the African people and the Christian world.

*Traditional Christian Doctrines on God and Christology*

Does it make a difference whether God is impassible or not? How did the notion of divine impassibility that was prominent in traditional Christian theology shape the doctrine of God and Christology? The problem of divine impassibility goes back to patristic times and continues to be an issue in the present. At the beginning of the Christian era, contrasting reason and emotion was highly promoted. While reason existed as a stable and relatively self-moving force, emotion existed as the domain of passion, which was interpreted as submission to external forces. The concept of divine impassibility was conceived following this pattern. It was adopted from the Greek
concept of divine *apatheia* (impassibility).\(^7\) This concept, which is the opposite of *pathos* (passibility) was developed in Greek philosophy as a description of divine perfection and later adapted by early church fathers, whose idea was to put God above earthly desires.\(^8\) Therefore, the nature of a Christian God was considered to be without change or passion since passion involved change and ultimately death.

A similar duality of emotion versus reason was intensified in the Christological controversies of the fourth and fifth centuries. At this time, the early fathers wrestled with the mystery of God in Christ.\(^9\) How could God be united with humanity, in Jesus, and yet remain separate from the suffering of humanity? To resolve this, *apatheia* became the principle for the affirmation of divine transcendence. God was considered above and beyond creation. In contrast to Greek philosophical writings, biblical literature attributes *pathos* to God. Biblical writers use anthropomorphic language and symbols to describe both the activities and emotional life of God. In the Old Testament, for example, God’s anger, repentance, or change of mind is aroused both by human sinful actions and by God’s compassion and mercy. This should not be considered a sign of weakness in God, but of God’s determination to continue the work of salvation. Unlike the *pathos* of human beings, which is induced by external forces, the fathers see divine *pathos* as divine love.

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\(^7\) *Apatheia* is a concept of negation. Its root meaning is perceived in its opposite concept *pathos*. Both concepts were taken from the Greek word *paschein*, which means to suffer, endure, undergo, experience. *Apatheia*, therefore, was taken to be understood as immunity to suffering or passion.

\(^8\) This element is also found in monastic asceticism. See Terrence G. Kardong, *Day by Day with Saint Benedict* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 44-45.

\(^9\) Gregory of Nyssa (c.334-394) in opposition to Eunomius insisted that generation in God does not necessarily imply passivity. Given God is incorporeal, God cannot be moved by passion. See *Against Eunomius* I, 13 in *NPNF* Vol. 5, edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Peabody, MS: Hendrickson, 1994).
and compassion. Therefore, the attribution of both positive and negative human
counts the main difference between the Greek
and the Hebrew approach to the ultimate reality. It is from both approaches that
traditional Christian theology developed its concept of divine impassibility.

We find this kind of approach in the writings of the apostolic fathers, which show
abundant evidence of acquaintance with biblical tradition. Yet, the influence of Greek
philosophy is undeniable. Ignatius of Antioch in his letter to Polycarp assumes the
impassibility of God on the one hand and confesses the suffering of God in Jesus Christ
on the other. He speaks of “the eternal, the invisible, who became visible for our sake, the
impalpable, the impassible, who suffered for our sake, who endured in all ways for our
sake.”10 Ignatius seems to emphasize the mystery of God using both the idea of an
impassible God and salvation through a passible God in the person of Jesus Christ. While
the passage implies that the impassible God suffered, it is not clear whether the
impassible God can also suffer without being affected by suffering. The tension created
by Ignatius’ explanation was used in the later centuries to explain the mystery of God.
The second-century Apologists Christianized the concept of apatheia by emphasizing its
use and avoiding the application of pathos when talking about God.11 They tended to
characterize God in terms of divine impassibility, thereby distancing themselves from the
biblical image of a passible God.

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Holmes (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 33.

11 Justin the Martyr uses the concept of apatheia to differentiate between the Christian God and
the Greek gods, see I Apol. 25, 2.
Significant theological developments that took place between the third and fifth centuries have their origin in the late part of the second century. This period witnessed the development of different modes of understanding the union between humanity and divinity in the Incarnation. The main problem was to explain how the union of the two natures in Christ took place and how it could be explained without reducing the divine nature of Christ. The issue was to preserve the full reality and integrity of both the divine and human natures in Christ. They claimed that suffering should only be applied to Jesus’ body. Since God is incorporeal, God cannot suffer. This claim was taken to mean that God cannot experience an emotional change as a result of God’s relationship with creation.

Despite the fact that the attribution of impassibility to God reached its highest point in the third century, a few attempts were made to attribute suffering to God in both Christological and Trinitarian discourses. In the Alexandrian theologies, for example, this theme was advocated by people like Clement and Origen. While Clement denied the possibility of divine suffering, Origen made an affirmative statement of divine suffering love, affirming that “not only the Logos suffered in Jesus Christ but also that the Father suffered with the Son.” Likewise, the Cappadocian fathers, in response to Arianism,

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12 Paul L. Gavrilyuk gives a detailed description of the major groups involved in the Christological debate, which include Docetism, Patrpassianism, Arianism, and Nestorianism. See Gavrilyuk’s *The Suffering of the Impassible God: The Dialectics of Patristic Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 64-175.


denied the suffering of God. They argued that Christ is “passible in his flesh and impassible in his Godhead.”

According to Gregory of Nyssa (c.334-394), by His being God, the Logos is impassible. After the Incarnation, God in the person of Jesus suffered and died. For Gregory, God was both passible and impassible. In his attempt to find a better way to explain the mystery of God in the Incarnation, Gregory of Nyssa was reacting to Eunomius, the Arian. The problem was how to explain the issue of the generation of the Son from the Father. Gregory claimed that the act of divine generation did not produce unlike results; that is, the Father does not change by begetting the Son, nor is the Son who is generated less than the Father. Gregory argued that, “if God created without labor or matter He surely also begot without labor or flux.” For Gregory, it was not necessary to ground the debate about God in human experiences associated with human conception and birth. For him, those human characteristics put divine impassibility at risk. However, he consistently insisted that, in the Incarnation, there is an exchange of one nature to the other, calling this phenomenon koinonia tôn idiomatòn. In this union, God

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15 The Cappadocian fathers are Gregory of Naziansus (329-389), Basil of Caesaria (330-379), and Gregory of Nyssa (330-395). They laid the pattern for formulating the doctrines related to the mystery of the Trinity.


17 Gregory of Nyssa., iv, 1.

18 Gregory of Nyssa., iv, 1.

19 The term koinonia tôn idiomatòn is the Greek expression that means a mutual exchange of properties whereby the divine properties of Christ can be ascribed to the humanity of Jesus, and the human properties can be ascribed to the Divinity. This was later translated into Latin by the Latin fathers as Communicatio Idiomatum.
communicates divinity to humanity and humanity shares in the divinity. Thus, the Godhead took flesh as its own and suffered in it but remained impassible in its divinity.

The notion of divine impassibility continued to dominate the Christological controversies of the fourth and fifth centuries as the Alexandrian and Antiochene schools attempted to formulate the Christological doctrine of the Incarnation. Gregory’s koinonia tòn idiomatòn terminology was found to be problematic since it allowed the possibility of God to suffer. The belief at the time was that God was impassible. How could God be said to suffer or to become human without tarnishing his divinity? Nestorius, the patriarch of Constantinople, presented the Antiochene Logos-anthropos Christology, in which the Logos is conjoined to the humanity in Jesus. Their argument was in opposition to the Alexandrian Logos-sarx Christology, in which the Logos is ontologically united to the flesh. For Nestorius, this could jeopardize the integrity of his divinity. He wished to protect Jesus Christ’s divinity by insisting that there was no passion in the Godhead.

In opposition to Nestorius, Cyril of Alexandria (c.375-444), under the influence of his predecessor Athanasius, sought to address the issue from the Alexandrian position of Logos-sarx Christology, which stressed the ontological union of the two natures in Christ. Cyril claimed that the Logos in Christ as a transcendental reality remained untouched by the neediness of the human soul and body. Taking from Gregory of Nyssa, Cyril

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20 Athanasius affirmed the consubstantiality of the Logos with the Father, claiming that the Son is of the same substance. He continued to think of the unity of the two natures in Christ in terms of the Logos-sarx model in which the Logos remained untouched by the properties of the flesh. He insisted that the human nature in Christ suffered, but his divine nature remained impassible. See Athanasius, Discourse against the Arians, III, 4; 32.

employed the use of *koinonia tôn idiomaton* in an attempt to conceptualize and articulate the mystery of the Incarnation. He translated the terminology into Latin as *Communicatio Idiomatum*. For Cyril, the Incarnation was not the compositional union of natures, but the *Logos*, being united with humanity, took a new form of existence as God-Man. Cyril called this union “hypostatic” meaning that the *Logos* who is *homoousios* with the Father came to exist as God Incarnate who could undergo human experiences such as birth, suffering, and death. Cyril asserted that “it was permissible to attribute experience of human nature only in reference to incarnate condition.” This means that the One who is impassible as God actually is passible as God-Man.

From the fourth to the seventh century, the Church continued to search for the solution to this issue in its conciliar decisions. The issue of divine impassibility continued to be a major theological concern throughout the medieval period. Medieval theologians inherited from the early fathers the body of opinions on the concept of divine impassibility that were declared normative in the Christian tradition. Anselm (1033-1109) and Thomas Aquinas (1226-1274), like their predecessors, faced the need to preserve Jesus’ authentic humanity and to describe the mode of experiencing the passion that did

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22 “Hypostatic union” is a theological term introduced at the Council of Ephesus (431) to express the union of the divine and human natures in Christ. It is a union “in which a genuine human subject (body and soul) belongs to the Second Person (*hypostasis*) of the Trinity. This definition is taken from Leo J. O’Donovan’s *A World of Grace: An Introduction to the Themes and Foundations of Karl Rahner’s Theology* (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), 192.

23 *Homoousios* is a term derived from Greek and accepted by the Council of Nicaea (325) to affirm that in the Godhead the Son, who is the Second Person of the Trinity, is one in being with the Father. The statement was incorporated into the Nicene Creed. This definition is taken from O’Donovan’s *A World of Grace*, 192.

not interfere with the divinity of the Incarnate Word. Anselm upheld the doctrine of
divine impassibility in terms of God’s sympathy.\textsuperscript{25} He admits that God is compassionate
but denies that this means suffering on the part of God. In the compassion of God,
Anselm sees God pitying the sufferer without being touched by the weakness of the
latter.

Aquinas’ view is guided by two basic assumptions: that God is pure actuality
without any potentiality and that God is incorporeal.\textsuperscript{26} He argues that moving from
potentiality to actuality is the sign of imperfection. The attributes of perfection, in-
corporeality and simplicity, require that God is immovable. Basically, he would believe
that God is impassible, only on the condition that the attributes implied are compatible
with divine immutability. Love, for example, can only be attributed to God when it
signifies “activities of the intellect.”\textsuperscript{27} According to Aquinas, human love involves
motion and immutability that signify change. However, God being love himself has the
characteristics of immutability and impassibility that distinguish God from creation. Only
positive characteristics such as love, goodness, compassion, and perfection could be
considered divine attributes.\textsuperscript{28} Thus, beyond the legacy of philosophy, the early church
fathers and the Scholastics insisted on divine impassibility as the norm. They thereby

\textsuperscript{25} Anselm of Canterbury, \textit{Proslogion with the Reprise of Gaunilo and Anselm}, trans. Thomas
Williams (New York: Hacket, 2001), 8. See also \textit{Cur Deus Homo: Why God Became Man} (Chicago: Open
Court, 1903), 1, 8.

\textsuperscript{26} Thomas Aquinas, \textit{Summa Theologica}, I, Benziner Bros, trans. Fathers of the English
Dominican Province, 1947, 9.1.

\textsuperscript{27} Thomas Aquinas, \textit{Summa Theologiae}, I, 20, 1.; II 22, 3.

\textsuperscript{28} Aquinas, Ia q. 20, a. I
tried to distinguish these divine attributes from human passion, which was regarded as a fallible and finite part of human nature.

However, things began to move in a different direction during the Reformation. With the exception of Martin Luther, whose Christology articulated the classical doctrine of *koinonia tòn idiomatôn*, the rest of the Reformation theologians accepted the ancient notion of divine impassibility as normative. Although the concept of divine impassibility continued to be taken as normative, Luther had a different way of thinking about God. As he wrote, “He who does not know Christ, does not know God hidden in suffering.” Luther tended to relate the suffering of God to the concept of divine impassibility by means of his interpretation of *koinonia tòn idiomatôn*. This terminology meant for Luther the total reciprocity of the two natures in Christ. As he writes, “The two natures join their characteristics, and the divine nature gives to the human its characteristics, and, conversely, the manhood gives its characteristics to the divine nature.” For Luther, this assumption was further developed in his theology of the Cross and his Christology, which showed traces of his belief in the suffering of God. He wrote, “God can be found only in the Cross and suffering.” In this light, Luther offers affirmation of the suffering God and divine involvement in the suffering of Christ.

These developments in traditional theology show that Greek philosophy, which was flourishing during the patristic time, influenced the way the fathers thought about

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31 Mozley, 122.

32 Luther *Luther’s Works*, vol. I, no. 24
God and their world. Similarly, during the medieval period, theology was influenced by the feudal system, which was governing society. In light of these facts, it can be argued that the influence of historical realities on theology makes it necessary to study patristic and scholastic theology, to determine what ideas were being expressed, and to see how relevant those ideas were during their time, and how relevant they are to our day. This is a crucial argument in support of an inculturation approach for translating past ideas into contemporary terms. Just as contemporary theologians are not bound by past philosophies, so they are not bound to past socio-political analogies. In both situations, there may be relevant analogies that may prove useful in informing the theology of our time, particularly African theology.

For African theology, however, the concept of divine impassibility implies an insurmountable distance between humanity and God. Given that Africans have historically always related to a personal God, an impassible God is theologically challenging. In this connection, I propose an inculturation approach through which the Christian message could be integrated into African values in such a way that not only the Christian message is expressed in the traits of African cultures, but also that the African cultures are evangelized to become enrichment for the Christian faith. This approach will offer an adequate understanding of God that dismisses only the interpretation of divine impassibility provided by ancient theology that places God far from human suffering. And, yes, it will make a difference not only in how African people relate to God but also how the entire Christian world relates to their creator.

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33 African traits may include religious symbols, feasts, ceremonious activities, myths, and rituals.
Divine Impassibility in Contemporary Thought

In the twentieth century, there was a paradigm shift in the way theologians thought about the notion of divine impassibility in relation to human suffering. With few exceptions, late twentieth-century theologians portrayed a passible God who suffers in solidarity with humanity in order to liberate them. The need for a God who suffers arose in response to human needs in the face of twentieth-century suffering. It was the voice of theologians arguing from the experience of human suffering, such as the brutalities of WWII, racism, sexism, political turmoil, economic and political power depravation, and numerous other injustices. For them, an apathetic God takes no interest in human affairs and is entirely immune from suffering. Their goal was to rediscover grounds for hope in the midst of a growing sense of despair. They based their claims on Christ’s passion and death, where God became crucified, suffered, and died on the Cross for the sake of salvation. This image of a passible God is significant for contemporary theology, especially African Christology. Although African Christianity was affected by the traditional Christian understanding of God as impassible, there is also an ancient belief in African religion that God is both impassible and passible.34

The traditional concept of divine impassibility was rejected as insufficient by many contemporary theologies.35 "They claim that the doctrine of divine impassibility is

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35 Some of the contemporary theologians who defended the concept of God’s suffering include Elizabeth Johnson, Jürgen Moltmann, James Cone, Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Laurenti Magesa, and John Mary Waliggo, to mention but a few.
of Greek origin and has little to do with the compassionate God of the Bible.” For them, the concept of divine impassibility conveys the image of a God who stands silently and apathetically beyond the world’s historical struggles. This God, portrayed by Greek philosophy, appears to take no interest in human affairs and is entirely immune to suffering. Jürgen Moltmann and James Cone are two contemporary theologians who have defended the notion of a God who suffers. They base their arguments on the theology of the Cross and people’s life experiences in relation to Jesus. Their starting point is the human experience of suffering. They have portrayed a passible God who suffers in solidarity with those who suffer in order to liberate them from both physical and spiritual bondage.

However, not all contemporary theologians reject the traditional claim of divine impassibility. Theologians such as Paul L. Gavrilyuk and Thomas Weinandy have defended it, arguing that contemporary views have misrepresented traditional theology by associating it with Greek philosophy. Both Weinandy and Gavrilyuk insist that before passing any judgment on the idea of divine impassibility, one must first look carefully at what the fathers were trying to explain. Both theologians reject the claim that the fathers adopted the doctrine of divine impassibility uncritically from Hellenistic philosophy. They also reject the claim that this doctrine of divine impassibility does not leave room for divine emotions and God’s involvement in history. The lack of agreement from contemporary theologians raises questions relevant to the topic at hand. Did the fathers

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36 Jürgen Moltmann, Jesus Christ for Today’s World (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1994), 42.
reject completely the notion of divine passibility? Did contemporary theologians misinterpret the fathers?

**Solution to the Problem: Reconstructing African Christology**

In the twentieth century, the Latin American Catholic church was awakening to the issues of justice and civil rights within the larger community. The American civil rights movement also stirred conversation about the broader calling of the Church in the face of suffering and discrimination. At the same time, African theologians began theological research in light of scripture and tradition, seeking to understand how African beliefs and customs could be reconciled with Christian teaching. Proposals for African Christology drawing on inculturation and liberation theologies were made.37 These theologies are intended to develop a Christianity that will no longer be seen as imported but genuinely African. They include African lived experiences reflecting historical, cultural, social, and religious dimensions.

African theologians are searching for ways to develop a theology that fully embraces the dignity of each human person as revealed by the mystery of the Incarnation. Scholars of African Christology have developed divergent views on the image of Jesus Christ in Africa. In many ways they are trying to integrate the Christian faith into Africa’s cultural heritage through the approach of inculturation. What role does the continent’s suffering play in shaping the understanding of who Jesus is for Africans?

The focus of this study is the suffering God revealed in the person of Jesus, God’s

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commitment to the liberation of the oppressed, and God’s position as a passible God. This dissertation will address the impassibility of God in light of the African experience of suffering, and how this suffering affects people’s lives, beliefs, and cultural and religious practices. In addition, how these four aspects of human experience shape African Christology will be examined.

A theology of inculturation involves the effort to integrate Christian teaching into African cultures so that the cultures are assumed and purified by the Gospel message. It also seeks to translate Christian values into the African context by identifying and correcting the shortcomings in the encounter between the Western form of Christianity passed on by the missionary activities and the African religion and culture. This approach to the Christian mystery is embraced by Charles Nyamiti and other African theologians who have taken the biblical teaching on Jesus Christ and placed it in the African cultural context. Like traditional theologians, African theologians have utilized Scriptures and Christian tradition as the ground for their African theology. However, they insist that these sources must be approached from a traditional African perspective. What matters for Africans is who Jesus is in relation to their life struggles and how these struggles might be redeemed by Christ’s suffering. The suffering Jesus, therefore, becomes the special revelation of God. The content of Christ’s message, for the oppressed, is liberation.

In African Christology, Christ is found in everyday life experiences. As John Mbiti, the father of African theology observes, “In Africa the knowledge of God is not found in creedal formulations, theological statement and mystical experiences, but in
day-to-day encounter with the challenges of life.”

God is, therefore, found in living contacts, in concrete situations and experiences. With this in mind, I will establish the association between the issue of divine impassibility based on the reality of the suffering of Jesus Christ and the African experience of suffering to make the claim that the suffering Jesus, as the revelation of the impassible God, is the basis of an adequate Christology.

Africans are searching for a suffering Jesus who can identify with their own suffering. They want a Jesus who suffers with them in the shanty towns, in refugees’ camps, in domestic violence, in political unrest, in ethnic hate, in poverty, in gender discrimination, and the like. In these conditions, a suffering Jesus reveals to them a suffering God standing with them against injustices and oppression. At present, there are differences in the way African theologians are developing African Christology, much of which draws on their life experiences. Similarly, there are differences between how the early fathers approached the question of Jesus and how contemporary Africans are dealing with it. While the fathers approached the problem from above, African theologians are starting from below.

To date, scholars of African Christology have developed divergent views on the image of Jesus in Africa. For them, the passible God, as seen in Jesus, is more meaningful within their lived experience. With the longing for justice, reconciliation, and peace, the search is shifting to Jesus as the reconciler and liberator for a fuller human dignity. Yet, the question is still raised. What role does human experience play in shaping

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the understanding of who Jesus is for Africans? My focus will be on Jesus’ experience as human and his divine power to liberate suffering humanity, the role that makes him a possible God. The suffering of God must be seen in the person of the suffering Jesus. Jesus the crucified is seen in history to redeem the marginalized and, by identifying with them, is able to release them from unjust social structures.

What we value is surely of relevance to our understanding of God. In ancient times, the focus was on the values of power, authority, kingdom, glory, and honor. For example, in the medieval period, the highest form of authority would have been a king. It is not surprising that in this context a monarchical view of God would have flourished. But the limitations of the monarchical metaphor are manifest in the African culture and socio-political and economic realities that may urge the acceptance of new metaphors for the divine-human relationship. Metaphors such as king, lord, transcendent, and impassible, emphasized in ancient Christian theology, are inadequate when considered to be the absolute representation of God. An alternative Christology should be based on the suffering Jesus in relation to suffering humanity. It should seek to address issues that neglect respect for human dignity. This would result in my proposed theology of African inculturation based on the African values of respect, inheritance, and community. Since Africans relate to God in a community, Christianity in Africa has to nurture each individual Christian within the community with its inherited concept of a God who nurtures, heals, and accompanies humanity in their suffering in order to liberate them.

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39 Theology of inculturation seeks to incarnate Christian values in the African context by identifying and correcting the shortcomings in the encounter between the Western forms of Christianity passed on by the missionary activities and the African religion and culture. See Laurenti Magesa, *Anatomy of Inculturation: Transforming the Church in Africa* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 174.
In order to reconstruct a Christology that reflects the African experience, I will examine both selected patristic and contemporary sources that reflect on the issue of divine impassibility. I will explore the issue of human suffering from the African context that connects to the reality of a suffering Jesus. This will allow for the development of an African faith community that celebrates a theology respectful of African realities, both cultural and spiritual. It will enable Africans to have a better understanding of the Universal God with the aid of inherited ideas and life experience.

To bridge the gap between the African experience and the Christian faith, I will evaluate the work of African theologians on the theology of inculturation, which is important in reconstructing adequate Christology. As previously noted, in patristic and medieval times theology reflected the cultural atmosphere. Similarly, my proposed theology of inculturation will affirm that ancient Christianity was also inculturated. This will help Africans feel at home within the larger Christian community and enable them to relate to the universal God. In this respect, the Theology of inculturation and liberation in sub-Saharan Africa is crucial to the bridging of the gap between ancient Christian theology and relevant African theology. As Schreiter points out, both approaches are complementary in the sense that they address not only the suffering experiences of the African people but also the richness of the African culture,\(^40\) which can be integrated into Christianity, making it more meaningful not only to Africans, but also to the rest of the world.

\(^{40}\) Schreiter, *Faces of Jesus in Africa*, viii.
In the teaching of Christian faith and the norms that govern human conduct, the African traditional community must serve as a theological framework in which love and respect shape the identity of the African Christian individual. My suspicion is that the way Christianity was first introduced to Africans through recited Catechism with fixed doctrines is not applicable to the African experience and can be confusing if taken without consideration of this context. This is why the inculturation approach is necessary to enable Africans to live their faith in Christ from within the roots of their culture and to express it in their own way. To discern the actual image of Jesus that informs the African people, revisiting the doctrine of divine impassibility and passibility through the method of inculturation is a necessary approach in reflecting on the African relationship to a suffering Jesus. Relating their suffering to a suffering Jesus will make their own suffering redeemed by the redemptive suffering of Jesus.

**Defining the Terms**

*Impassibility and passibility:* The term *passibility* comes from the Latin word *passibilis*, which means able to suffer or to experience emotions. Contrary to that, *impassibility* describes the theological doctrine that God does not experience pain or emotions from the actions external to Himself.\(^4\) Scriptures have portrayed God as being subject to emotions such as joy, anger, love, and compassion. However, biblical scholars do not take these anthropomorphic phrases to mean that God literally experiences these emotions. The terms are used metaphorically to describe God’s presence and actions in the world together with God’s relationship to human beings.

Literature Review

What follows is a review of some of the influential literature that will assist in the formulation and conceptualization of this research theme: the problem of divine impassibility/passibility as it relates to Christology and African theology and the need for a more adequate understanding of God. The early church fathers employed the concept of divine impassibility in an effort to articulate the doctrine of the Incarnation and to protect the doctrine of God. The issue in question created controversies dating back to the onset of Christianity and is criticized by contemporary theologians who are arguing for a theology of a passible God who is affected by human suffering. This dissertation will be divided into two sections, with section one examining the work of selected early church fathers and contemporary theologians who made a significant contribution on impassibility/passibility and its component issues. Section two will examine the work of selected African theologians on the issue of divine impassibility in an African context.

Patristic Evidence

Patristic literature argues that God is impassible in and of God’s self. God is inherently beyond suffering. For the early church fathers, impassibility meant that God does not experience pain and suffering such as humanity does. When this was applied to Christology, it triggered controversial debates. If Christ came to reveal the Supreme God, he could not have come in human flesh. Thus, Cyril of Alexandria was challenged by Nestorius to explain the mystery of the Incarnation without compromising the divine nature in Christ. He came up with the hypostatic theory that described the ontological nature of the union of the two natures of Christ. In the Incarnation, Cyril sees the eternal God directly experiencing suffering and death, yet “God does not become overwhelmed
by suffering or death.”

The debate was ignited by the fact that Cyril and Nestorius approached the issue of divine impassibility from different starting points. While the question for Cyril was how the Logos could become human without ceasing to be divine, for Nestorius it was how the two natures could retain their original integrity after conjunction.

According to John McGuckin, it was Cyril who drew significant attention to the possibility that God suffers. As he puts it, “One of his [Cyril’s] favorites was: The Logos suffered impassibly.” Cyril claimed that the doctrine of the Incarnation has a direct role in introducing the idea of a God who suffers by becoming human and participating in history and time. Given this idea, Cyril explains why Mary should be called Theotokos (God Bearer), yet Christ’s divinity united with humanity does not compromise His divinity.

**Contemporary Views on Divine Impassibility**

For the defenders of Patristic theology, an impassible God was not just a Greek abstraction but was considered crucial to salvation. God became human so that humanity can rise above its fallen nature and its suffering. This is what excited Cyril, to think that the “the impassible suffered” in the flesh. In this, he meant that the eternal, all powerful, immutable, yet Incarnate God had indeed entered fully into human experience once and for all. In the Incarnation, Christ became God united with human nature and through Christ God was revealed to be possible. Cyril’s message, therefore, is one of hope to

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suffering humanity, given that only if the impassible God becomes passible for their sake can human suffering be endured.

Cyril of Alexandria’s articulation of divine impassibility/passibility strikes some modern minds as plausible. Thomas Weinandy, in his book Does God Suffer?, finds Cyril’s *Communicatio Idiomatum* to be the heart of the Incarnational mystery. He criticizes those who advocate for a passible God and charges that “they miss the logic of *Communicatio Idiomatum* and in this way they limit suffering within God’s divine nature and out of human nature.”44 However, he maintains that the *Communicatio Idiomatum* ensures that the Son who is impassible as the wholly other is precisely the same one who is actually passible as human in the person of Jesus.

Weinandy defends the fathers in their account of the impassibility of God, claiming that “they were more influenced by and more faithful to biblical revelation than those contemporary theologians who defend divine passibility.”45 He maintains that the philosophical notion of God and God’s relationship to the world grew up within and gave expression to the patristic tradition. He contends this notion of God finds its source, its inspiration, and its impetus from within the Bible itself. He rejects the entire proposal of contemporary theologians that ascribes suffering to the divine nature by saying that “they misconceive and so misinterpret and misrepresent the fathers and Aquinas.”46

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45 Weinandy, 84.

46 Weinandy, 202. Weinandy seeks to defend Aquinas by showing the logic of his metaphysical question of what God is. In Aquinas’ view, we don’t have immediate access to the divine reality as it is in itself. He insists that divine characteristics must be distinguished from human characteristics. His argument is that passion in human beings pertains to will and emotional change. God, on the other hand, is not
What was the purpose of the concept of divine impassibility in patristic theology? Why was the concept even considered worthy of consideration? In his book *The Suffering of the Impassible God: The Dialectics of Patristic Thought*, Paul Gavrilyuk offers some insights into why this question needs more attention. He maintains that the fathers did not adequately address the controversial question of whether and how the impassible God can be involved in suffering. His assessment of this question raises an important issue. In both studies for and against divine impassibility, he has discovered some strengths and limitations. He points out that the fathers did not address the issue adequately, and, yet, he warned that contemporary theologians should not be too quick to judge the fathers without first understanding their mind.

Gavrilyuk states, “A standard line of criticism places divine impassibility in the conceptual realm of hellenistic philosophy, where the term allegedly meant the absence of emotions and indifference to the world.” However, he maintains that impassibility in this sense cannot be an attribute of the Christian God. For the fathers to call a Christian God impassible, they sought to distance God the Creator from other gods of Greek mythology.

In response to human suffering in the twentieth century, Jürgen Moltmann, James Cone, and other liberation theologians see God as passible for the purpose of making God more present to those who suffer. For Cone, the passibility and impassibility of God are corporeal but pure act (*actus purus*) or being itself (*ipsum esse*). Aquinas insists that God is beyond the human category of motion with its alternating movement and rest. Therefore, there is no passion in God, and we cannot think of God as changing in a certain way with a kind of change that we know in our human experience, namely from potentiality to actuality (see *Summa Theologica* Ia, 9, 1-2).

necessary for understanding of the nature of God. However, Moltmann and Cone see this theological tension not as a problem but as a sound argument for a truly compassionate and empathetic God. This concept is helpful to their audience, that is, the poor and the oppressed. Moltmann has taken the Cross and Christ the Crucified as his starting point.

In his book *Jesus Christ for Today’s World*, Moltmann argues that if God cannot suffer, how can Christian faith explain adequately the meaning of Christ’s birth, passion, death, and resurrection? Moltmann blames traditional theology for failing to develop a consistently Christian concept of God and for leaning instead on the metaphysical tradition of Greek philosophy that views God as impassible. He claims that “if God is incapable of suffering, he must be incapable of love and Christ’s passion can only be viewed as a human tragedy that will be the end of our faith.”

In this light, Christian theology should also seek to perceive God in a suffering Jesus whose passion reveals a suffering God.

Unlike Moltmann’s, Cone’s Christology focuses on the revolutionary “Black Christ,” who preached the good news to the poor and the oppressed. As the subject of Black theology, a suffering Jesus reveals himself in the struggles of the oppressed. Cone finds a passible God in the image of the God of the Exodus, who stands on the side of the oppressed to change oppressive political, economic, and social structures.

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50 Cone, 207.
perspective of the oppressed Black people. It has to be contextual in the sense of making
the social context of the oppressed people its passionate concern.

In order to fully articulate and support a concept of a passible God, one needs to
appreciate the origin of the argument for an impassible God. The first section will explain
the foundation of the concept of an impassable God, thus allowing me to contextualize
this view of God as impassable.

**Divine Impassibility in the African Context**

The second section addresses the issue of divine impassibility in an African
context. Of essential significance to this section is material drawn from selected
contemporary African theologians. African Christian theologians are searching for an
authentic relationship with the Christian God. They are attempting to determine the past
and present context of salvation in African Christian history. The point is, even before
Africans received Christianity they were part of salvation history. Traditional Christian
soteriology offers an answer that is problematic to Africans because it is based upon the
concept of a weak and powerless God. It is an answer that rests on a passible God who
suffers with humanity in the person of the suffering Jesus. The question remains, to what
degree is the issue of divine impassibility present in traditional African religions?

The reality of God is a basic assumption Africans inherited from their traditional
religious views. For some African theologians, God can be transcendent and immanent
simultaneously. As John Mbiti says, “Africans believe that God has intrinsic attributes of
omnipotence, omnipresence, omniscience, transcendence but also immanence.”

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However, the awareness of God as both transcendent and immanent obliges theology to think of God’s being as a mystery. Thus, what contemporary theologians are emphasizing is the significance of maintaining the dialectical tension between divine immanence and transcendence.

Like John Mbiti, Charles Nyamiti approaches the mystery of Christ from the African ancestral viewpoint. Among other African theologians, Nyamiti stands out as an advocate of divine impassibility in African theology. Although he agrees with Moltmann that the Cross should be interpreted in Trinitarian terms, Nyamiti disagrees with the idea of divine passibility. He rejects any further implication of Moltmann’s theology of the Cross, calling it “the error of Patripassianism,” which claims that the Father himself suffers on the Cross with the Son. He accepts that God the Father becomes an ancestor through the ancestorship of the Son, but he would not admit that God the Father suffers with God the Son. Nyamiti also believes that God reveals His power through the weakness of Christ’s Cross and that it is through his triumph on the Cross that we become partakers of divine nature. Yet, Nyamiti insists that God the Father, due to His impassible nature, was not involved in the suffering of the Son.

Nyamiti’s approach differs from that of liberation theologians such as the group of African women theologians known as the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians. Women theologians have raised questions of the applicability of Nyamiti’s theological statements for all Africans. They have criticized the patriarchal concept of

52 Charles Nyamiti, *Christ as Our Ancestor: Christology from an African Perspective* (Gweru, Zimbabwe: Mambo Press, 1984), 44.

divine impassibility that supports the hierarchy, domination, and sexism that is the cause of their suffering. The idea of impassibility divinizes the male stereotype of not suffering or feeling emotions. Mercy Amba Oduyoye, the founder of the Circle, insists on the compassionate God in Christ who can empower women to face and conquer life’s struggles. Women refuse to allow themselves to be subjected to the cultural codes that mask the image of God in women. They have discovered their own images that empower them. Their experience of the possible God empowers them with the spirituality of resistance to dehumanization as they respond to oppressive social conditions.

In The Will to Arise, for example, Teresia Hinga, a member of the Circle, describes the Christology of African women as the experience of God in Christ. For her, African women describe Jesus as a friend and companion who helps them bear life’s burdens. Within the feminist framework, the understanding of a compassionate God as possible involves more than solidarity with the poor, as seen in male liberation theology. For African women, the idea of a suffering God brings empowerment, comfort, and healing.

In Jesus the Liberator, Laurenti Magesa approaches the issue of divine impassibility from the socio-political view. His approach is similar to that of James Cone, who developed a political theology in God of the Oppressed by examining the socio-political situations of African Americans. Magesa examines the socio-economic and

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political situations prevalent in Africa that raise numerous ethical and moral questions. These include issues of excessive wealth in the midst of dehumanizing poverty, political and economic domination by domestic and international power brokers, and the lack of freedom in its various aspects: ignorance, famine, and ethnic wars. He sees all of these issues as sources of suffering for the African people, which necessitate a passible God who can liberate them from their suffering situations.

While liberation theologians see the power of God in human experience, Nyamiti sees it in God’s uniqueness. This makes Nyamiti reject any theology that implies divine suffering. In his view, the belief in divine passibility would lead to obscuring the difference between the impassible God and a passible human nature in Jesus. Nyamiti, in my judgment, fails to understand women’s search for an image of a passible God in the suffering of humanity. African women live by caring, and they see in themselves an image of a caring God in whose image they are created. Their goal is to make those who suffer feel that a passible God is present and caring for their needs.

Outline of Chapters

The first part consists of three chapters. The issues to be addressed will include the issue of divine impassibility as a theological problem. This will also include early debates concerning the union of Christ’s divine and human natures and the relevance of divine impassibility to contemporary issues in the world and to African theology. It will

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also include the response of contemporary theologians on the issue of divine impassibility.

Chapter 1, Introduction: The Statement of the Problem will define the problem in its context; give it a background and pose a possible solution to the problem. This chapter will also state the significance of this issue of divine impassibility/passibility in today’s pluralistic theology.

Chapter 2: God as Impassible: Review of Patristic Theology, will focus on the historical background of the development of the Christological debate of the fourth century. Different stages in the development of this debate will be highlighted with emphasis on the work of Cyril of Alexandria in response to Nestorius. An attempt will be made, in this chapter, to make a systematic presentation of the basic features of the theme of divine impassibility and the significance of Cyril’s Christology.

Chapter 3: God as Impassible: Review of Selected Contemporary Western Theology will review twentieth-century theology with two different perspectives on the impassibility of God. The chapter will also state why the question of divine impassibility is again a contested issue today. The work of Thomas Weinandy and Paul L. Gavrilyuk will be reviewed as commentators and defenders of the patristic view of divine impassibility. Jürgen Moltmann and James Cone will be reviewed as the opposing approach in attempt to present divine passibility as a workable solution to the problem of divine impassibility and human suffering. This will show how this debate of divine impassibility continues both in pro and con forms even in contemporary theologies.

The next two chapters will examine African Christology of Charles Nyamiti and other selected African theologians. In Chapter 4: The Problem of Divine Impassibility in
an African Context, I will demonstrate how the issue of divine impassibility is already discussed in African theologies. The chapter will analyze African traditional religion with focus on the concept of divine suffering. I will present the strengths and limitations of selected African theologies and will suggest how African theology can more adequately reflect the African experience. The immense suffering of the African people calls for a theology grounded in a passible God. African theology needs to recognize and address the realities of African life.

Taken together, therefore, the three trends of theology could be seen as a comparative presentation of classical, contemporary Western, and African theological approaches to the reality of God and particularly to the issue of divine impassibility.

Chapter 5: Reconstructing African Christology via the Doctrine of Inculturation will critically assess the inadequacy of the concept of divine impassibility in traditional Christian theology and how the image of a passible God as seen through the suffering Jesus can be more adequate. It will appeal to the experience of a sufferer to make a claim that the affirmation of the reality of divine passibility is implicit not only in the structure of African theology but also in the Christian community at large. This will result in a unique African Christology which, while reflecting the African experience, maintains the universal nature of Christ.

Methodology

The work of selected authors will be reviewed, analyzed, and selectively integrated into the findings. The inquiry will include contextual, historical, mutually critical, comparative, reflective, and hermeneutical methods. By doing so, it is hoped that this study will attain three goals: to outline a short history of the problem, to define the
basic features of the African Christological debate, and to demonstrate its contribution to contemporary pluralistic theological knowledge.

**Significance of This Study**

This dissertation is an integrative presentation of classical theology, contemporary Western theology, and African perspectives of the reality of Christ specifically relative to the issue of divine impassibility. As such, it is significant on several levels. First, it will demonstrate the renewed claim that God suffers as an indicator to a new theological trend that signifies changes in the Christian God-talk. The truth in this study is that what used to be seen as heresy has turned to be a basic theological subject that obliges theologians to make a theological inquiry.

Second, it will also reconstruct African Christology through the method of inculturation in order to bridge the gap between African traditional beliefs and the Christian faith. In doing so, it will challenge ancient Christian theology with its one-way approach to the mystery of God, which denies personal human experience as another way to know God. This will expose a widespread awareness in the contextualization of the concept of God and will demonstrate how both revelation and experience shape the way Christians of different cultures relate to Christ. The African desire to identify with the suffering Christ will be highlighted, creating a framework for an African theological discourse concerned with the image of Christ as the revelation of a suffering God.

**Qualifications**

The writer is qualified for the following reasons. First, in her master’s thesis she analyzed the present context of African theology with the purpose of demonstrating its neglect of the role of women in the Church. The result of the thesis was an inclusive
Christology. Second, being African, the writer is personally qualified to study the meaning of suffering to the African people as it relates to the suffering Jesus. Third, the writer’s transcripts demonstrate coursework that covers the range of Christology, soteriology, mystical theology, medieval theology, ecclesiology, and the interdisciplinary approaches that will be necessary in this research. These three qualifications demonstrate the writer’s ability to execute this study with the goal of contributing not only to contemporary African Christological discourse, but also to the entire Christian theology.
CHAPTER 2

GOD AS IMPASSIBLE: A REVIEW OF PATRISTIC THEOLOGY

The Notion of Divine Impassibility: Evaluation of Patristic Thought

Having been born and raised in one of the poorest countries of Africa, I have learned that poverty combined with gender discrimination intensifies women’s suffering and limits their chances of competing for limited resources. The case of my own mother comes to my mind as I reflect on the struggles of the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalized in Africa. I remember a time when my father was suffering from severe malaria and his life was threatened. There was no means of getting him to the hospital twelve miles away from our village. There was a bicycle in the house but, given the fact that it belonged to my father and in our culture there are some items in the house that belong only to the head of the household, my mother and I had never learned how to ride that bicycle.

My mother asked our neighbors to help us take my father to the hospital. When we got there we were told to go to the major hospital four more miles away because the case was too complicated for the small dispensary. I remember being overwhelmed by frustrations when my mother and I were sent away because there were no services in that small dispensary for my ailing father. We were very tired, but we had to go to the major hospital where we hoped to have my father’s life saved.
At the hospital, we had to wait several hours before being transported to the general ward where poor people were admitted. As we waited at his bedside helplessly, my father complained of much pain and thirst; yet there was no clean water for him. It was difficult to imagine the anguish of having nothing to put in his mouth when he was sick and dehydrated, let alone waiting hours for the doctor to arrive. Unfortunately, my father died before getting treatment. It was a painful experience that raised in me a lot of questions. Where is God? Can God hear us when we cry? Why was God silent when we called for help? Why did God not save my father? But then I recognized God had saved my father. I realized later that physical salvation is of value in God’s sight only when joined with spiritual salvation. True salvation for my father came in his union with God in his life and in his death.

My painful experience connects me directly to the question of whether or not God suffers. The notion of divine impassibility has been a major theological concern, not only in the past for the patristic fathers, but it continues to be an issue today. While most of the patristic fathers embraced the idea that God is impassible, some contemporary theologians insist on God’s suffering with and for humanity. The idea of impassibility achieved considerable influence during the patristic period and medieval era. All who worked on this issue were wrestling with the question of whether God experiences emotions or not, and if God suffers, is God powerful enough to save humanity from their suffering?

For many contemporary theologians, a suffering and oppressed humanity needs a God who is present to them. They base their claims on the Incarnation and the passion of Christ, in which God is known as the God who is involved in the history of human
salvation. For in the Incarnation and the passion of Christ, we see God becoming human and suffering. This claim brings up the issue of divine impassibility that states that God cannot suffer.

In such a context, the ancient doctrine of divine impassibility has been questioned by theologies such as liberation theology, feminist theology, theology of the Cross, and so forth. Jürgen Moltmann, James Cone, and Elizabeth Johnson are a few of the many contemporary theologians who have argued for the doctrine of divine passibility as opposed to impassibility. These theologians have framed insights from their lived experiences into new patterns of thought that seek to understand something of the mystery of God. It can be assumed, should God be impassible, that God takes no interest in human affairs and is entirely immune from suffering because these attributes are inherent in the definition of impassibility.

Not all contemporary theologians reject this classical claim of divine impassibility. Paul L. Gavrilyuk and Thomas Weinandy, for example, have actively defended it, arguing that contemporary views have misrepresented ancient theology. Gavrilyuk insists that before passing any judgment on classical divine impassibility, we must first look carefully at what the fathers were trying to explain. Both men reject the claim of contemporary theologians that the fathers adopted the doctrine of divine impassibility uncritically from Hellenistic philosophy, which does not leave room for divine suffering and involvement in history.

Gavrilyuk and Weinandy, who reject the contemporary concept of divine passibility, are misunderstanding its defenders. What the defenders are looking for are tools to empower suffering and oppressed people in order to encourage them with the
message of God’s presence and support in their lives. The experience of God’s presence has nothing to do with visions, miracles, or other supernatural phenomena, which may be experienced by an individual. Rather, it is a sense of union with the divine reality and the realization that God is there in their struggles and successes. The concept of divine impassibility, therefore, reflects the idea of God’s Incarnation and the redemptive quality of the Christ event.

**Second-Century Theology: Impassibility as “Apophatic Qualifier” of Divine Emotions**

The purpose of this chapter is to evaluate the patristic stance on the issue of divine impassibility to see what issues it raises and how these issues continue into the present. The question of whether God suffers can be traced back to the theologies of the second century. How did they explain the issue of divine involvement in the world? The initial stages of this discussion attempted to address the distinction between the first and second Persons of the Trinity. At that time, the doctrine of divine impassibility was still underdeveloped. Early theologians were trying to determine the identity of Jesus Christ as both divine and human and to establish a proper explanation of the Incarnation. The challenge was how to defend the impassibility of God but still explain to what extent the human suffering of the Christ touched the divine nature. Some theologians over-emphasized the divinity of Christ and denied His humanity and vice versa.\(^1\) In the latter part of the second century, especially in the theologies of the apologists such as Justin,

\(^1\) The key theologians responsible for this Christological debate came from the Alexandrian tradition. They emphasized Christ’s divinity and diminished his full humanity, while the Antiochenes defended His humanity. See Justo L. González, *A History of Christian Thought from the Beginning to the Council of Chalcedon* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1987), 374.
Irenaeus, and Tertullian, it is obvious that the Greek concept of *apatheia* was seen as one of the key issues regarding the Christian God.²

The concept of divine *apatheia* was also used to contrast the Christian God with the gods of Greek mythologies. As Justin the Martyr reflects in *1 Apology*, “God is too far away from the business of the world to be named or known. Unlike the non-monotheistic deities, the divine nature is unbegotten and impassible.”³ However, his idea of God is not limited to the Aristotelian idea of God, which holds the deity to be “unmoved mover.” It also embraces the God of Christian faith who is actively involved in the lives of people and can be thought of as “emptying Himself” (Phil. 2:11) in the Incarnation without changing the divine nature for the purpose of salvation.

We need to draw a distinction between three periods of patristic discussion that dealt with the issue of divine impassibility and its development. When one distinguishes these periods from each other, the evolution of the language used to discuss God is made clearer. Therefore, the discussion will be divided into three parts. First, I will discuss Christological issues of the second and third centuries. Second, I will deal with the fourth century Arian controversy and the issue of divine impassibility. Third, I will discuss the Alexandrian theology, focusing on Cyril of Alexandria’s Christology and the impassible suffering of God. This third section will retrieve Cyril of Alexandria’s “single subject” Christology as a resource for contemporary discussion of the redemptive suffering of God in Christ. It will also examine an impassible God relative to the ancient Greek gods and

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³ Justin the Martyr, *1 Apology*, 13.4; 25.2
how patristic work on the issue of divine impassibility informs the understanding of
divine involvement in human history.

Setting the Stage: What Is at Issue?

Paul Gavrilyuk and Thomas Weinandy will serve as supporting commentators on
selected primary sources. The primary sources include the Cappadocian fathers (namely
Basil, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzen) and Cyril of Alexandria. These early
Christian fathers were great defenders of the doctrine of divine impassibility. Their
doctrine of God and Christology accommodated the tension between divine negative and
positive attributes as they wrestled with the issue of divine impassibility. This chapter
will conclude with an assessment of whether there is any room in ancient Christian
theology for an interpretation that God suffers.

Gavrilyuk and Weinandy stand as voices of contemporary defenders of the
patristic stance on the issue of divine impassibility, not only with their support of the
concept of divine impassibility in Patristic thought, but also with their view that
contemporary defenders of divine passibility misrepresent the tradition. Gavrilyuk and
Weinandy examine the patristic understanding of God, the biblical narratives of the God
of Israel, and the development of the Christological debates in order to show how the
fathers regarded the doctrine of divine impassibility as being compatible with the biblical
idea of divine involvement in the world. The concept of divine impassibility is found
throughout patristic debates about the person of Jesus Christ. These debates were an
attempt to secure both the historical involvement of God in human history and the
irreducible divinity of God, a divinity that transcends the limitations of temporal
existence and remains undiminished by God’s engagement in history.
Contemporary critics of the position of divine impassibility argue that ancient theology was captive to the Greek philosophical concept of *apatheia* and that it failed to recognize the loving and compassionate God of the Hebrew Scriptures as found in the story of Exodus, many of the Psalms, the Song of Songs, and the prophets. Both Gavrilyuk and Weinandy refute this criticism. They defend the apologists⁴ who described God as impassible and used philosophical language to defend Christianity against the philosophical attacks of the time.

During the second century there was a debate as to whether or not emotions and affections could be attributed to God in the same way emotions were attributed to Greek gods. Certain human emotions, including anger, affection, love, and compassion, were attributed to Greek gods. However, for the Christian God, early theologians used *apophatic qualifiers*,⁵ or negative theology, to ensure that the attributes such as impassibility, immutability, and invisibility belong to God alone. As Gavrilyuk points out, “[these negative attributes] serve as indicators of the divine transcendence and creaturely limitations.”⁶ Since our language about God is so limited, these attributes are used to express the distinction between the uncreated and the created. Therefore, by calling God impassible, the apologists meant to distance God from finite creatures by

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⁴ The apologists are defenders of Christian faith against popular philosophical notions of God. The early church fathers who were Christian apologists include Justin the Martyr, Irenaeus of Lyons, Tertullian.

⁵ *Apophatic qualifier* is the negative language that is used theologically to express what God is not. See Paul Gavrilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God*, 61.

attributing “God-befitting colored characteristics such as mercy, love and compassion”\textsuperscript{7} to the Christian God as opposed to the Greek gods.

Greek and Roman gods were basically superhuman, not wholly other or transcendent, as the Christian God was believed to be. For the apologists, the Christian God was \textit{one}, who created everything from nothing and who was self-existent from all eternity. Their Christian God was totally other than things that are contingent, come and go, or live and die. So there was a sense in which the Christian God is physically inaccessible because the absolute creator God is infinitely different from creatures. That is why patristic theology insisted that God could not be known by pure reason or pure human experience but only through revelation. However, this understanding should not be taken literally to limit human knowledge of their creator. What we learn about God from revelation is not antithetical or contradictory to both reasoning and human experience.

We cannot know God fully from our human knowledge but only as God chooses to reveal Himself to us. That there could be an all-powerful, unchanging, loving, compassionate, wholly other God is not beyond the realm of possibility. What Christian tradition is accentuating is that when a person says he or she knows someone, it is to the extent of the person’s experience of someone known that allows for the knowing. But when a person says he or she knows God, it is only to the extent that God reveals Himself to that person. It is within that range of divine communication that the person can claim to know God. That is to say, it is not our reasoning capacity or our human experience that

\textsuperscript{7} Gavrilyuk, 51.
makes the knowing of God possible. The relationship between experience and revelation here is that God may choose to make this revelation possible through human experience or through other revelatory means such as Scriptures, contemplation, or as God did in the person of Jesus Christ.

According to Christian tradition, Jesus Christ is the ultimate revelation of the transcendent God for Christians. But the revelation that God is impassible, immutable, invisible, incorporeal, transcendent, wholly other, loving, and holy was already known to the ancient world, where God acted in history to reveal Himself to humanity. In the Hebrew Scriptures, for example, God reveals Himself to Abraham, Moses, and to the prophets as wholly other. God conveys His presence to Abraham as He began to form a covenant community that would reveal God’s presence and His will to all humanity (Genesis 15:12-21). God also revealed Himself to Moses in the form of a burning bush. In this event, God was about to send Moses to lead His people out of bondage (Ex: 3:1-6). Ultimately, God revealed Himself in the person of Christ for the purpose of salvation (Hebrews 1:3). Jesus Christ provided a once-for-all idea of who God is. Since Christ is God united to human nature, God’s otherness, holiness, mercy, love, and compassion have now become revealed in human form, and we can now more fully understand God. God has made Himself known in order to provide salvation to all who respond in faith.

Through Jesus Christ, God has entered into human history for the sake of salvation. God suffered in order to restore our lost relationship with God. What excited the early church fathers was that the One who is impassible and unchangeable had entered into our changeable human experience once and for all to save our broken nature. Justin the Martyr, who was greatly influenced by Plato, makes the impassibility of God
the center of his concept of divine impassibility. However, he also attributes suffering to
the impassible God when talking about the Incarnation of the Logos. He claims in his
work *Dialogue with Trypho*, “God suffered, insofar as He revealed Himself in the
experience of Jesus Christ.” Since the Logos was passible in the person of Jesus Christ,
it is adequate to say that God is passible. This passibility does not change God.

The function of *apophatic qualifiers* (e.g., im-passibility, im-mutability, etc.) is to
offer a less inadequate language for naming God. It is also a way to insist that God is
neither like humans nor like non-monotheistic gods. It is meant to insist that God is in
total control of all divine actions and to rule out all those passions that were unfitting of
the divine nature. In his work *Does God Suffer?* Thomas Weinandy insists that, although
they were influenced by philosophical ideas of the time, apologists were also faithful to
the Hebrew and Christian revelation of who God is in relation to the issues of divine
impassibility and passibility.  

Both Weinandy and Gavrilyuk have addressed the question as to whether, or in
what manner, suffering may be ascribed to God from the patristic point of view. They
have outlined how the idea had developed dialectically through major theological
controversies between the second and fifth centuries. The significance of the
Christological controversies is that they lay the foundation for addressing the questions
regarding the nature of Jesus Christ, the relationship between His humanity and divinity,y
and how these issues inform the understanding of the notion of divine impassibility.

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8 Justin the Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 57:3.

Christological Controversies between the Second and Fifth Centuries

What was at stake? From the second century onwards, a number of controversies developed about how the human and divine natures relate within the person of Jesus Christ. Christological controversies were disputes that helped to shape the orthodox teaching of the Christian faith and occurred against the background of the Trinitarian controversy in which the early church fathers maintained that Christ was of the same substance (homoousios) with the Father. Ultimately, the Christian tradition will maintain that Christ is one person with two natures, one fully divine and the other fully human. The issue was how to explain theologically the idea of divine involvement in the world and how the Incarnation took place without the minimization of the divine nature of Christ. The term homoousios was borrowed from the Greek language and introduced to Christian theology to explain theologically the mystery of the Incarnation. This affirms that people develop theology from their own experiences.

This issue of divine impassibility triggered the Christological debates that led to anathematization of some members of the Christian community. According to Gavrilyuk, the major Christological debates include Docetism, Patripassianism, Arianism, and Nestorianism. These controversies helped to shape the evolution of Christological

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11 The term homoousios means “of the same substance.” It was used to oppose the party associated with the term anhomoios, which means “the Son is unlike to the Father.” At the Council of Nicea (325), the term homoousios was approved to express the divine consubstantiality of the Son with the Father. At the Council of Nicea it was also suggested that the term be included in the Creed in order to emphasize the divinity of the Son. See Leo O’Donovan ed. *A World of Grace: An Introduction to the Themes and Foundations of Karl Rahner’s Theology* (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), 192.

12 The Christological issues were discussed and debated for years, and the decision reached at the Council of Chalcedon (451) was that Christ had two natures, human and divine.
thought and their impact continues to be felt. Gavrilyuk traces the development of the controversies that dealt with the Christological question as to whether and under what circumstances the Son of God, who is God as the Father is, underwent human experiences of birth, suffering, and death. Gavrilyuk’s work in this area may be viewed as an attempt to secure both the historical involvement of God in human history and the irreducible divinity of God, which transcends the limitations of this temporal existence and remains undiminished by God’s engagement in history.

Second-Century Docetism: Was Christ’s Passion Real?

In the second century, a group known as Docetists denied the humanity of Christ and claimed that Jesus was not a real human being. They claimed that Christ was pure spirit and that his body was not real. The Docetists claimed that God, being perfect and infinite, could not be associated with matter and, therefore, could not suffer. God as the Word could not have become flesh, for that would have entailed His suffering human limitations. The idea that Christ did not have a real natural body during his earthly life, but only an apparent one, led Docetists to deny the Incarnation and the real suffering of Christ. Docetism became more developed as an important doctrinal position of Gnosticism, another dualistic system of belief, which held that matter is evil and the spirit is good. Both movements developed out of the dualistic philosophy of the time.

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14 Gnosticism was a dualistic belief system that proclaimed salvation through “gnosis.” or esoteric knowledge. This mystic movement claimed to have a secret knowledge about the ultimate spiritual being, the Demiurge, or debased deity who created the universe, the evil universe and salvation. Gnosticism existed long before Christianity in the Hellenistic world. Gnostics believed that the spirit, which is enslaved in the body, must be liberated through *gnosis* (knowledge). Later it was adapted in Christianity and identified Jesus as an embodiment of the Supreme Being, who became Incarnate to bring *gnosis* to the world. See Robert Grant, *Gnosticism and Early Christianity* (N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1966), 150.
Docetism taught that Jesus only appeared to be human and that while He was God He was not truly human and did not experience any human emotions. The Docetists assumed that divine impassibility negated any kind of direct, divine experience of the human condition. They denied the full humanity of Christ and claimed that the divine savior simply appeared to be in bodily form. Likewise, the sufferings and death of Christ could not have been real because it is inconceivable that the divine spirit would give itself up to evil and the destructive power of matter. They either denied the reality of Christ’s humanity altogether or questioned the fact that His body really suffered. They argued that if Christ was born, suffered, and died on the cross He was not divine. However, if He was God, then He could not suffer. This understanding led them to conclude that the passion of Christ was not real.

The church fathers rejected this view and affirmed that with the Incarnation, the divine nature of Jesus Christ, in reality, suffered. As Gavrilyuk puts it, “The church fathers of the second and third centuries agreed that Christ suffered truly and rejected all Docetic reinterpretations of the incarnation.” Irenaeus of Lyons, a strong opponent of Gnosticism, made significant contributions to the issue of divine impassibility. In his work Against Heresy, he restores the tension between divine impassibility and passibility that had been lost in Gnostic thought. He applies the concept of divine impassibility to his

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15 Gavrilyuk, The Suffering of the Impassible God, 89.
16 Gavrilyuk, 84-85; see also Irenaeus in Against Heresy, 3.16.1 (trans. Pollard).
17 Gavrilyuk, 89
Logos-Christology in a manner different from the way the Gnostics used it.\textsuperscript{18} He does not enter into controversial discussion of the distinction of the two natures in Christ. Rather, he focuses on the union of the humanity with the divinity, which culminated in Jesus Christ. His Christology maintains the unity of Jesus Christ’s divinity and humanity, setting a framework for the Christological discourse for the later centuries.

\textit{Third Century: The Problem with Modalist Patripassianism}

Modalist Patripassianism, which arose in the third century, held that God the Father and the Son existed as temporary modes of being, that is, when God is the Father, He is not the Son, and when God is the Son, He is not the Father. God’s names change with His mode of being. They maintained that there is no permanent distinction between the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. Like the Docetists, the Modalist Patripassians had the same concern of establishing the unity of the Godhead within the Trinity and maintaining the full divinity in Christ. But they approached the situation differently, moving it into a different extreme. Modalist Patripassians claimed that the Father and the Son were one and the same and, therefore, both suffered in reality. Since the Father and the Son were united as aspects of one divine being, the sufferings attributed to the Son were also to be ascribed to God the Father. Unlike the Docetists, the Patripassians emphasized the idea that suffering can be ascribed to God the Father in reality. Their argument is based on the facts of the Incarnation. If Christ was God-Man, then God must have suffered in the

\textsuperscript{18} Irenaeus of Lyons, \textit{Against Heresy}. III 16, 6. Irenaeus emphasized that “He (i.e., Christ) took up man into Himself, the invisible becoming visible, the incomprehensible being made comprehensible, the impassible becoming capable of suffering, and the Word being made man, thus summing up all things in Himself.” Docetism was condemned at the Council of Chalcedon in 451CE. Also, Tertullian in \textit{Against Praxeas} and Hyppolytus in \textit{Against Noetus} wrote against the Gnostic teaching in the third century.
person of Jesus Christ. However, Patipassians failed to show how God the Father could have participated in Jesus’ suffering without changing into a different state of being.

According to Gavrilyuk, “The point of departure for all Patipassianism was an attempt to reconcile the church tradition of monotheistic faith to the Christian worship of Christ the Crucified.”¹⁹ However, they ended up failing to show the distinction between the Father and the Son. Noetus, Sabellius, Callistus, and Praxeas are examples of Patipassians who taught that the Father was identical with the Son and suffered on the cross. Noetus, a strong proponent of Modalist Monarchianism²⁰ claimed, “The Father was born, suffered and died.”²¹ He argued that if the Father is God and Jesus Christ is God, then both the Father and the Son suffered in the sufferings of Jesus Christ.²² As Gavrilyuk puts it, “Noetus conceived divine impassibility and passibility as temporary properties that mark out successive modes of God’s existence.”²³ He held that before the Incarnation, God was impassible, immutable, and immortal; but God became passible, mutable, and mortal after the Incarnation so as to live human life through Christ and fulfill the plan of salvation. Callistus²⁴ and Praxeas agreed with Noetus that the Father

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¹⁹ Gavrilyuk, The Suffering of the Impassable God, 93.

²⁰ Monarchianism, a movement that is closely related to Modalism, claimed that the Son was a human being united to God the Father. In his divine aspect, he simply is identical with the Father; in his human aspect, he is merely human. This term is derived from the royal language used in reference to the monarchs of the time. The main proponent of Monarchianism is Praxeas (see Tertullian, Against Praxeas).

²¹ Gavrilyuk, 94.

²² Gavrilyuk, 100

²³ Gavrilyuk, 94.

²⁴ There are new findings that cast doubts on Hyppolitus’ work against Callistus. There is speculation that Hyppolitus is not a reliable source given that he is the only source commenting on the Christology of Callistus and he was biased against Callistus. Therefore, his material needs to be controlled
suffered, but they wanted to make a distinction by emphasizing that the Father suffered only in the flesh and was not overcome by the sufferings.\textsuperscript{25}

Gavrilyuk finds the Patripassianism controversy Christological in nature because the whole issue in this debate was how to determine the identity of Jesus Christ.\textsuperscript{26} Thomas Weinandy argues that the real issue for the Modalist Patripassians was not the attribution of suffering to the Father but the failure to make an adequate distinction between the Father and the Son. For Patripassians, the Son was merely a different temporary mode of expression of the Father whereby the Father became human, suffered, and died on the cross. Justin the Martyr is one of the Apologists who strongly condemned Patripassianism. In his 1 Apology 63, he refers to those “who affirm that the Son is the Father,” and condemned them. He repeats the same condemnation in his Dialogue with Trypho, 128, insisting on the idea of the Logos as a mediator between God and the world, suggesting that God cannot enter into direct relationship with the world. Does Justin think God is limited to only one way of revelation? Is it not true that God had many ways of revealing Himself to the world? If God became human for the purpose of salvation, God, who is eternally impassible, must have the power to suffer without being affected by the suffering.

Justin and all the apologists who found fault with Patripassianism fell into another extreme of subordinationism as they tried to find a better way of explaining the issue of

\textsuperscript{25} Gavrilyuk, 100.

\textsuperscript{26} Gavrilyuk, 92.
divine impassibility. They, too, wrestled with the same questions but answered them differently. Was Jesus Christ fully divine or fully human? How should one make a distinction between the two? The result was the overemphasizing of the humanity of Christ and underemphasizing of His divinity or vice versa.

**Fourth and Fifth Centuries: The Early Hints of Divine Passibility**

Although the affirmation of divine impassibility predominates in the church theologies of the fourth century, the need to attribute suffering to God as a possibility was not ruled out. The problem was how to adequately articulate the possibility of divine suffering. The fourth-century fathers also wrestled with the same issues faced by the apologists of the second and third centuries. The two issues at stake were those created by the theology of Justin the Martyr’s *Logos*-Christology and those created by the dualism of Gnosticism. Was the union of the divine and human natures in Christ real? How can consubstantiality be explained while safeguarding the integrity of the two natures in Christ? If Christ was both human and divine, was the divinity fully involved in Christ’s human experiences? Did the divinity suffer during Christ’s passion? Most Christological solutions tended toward one extreme or the other.

The mystery of God and the union of the divine and human natures in Christ were explained in the context of *Logos* Christology. As mentioned in Chapter 1, this Christology was articulated in two forms: *Logos-sarx* Christology and *Logos-anthropos* Christology.27 The latter emerged later to correct the inaccuracy of the *Logos-sarx* Christology.

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27 According to *Logos-Sarx* Christology, the *Logos* assumed human flesh. This human flesh was not without a human soul to make Jesus fully human. The term *sarx* means flesh and *anthropos* means humankind (with body and spirit/soul). These approaches are based on the teachings of the two great
Christology. According to *Logos-anthropos* Christology, the *Logos* was united with the whole of humanity, that is, with body and soul. This approach characterizes the Antiochian school of biblical exegesis and philosophy. The emphasis of the Antiochian theologians on Christ’s full humanity was a means to protect Christ’s impassible divine nature from being tainted by matter.

On the contrary, the *Logos-sax* Christology was an attempt made by both the opponents and proponents of orthodox Christology that were trying to articulate the theology of the divine-human unity in Christ in the form of the *Logos* getting conjoined only to the flesh but not to the whole individual. The *Logos* in this case replaces the human spirit, or soul, in Jesus Christ to animate His body and become the source of all His actions. The problem with this Christology is that it failed to establish an adequate distinction between the divinity and humanity in Christ. This approach characterizes the Christology of the Alexandrian School, but it equally forms the background and development of the Arian controversy in which the status and nature of the *Logos* was at stake.

*Arius and Arianism: The Problem of Subordinationism*

While the Docetists denied the reality of Christ’s humanity, the Patripassians emphasized that both the Father and the Son suffered in reality. Those who found fault with Patripassianism attempted to bring about an adequate distinction between the Father and Son without minimizing the Father’s divinity, but ended up denying the divinity of Christ and falling into the extreme of Arian Subordinationism Christology.

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The belief that the Supreme Being is unequal to created beings has been present throughout the ages. This view came into question when theologians started to think about the reality of Jesus Christ as God-Man and the reality of the salvation of humankind. The problem was how to reconcile two factors that constitute Christianity: monotheism and the reality of the person of Jesus Christ as human and divine. It was in this context, that the church fathers of the fourth century wrestled with various theological extremes as they tried to search for ways to explain divine involvement in the world. The struggle to understand the relationship between God and the created order that is found in Patrrippassianism laid the foundation for Arianism, another extreme that will be discussed in this section.

One of the key arguments of Arianism was that the *Logos* cannot be God in reality because God cannot sully himself with the material world. As Gavrilyuk points out, “The Arians made a sharp distinction between the un-generated God the Father from the generated Son who is from the Father and inferior to the Father.”28 They insisted that, unlike the invisible, incomprehensible, immutable, and impassible Father, the Son was essentially created and capable of being born, suffering, and dying on the cross. This raised questions as to whether the *Logos* was fully divine or just semi-divine. The Arians assumed that the Son, or the *Logos*, was just a superior creature ranking above all other created beings due to his origin from the un-generated High God. They avoided saying that the Son is of the same substance with the Father, which for them would suggest that God the Father is a composite, divisible, mutable, and even corporeal being. The concern

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was to maintain a strict monotheistic faith by putting more emphasis on the transcendence of God the Father and the Son’s generation from the Father from whom He derives all his glories and divine actions. They assigned to the Son a subordinate status to the Father, thereby bringing another type of Subordinationism as a solution to Patриpassianism.

Arianism is often associated with Arius (260-336) and his teachings and is used to refer to other non-trinitarian theological systems of the fourth century that regarded Jesus Christ as either a created being or as a semi-god. Arius was a presbyter of Baucalis in Alexandria and the follower of an ancient Greek Christian theologian who argued that Jesus Christ was the highest created being but was not divine. The spark for the controversy was Arius’ preaching. He taught that:

Jesus Christ is neither fully human nor fully divine – He is in between. Jesus has no human soul; it is the Logos that takes the place of the human soul, united to Jesus’ human body. The Logos, the preexistent Christ, is a creature created out of nothing. He had a beginning and His role in the salvation history was to mediate the relationship between God and the world.29

Arius claimed that Christ the Logos experienced suffering to prove his unlikeness to the impassible High God. This was the struggle Arius experienced as he tried to reconcile the idea of the Incarnation with Divinity. How can the most High God unite with the creature to become one? His goal was to protect the divine nature of Christ.

The problem with Arius’ teaching was that he was operating under the influence of a kind of Platonism that made a sharp distinction between a transcendent High God and human nature. For him, if Christ was involved in human experiences of change, such

as birth, passion, and death, He could not be fully divine. He portrayed Jesus as a semi-divine creature who assumed a human body, but he does not mention that Jesus possessed a human soul. His idea of a highest God was so high that this High God cannot mix with finite creatures. This High God is utterly spiritual and transcendent. He cannot diminish Himself by taking on a human body, and therefore, the created Logos does this role of mediating between God and humanity. Given Jesus is an in-between creature, the assumption is that He must be more than a human being and less than a God. This teaching was pronounced heretical by the Church Council of Nicaea in 325CE.

**Athanasius of Alexandria against Arius**

This controversial teaching was rejected by Athanasius of Alexandria, who is well known as a leader of the anti-Arian movement and who tried to find a better way of making a distinction between the pre-existing Logos and the Incarnate Logos. In addressing the Arian questions about the implications of the teaching that “the Logos became flesh” (John 14.14), Athanasius came up with the suggestion that Jesus was less than a full human being. This suggestion made him sound like the Arians, though he did not explicitly mention that Jesus’ body had or did not have a human soul. This Arian understanding of Christ may be taken to suggest that, if Jesus did not have a human soul, then He was not fully human. For Athanasius, what happened in the Incarnation was that the Logos assumed human nature with its physical conditions but without the human soul, thus, enabling Him to save humanity.

Gavrilyuk is correct when he says, “Arianism was meant to offer solutions for the problems of Patripassianism but ended up causing more damage by creating a hierarchical vision of the divine realm that puts Christ in the inferior position in relation
to the Father whom they called the High God.”

He cites the fact that Arians made a sharp distinction between the Father and the Son, taking it to another extreme of Subordinationism by denying the true divinity of Christ and reducing Him to a mere creature without a human soul. As stated above, this Arian Subordinationism was influenced by the Platonic understanding of reality as a multi-level hierarchy that puts the intellectual realm at the top of the pyramid and the material realm at the bottom. The Arians argued that if God is the highest and transcendental Being, He cannot in any way be united with human flesh. With this in mind, the Arians denied the reality of the divinity and humanity in Jesus.

The Arians’ argument denied God’s direct involvement in the world. They viewed the Supreme God as the highest reality, completely removed from the material world, which was regarded as inferior. They denied that this High God participated in the worldly experiences of birth, suffering, and death. With negative attributes, they distinguished this un-generated God the Father from the inferior divine being, the Son, or Logos, who is generated by the Father. They claimed that since Jesus Christ, who was involved in suffering and death, could not be fully divine, the Son must be unlike the impassible High God. The Arians noted the involvement of the Logos in suffering to prove His unlikeness to the impassible High God. They viewed Jesus Christ, but not the Father, as a unique creature suitable to assume human flesh, suffer, and die.

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30 Gavrilyuk, 113. Arianism regarded Christ as created being. It was declared heretical by the Council of Nicea in 325. The Nicene Creed was formulated with its central theme Homoousios, meaning “of the same substance” or “one being” to emphasize the divinity of Christ. As God the Father, the Son is also true God and uncreated being.
Gregory of Nyssa against Eunomius

Another question that was raised concerning the generation of the Son from the Father was whether the generation of the Son involved suffering on the side of the Father. As per Gavrilyuk, the Arian controversy was propagated by Eunomius, who wanted to react to the Modalist Patriscian view that made no distinction between the divinity and the humanity of Jesus Christ. Yet, Eunomius did not make enough distinction between the two natures. He claimed that the Son, by reason of generation, had been made a product of this generation and, therefore, the Son is less than the Father. He appealed to human experiences of Jesus Christ to prove the Son’s passibility and dissimilarity from the impassible Father. His claim was similar to that of earlier Arians, who claimed that the Son was unlike (anomoios) the Father and, therefore, passible. Therefore, Eunomius failed to associate the fully divine Logos to the human experiences of Jesus Christ. He chose not to engage human analogies of birth and passion, claiming that “the Father’s essence is incommunicable, and, therefore, the Father generates and creates effortlessly without division or motion of essence.”

For Eunomius, the Son is less divine than the Father.

Gregory of Nyssa, reacting to Eunomius, attempted to find a better way to explain the problem of the Father’s suffering with the generation of the Son. He claimed that the act of generation does not produce unlike results; that is, the Father does not change by begetting the Son, nor is the Son less than the Father. Gavrilyuk puts Gregory’s argument this way, “If God created without labor or matter He surely also begot without labor or

flux.”

For Gregory, it was not necessary to ground the debate about God in human experiences associated with human conception and birth. Why would Gregory object so strongly? Those particular human activities would put divine impassibility at risk by bringing God down to humanity’s level and, thus, lowering His divinity.

However, Gregory consistently insists that, in the Incarnation, there is an attribution of the characteristics of one nature to the other, calling this phenomenon *koinonia tôn idiomatòn*. In this union, God communicates divinity to humanity and humanity shares in the divinity. Thus, God took flesh and suffered but remained impassible in the divine form. This God who suffered on the cross should be honored in the same way as God the Father, for they are of the same substance.

Arianism was rejected by the ecumenical Council of Nicaea (325), the first to be held at the end of church persecution. The reason for rejecting Arian teachings was because the way the Arians wanted to explain the relationship between Jesus Christ and the Father undermined the full divinity of Christ. At the Council of Nicaea, a formal statement of Christian beliefs was formulated that states that “Jesus is true God, and true man.” Later this creed was subsequently expanded and is still in use in most Christian churches. As Gavrilyuk points out, the fathers affirmed the Nicene theology that human salvation required that Christ be fully human and truly divine. Having ruled out the

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32 Gavrilyuk, 119.

33 The term *Communication Idiomatum* is the Latin expression that means a mutual exchange of properties whereby the divine properties can be ascribed to the man Jesus, and the human properties can be ascribed to the Logos. See Justo L. Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought: From the Beginnings to the Council of Chalcedon* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1987), 321-322.

three extremes of the controversy, the Council of Nicaea asserted that the Son suffered in reality and not in mere appearance. It was the Son who became Incarnate and suffered, not the Father. Moreover, the Son’s involvement in suffering did not diminish His divinity. This explanation offers some light onto how the Logos experienced both divine and human actions, including Christ’s suffering in the flesh, without being overwhelmed by them.

**Cyril of Alexandria against Nestorius**

During the late fourth century, the debate about the involvement of God in the suffering of Christ arose again. Once more, the central question was how to work out the union of the divinity and the humanity of Christ. Nestorius of Constantinople (c.451), following his teacher Theodore of Mopsuestia (c.350-428), had emphasized the distinction between Christ’s two natures much more than the unity of His person. Nestorius claimed that “since God is impassible, the divine subject cannot be involved in the suffering of Christ.”

Therefore, the human experiences of Christ are to be ascribed only to His humanity and not to His divinity. He concluded that divine impassibility meant that under no circumstances could God be the subject of birth, suffering, and death. His view of the Incarnation was that it was a mere joining of the two natures, human and divine. He denied the title *Theotokos* for Mary, saying that Mary should not be called “Mother of God” and insisted instead on *Christotokos*, that is, “Christ Bearer.”

Cyril rejected this Nestorian view that ruled out any possibility of divine involvement in the suffering of Christ as utterly unworthy of God. He proposed a

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35 Gavrilyuk, 18.
different starting point for understanding the Incarnation by employing the kenotic version of Phil. 2: 5-11: “Though he was in the form of God, Jesus did not deem equality with God as something to be grasped at . . . rather, he humbled himself, taking the form of the slave, obediently accepting death, death on the Cross.” (2:5-11). Cyril demonstrated how the only begotten Son of God emptied Himself, took human flesh for the sake of salvation.

The purpose of Cyril’s rejection of the Nestorian view was to emphasize the hypostatic union of Christ. It was God the Word Incarnate who made possible the union of humanity to Himself. These two natures united hypostatically in a single subject of Christ making it possible for God to participate in human experiences. Cyril uses different analogies, such as body-soul, to demonstrate how two natures in Christ united to form only one reality. Cyril insisted that God assumed a human body, endowed with a human soul, and that enabled Him to undergo all human experiences. For Cyril, the human soul was the source of feeling emotions and, therefore, the source of suffering. In his interpretation of the hypostatic union, Cyril insisted that before the Incarnation, the Logos was characterized by all the divine perfections and negative attributes, such as impassibility. In this he made a clear distinction between the Creator and creation by insisting that “the statements ‘God wept’ or ‘God was crucified’ were theologically legitimate as long as it was added that the subject was God made flesh and not God outside the framework of the Incarnation.”

Cyril laid the groundwork for the possibility of attributing suffering to God.

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36 Gavrilyuk, 155-156; see also Weinandy in Does God Suffer?, 192. Weinandy interprets Cyril’s articulation of the body-soul analogy of the divine Incarnation in a narrative that explains the hypostatic
Nestorius responds to the idea of hypostatic union by claiming that Cyril is confusing the natures. Nestorius focuses on the divinity and humanity in Jesus Christ as his starting point. For Nestorius, the conjunction of the two subjects in Jesus Christ had to be conceived along lines consistent with the ontological division between the Creator and the created. He argues that it was not befitting that the impassible *Logos* be in anyway associated with change and suffering. Nestorius failed to make an adequate distinction between the two subjects in Jesus Christ by insisting that human experiences should be ascribed only to the human subject assumed and not to the divine *Logos* that was pre-existent, and that these two must be clearly distinguished. With this understanding, Nestorius accused his opponent Cyril of misinterpreting the second article of the Creed by applying all the human experiences of Christ, including suffering and death, directly to the *Logos*. Nestorius also rejected Cyril’s kenosis theory by insisting that any involvement of the *Logos* in the emptying as proposed by Cyril would violate divine impassibility.

However, Cyril preferred to speak of the single subject, the *Logos*, and to refer to Him as existing in two distinct natures. In becoming flesh, however, the *Logos* remained God and because He united hypostatically to the flesh, God was not affected by this union but remained unchangeable and unalterable. Cyril uses the kenotic hymn as the point of entry into the meaning of the Christological article of the Nicene Creed that addresses Christ as “the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not made, one in being with the union. He maintains that as the human body and soul unite ontologically to form a human being, so the divinity and humanity of Christ united ontologically to form the one single subject of Christ.
Father, who made Himself human in the womb of the Virgin Mary for our salvation. Cyril insisted that the Virgin Mother should be called *Theotokos* and not *Christotokos* as Nestorius claimed due to the fact that the one she bore was both fully divine and fully human. Within the human nature, the *Logos* was able to undergo all human experiences except sin. He experienced hunger, fatigue, fear, pain, and even death.

Cyril insisted that Christ’s divinity did not suffer outside the limitations of his self-emptying or the Incarnation. “He suffered in his own flesh, and not in the nature of the Godhead.” Instead of speaking of the two conjoined subjects as Nestorius did, Cyril preferred to speak of a single subject, one divine Word, and referred to Christ as existing in two distinct states: outside and within the framework of the Incarnation. Therefore, the Incarnation for Cyril meant that the Word’s submission to the limitations of human existence entailed a temporary restraint of divine power and other perfections. Cyril insisted that the “the Word of God the Father himself suffered in the flesh for our sake,” meaning that the Word remained impassible in His divine nature throughout the Incarnation but suffered in His humanity as He underwent human experiences from conception to death.

Nestorius objected to Cyril’s claim that God suffered in another nature, stating that it was an evasion of the problem not a resolution of it. The divine impassibility for Nestorius was unconditional and absolute: that which could not suffer in its own nature

37 Quoted from the Nicene Creed.
39 Cyril of Alexandria, 115.
could not possibly suffer in another nature. To show the significance of the human soul, Cyril drew upon the theory of appropriation of human characteristics to show that “in the incarnation, God acted and suffered in and through the flesh and did nothing [human] outside the flesh.” As mentioned above, Cyril applied the body-soul analogy to explain the union of the divine Logos and the flesh for the purpose of demonstrating that this union of the Word with the rational soul of Christ was necessary for God to participate fully in the human condition.

Cyril’s view is that the distinction between the soul and body can be drawn only conceptually, and, in reality, one can speak only of a single undivided subject. The soul-body analogy adequately conveys the closeness and inseparability of the union of the Logos with the flesh. Therefore, the soul does not act apart from the body; in the same way, the body does not exist without the soul. Since the soul suffers because it exists within a body, so the Logos suffered by means of the flesh and in the flesh. For Cyril “flesh” means the whole of human nature, with a rational soul. As Gavrilyuk puts it, “Without the human soul, the divine Word would be incapable of experiencing such human emotions as fear, sorrow, and grief and to ascribe these emotions directly to the ‘naked divinity’ would be crude anthropomorphism.” In order to participate fully in the human condition, God assumed a complete human constitution, a body endowed with a rational soul. The theological significance of Christ’s rational soul is that it made Him fully human with the capability of undergoing human experiences.

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41. Gavrilyuk, 162.
If Christ did not have a human soul, then His suffering would not be real. This view would support the former Docetism error that denied the human nature of Christ. Cyril stressed on many occasions that the Logos remained impassible in His own nature in the Incarnation. Cyril’s intention throughout the controversy was to show that the divine subject submitted Himself to the limitations of the Incarnation and accepted all the consequences associated with this human condition. It is not accidental that the claim that “the impassible suffered” appeared in Cyril’s theology. Cyril wanted to preserve God’s irreducible divinity while at the same time insisting on God’s involvement in the human experiences within the Incarnation.

Cyril employed the use of Communicatio Idiomatum as an attempt to conceptualize and articulate the mystery of the Incarnation without diminishing the divinity of Jesus Christ. He maintained that the Communicatio Idiomatum demanded that Jesus Christ be one person in two natures and the Incarnation was not the compositional union of natures. The Incarnation was the person of the Son being united with humanity, thus taking a new form of existence. Cyril termed this union the “hypostatic union,” meaning that the Son who is homoousios, or consubstantial, with the Father came to exist as God Incarnate for the sake of salvation. Therefore, it can then be said that the Son of God, being truly divine, united hypostatically to the human nature, could undergo human experiences such as birth, suffering, and death. With the use of Communicatio Idiomatum, Cyril wished to assert that “[God] himself might remain impassible and yet

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42 To remind the reader: Communicatio Idiomatum means the exchange of properties of the two natures in Christ. See Cyril of Alexandria, On the Unity of Christ, 44.

43 Cyril explains the hypostatic union as “the seamless union of God and man in the single divine person of Jesus.” See Cyril of Alexandria, On the Unity of Christ, 35.
be said to suffer in his own flesh. He who is impassible as God actually is passible as human. In this way, Cyril found himself in a dilemma that cannot be explained. To assign the human experience to God was philosophically impossible. Although the Council of Ephesus ruled in Cyril’s favor, the problem continued to persist until the Council of Chalcedon, which ruled that Christ is fully divine and fully human.

**Conclusion**

The painful experience of my father’s illness and death, which I told at the beginning of this chapter, is an example of how human suffering can be redemptive if identified with the suffering of God. During that time, I didn’t think so much of the spiritual salvation of my father, which is eternal. I was thinking of physical or temporal salvation, which included restoration of my father’s good health. I just wanted something that was physically real to me. During my father’s agony and death, we were not alone. God was there, hidden beneath the opposite: in my dying father, in our doubts and frustrations. God was there to assure my father that after this life there awaited him everlasting life with Him. My father, a good Christian, knew this as well. He believed his Redeemer, who was alive in him, would bring him into oneness with God forever.

This one simple story brings to life the crucial question: Is there any room in ancient Christian theology for an interpretation that God suffers? Early theologians denied the idea of a passible God, arguing that suffering applies only to the body. Given that God is incorporeal, He cannot suffer in the way humans do. It was felt that God, in His relationship with the created order, cannot experience emotional changes of state. The main problem was how the union of the divine and human natures in Christ took place and how to explain this union without reducing the divine nature of Christ. The
church fathers employed the notion of divine impassibility in order to articulate the union of the two natures of Christ, divine and human. The goal was to emphasize the importance of the Incarnation as the revelation of the eternal, immutable, and impassible God in the history of salvation.

While most of the patristic fathers embrace the idea that God is impassible, Cyril of Alexandria came up with the idea that the Logos suffered in the human body of Jesus. With the use of *Communicatio Idiomatum*, Cyril asserted that He who is impassible as God became passible in the person of Jesus Christ. Cyril wanted to preserve the impassibility of God, but at the same time to assert the full participation of God in human history. The *Communicatio Idiomatum* that occurred in the person of Jesus allowed the assertion of divine participation in human history to happen. In this way, Cyril laid the foundation for a future theology of a passible God, therefore allowing room for a belief in a God who suffers.
CHAPTER 3

DIVINE IMPASSIBILITY: VIEWS FROM SELECTED
WESTERN CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGIANS

Contemporary Notions of a Passible God

In the previous chapter, I discussed how the issue of divine impassibility characterized the Christological controversies that came out of the Trinitarian debates of the third and fourth centuries. The task of spelling out Trinitarian distinctions and assigning roles to each Person in relation to the created order has remained a challenge into the present. This means that the doctrine of the Trinity did not solve the problems that led to its formulation: these issues include the oneness of God, Incarnation, salvation, divine transcendence, immutability, and impassibility. The issue of divine impassibility played a very important part in both the Trinitarian and Christological controversies of the fourth and fifth centuries. The early church fathers denied suffering in God, claiming that if the Logos suffered, it could not have divine status to be able to affect salvation. They were not prepared to demonstrate how it can be for God to suffer and yet the divinity to remain untouched by suffering. How, then, can contemporary theology address the issue of divine impassibility to make it relevant to contemporary Christian faith? The basic assumption is that every Christian theology should take a Trinitarian doctrine as the resource for understanding the mystery of God. In this
framework, the classical themes of Trinitarian procession, of unity and differentiation, and of the Christ-event can serve to address the problem of divine impassibility.

The earlier attempts to develop a theology of divine impassibility tended to limit the language used to talk about God. The use of negation was an option to explain what God is not in order to affirm what God is. Early in the twentieth century, contemporary theologians began to explore the issue of God’s involvement in the world and its suffering. Contemporary theologians questioned the traditional notion of a transcendent God because they could not reconcile the idea of the impassible God with the suffering of the present time. The world we live in is full of struggling and suffering people, and contemporary theologians are trying to develop a theology that can bring hope to the suffering people. As Jürgen Moltmann points out, “It is about this community that I am thinking.” This chapter, therefore, will address why the issue of divine impassibility continues to be debated. The theologies of Jürgen Moltmann and James Cone will be examined in light of their attempts to articulate divine passibility as a workable solution to the problems presented by divine impassibility.

**Jürgen Moltmann and the Theology of Divine Suffering**

The twentieth century witnessed a steady stream of wars, catastrophes, and genocide. In Africa, for example, racial discrimination in the South African apartheid system, the killings of Ugandans by Idi Amin in the 1970s, the so-called “ethnic cleansing” in Rwandan genocide, and famine in the horn of Africa all followed the

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horrors of war in Europe. These incidents and many other inhuman acts expressed toward other human beings around the globe have given rise to the question: Where is God in the midst of all these catastrophes? If God is almighty, why can’t He stop bad things from happening in the world? It seems that human beings are still haunted by the shadow that has been cast by man-made catastrophes of the past. People are longing for the active presence of God in situations of suffering. The idea of an impassible God that was developed in traditional Christian theology does not satisfy the longing.

The powerful words of Elie Wiesel in *Night*, as he recounts his experience in the Nazi German concentration camps at Auschwitz between the years 1944-1945, come to mind as the answer to the question, “Where is God?”3 Wiesel recalls many events that took place after the Jews were dragged from their homes by the Nazis to the camps. During the hanging and slow death of a boy, which all in the camp are forced to watch, he hears someone asking, “Where is God? Where is He?”4 Wiesel’s answer comes from deep inside his mind, “Here He is . . . He is hanging here on these gallows.”5 Although Wiesel was struggling with God for being quiet when His people were suffering at the hands of the Nazis, his idea of God, which he inherited from his Jewish heritage, didn’t change. God was present, enduring the suffering of His people. God was there in the person of the slowly suffocating boy on the gallows, in the suffering of the prisoners, in

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4 Wiesel, 61-62.

5 Wiesel, 61-62.
the concentration camps. Indeed, God is present to all the unnamed places in the world where suffering reigns through unjust wars, hate, prejudice, and discrimination.

Out of this background, Jürgen Moltmann, one of the prominent voices in contemporary theology, developed his theology of the Cross to affirm the presence of the passible God in situations of suffering. Moltmann is one of the contemporary theologians accused of breaking away from the classical claim of divine impassibility.⁶ He is also accused of criticizing the Christian tradition of having compromised the position of Christ’s passion in the doctrine of God in favor of a metaphysical tradition of Greek philosophy. He wonders whether Christian theology has not “failed to develop a consistent Christian concept of God.”⁷ This is true especially today when people are searching for the presence of God, a God that suffers with and for the people He created.

The claim that God reveals Himself in the person of Jesus Christ is the central theme of Moltmann’s trinitarian theology of the Cross. He begins with an assumption that all the persons of the Trinity suffered in the person of Jesus Christ.⁸ He claims that traditional theology had rejected the idea of a passible God, an idea he thinks the fathers borrowed from Hellenistic philosophy. He insists that, “If we follow the fashion of Greek philosophy and ask what attributes are appropriate for God, the attributes such as diversity, movement, or passibility will have to be excluded from the divine nature.”⁹

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⁸ Moltman, The Crucified God, 245.

⁹ Moltman, The Future of Creation, 42.
Emerging out of the background intense suffering, Moltmann’s theology of the Crucified God does not intend to introduce a new doctrine, but a redefinition of a concept of God from the perspective of the suffering people. The concept of an impassible, immutable, and transcendent God stands over against a suffering, divided, and never-self-sufficient world and, therefore, cannot help.

If God cannot suffer, how can the Christian faith see Christ’s passion as the revelation of an invisible God? This question calls for a new definition of the meaning of the concept of God, the meaning of the Cross and Christ’s passion and death. Was atonement for sin the purpose of Christ’s death on the cross? Or is there a deeper and more complex connection between Christ’s passion and God’s relationship with humanity? Sin is a metaphor for spiritual death, a break in the bonds of solidarity with God. The Cross represents a bridge between humanity and God in the form of Christ, who is one with God, displaying solidarity with us. In his words to the crowds in John 12, Jesus speaks of the purpose of his impending death. “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies it bears much fruit. . . . And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” (John 12:23-24, 32-33).

Christ, the second Person of the Trinity, is talking about his own suffering and death. He understands his death as the means of bringing all humanity into solidarity with God. Through suffering and death, Christ allows humanity to return to God, who is the source of life. The Cross of Christ is, therefore, the event in which the power of divine love is shown. Moltmann argues for the involvement of the entire Trinity in Christ’s suffering on the Cross. He doesn’t make a distinction of the three Persons of the Trinity.
The logic of his argument is based on the idea that, if God is One in Three Persons, then what is happening to one Person must happen to the other two. This idea makes it possible for God to reveal Himself in Christ’s passion and death, which is the opposite and contradiction of the divine nature.

One question arises: how can contemporary theologians develop a theology that can address the mystery of God in situations of human suffering? Contemporary theologians such as Jürgen Moltmann and James Cone claim that classical theology has failed to develop an adequate Christian concept of God, leaning instead on the metaphysical concept of God, and does not satisfy human hunger for God. What is needed is to find new ideas about the concept of God. There are different approaches to this issue. Besides Moltmann’s theology of the Cross, which posits that hope comes from the suffering of God, Black liberation theology, feminist theology, and other liberation theologies from all over the world are poised to read, evaluate, and address the challenges of time. The issue is how to think of God as love in the structure of modern society, where exploitation of the poor is rampant. We need to understand that God’s self-giving love was revealed in the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The theological significance of the Christ-event lies in the mystery of the Cross, where God suffers in the person of Christ. The whole Trinity is united in the communion of love, willing to do this for the sake restoring solidarity with humanity.

*The Hermeneutics of the Cross*

As the twentieth century gave way to the twenty-first century, the world was left with the same question that was heard during the Holocaust: where is God when we suffer? The whole difficulty of understanding the mystery of suffering lies in the Mystery
of God. How can contemporary theology enter into the imagination that can connect the
today’s experience of suffering with the experience of Christ on the Cross in order to
create a living relationship with a suffering God?

The development of Moltmann’s theology of the Cross and divine suffering was
mainly based on his own experience as a prisoner of war during World War II and the
horrors of the Holocaust. This experience gave him an understanding of how suffering
and hope reinforce each other. In his book *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the
Foundation of Criticism of Christian Theology*, Moltmann develops the theology of a
suffering God. Throughout the volume, Moltmann argues that the crucifixion of Jesus
was first and foremost a Trinitarian event in which all three Persons of the Godhead
participated in Christ’s suffering and in His identification with the suffering of the world.
The Cross of Christ is not merely the manner in which Jesus died, but God’s
identification with the suffering people through Christ.

Christ’s entire experience of passion and death on the Cross is the explanation of
the nature of the relationship between divine suffering and the suffering of the world. The
Cross of Christ signifies that God humbled himself out of love for humanity by tasting
pain and bitterness in order to bring humanity into solidarity with Him. As Moltmann
puts it, “He humbles himself and takes upon himself the eternal death of the godless and
the godforsaken, so that all . . . can experience communion with him.”10 This is the
incomprehensible mystery of God in which God who is power and might was overcome
by suffering. The crucified God chose to suffer with the powerless in order to empower

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them and to give them hope for a better tomorrow. In the darkness of suffering and death of Christ, the God of love reveals Himself in the resurrection, offering hope that continues to strengthen Christian faith. Moltmann’s theology, therefore, is viewed as a substantive contribution to theological discussion on the issue of divine passibility.

Like Cyril of Alexandria, Moltmann favors a kenotic theory as the way of conveying the message of God’s presence in the situations of human suffering. However, Moltmann does not develop the kenotic theory within the framework of a Christology based on the two natures of Christ, as found in fourth-century Christology. Rather, he emphasizes God’s self-emptying love, which allowed humanity to share in His divinity. This kenosis, however, does not constitute weakness on the part of God. Rather, it shows the strength of God’s love and compassion. By arguing that God is truly divine when He becomes human, Moltmann wants to confirm that “the divine kenosis which begins with the creation of the world reaches its perfect and complete form in the Incarnation of the Son.” Consequently, divine suffering becomes an expression of the relationship between God and humanity.

Moltmann took the theme of God’s forsakenness and suffering to explain “the event between the Father who forsakes His Son and the Son who is forsaken.” He sees God’s forsakenness experienced by Christ on the Cross as God’s special revelation. The cry of Jesus, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34; Matt 27:46),

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11 Moltmann, 205-206.


reveals tension in God. God is forsaken by God. God revealing Himself specifically in His forsakenness of the Son could be termed as the central theme for Moltmann’s Trinitarian theology of the Cross. This act of forsakenness is the climax of the mystery of divine revelation and cannot be excluded in the search of a true concept of God. God accepts suffering in Christ in order to enter into solidarity with humanity. Therefore, Christ’s suffering and death on the Cross is a source of Christian identity, which consists of personal identification with the crucified God.

God who suffers by virtue of His passion for humanity can indeed be the foundation of the theology of a passible God. The Cross, therefore, must be interpreted in Trinitarian terms as an event concerned with a relationship among the three Persons. This relational concept of the Trinitarian God creates room for redefining God as passible. On the basis of this relationship, whatever happened to Christ on the Cross must have, at the same time, happened to the whole Trinity. As Moltmann points out, “We have not just seen one Person of the Trinity suffer in the event of the cross . . . but as a Trinitarian event.” God, who suffers voluntarily, suffers out of love for humanity. As human beings, we are called to respond to this divine love by embracing hope that brings us closer to the mystery of God.

As I mentioned earlier, Moltmann’s Christology does not draw from the traditional two-nature Christological controversy. Instead, he focuses on the kingdom that is experienced in the present time in companionship with Jesus the Crucified. He

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14 Moltmann, 151.
15 Moltmann, 245.
imagines the kingdom to be where the sick are healed, the lost are found, the prisoners
are freed, the despised are accepted, and the poor discover their own dignity. In this
companionship with Christ, the power of God is experienced in real practical terms.
God’s kingdom cannot be restricted to any religious, moral, or spiritual sphere. It should
be a universal kingdom where the loving God is involved in the lives of all people.

In modern times, the approach to the mystery of God has been based upon
Christ’s human experience. If theology takes human experience as the starting point, then
theological knowledge will lead us from what we know (experience) to what we don’t
know (faith), the particular to the general, the historical to the eschatological. This fact
enables us to glimpse the reality of the impassible God, who became passible through the
person of Jesus Christ. The impassible God emptied Himself by assuming human nature
through the Incarnation with all its limitations except for sin. By assuming the human
nature and its limitations, God is able to undergo suffering and, thus, is able to experience
human suffering. This revelation signals the truth that when we suffer we don’t suffer
alone but God is always present in human suffering. Liberation theology has explored
this concept of a loving God who is in solidarity with the poor and the marginalized.

*Contemporary Liberation Theology on Divine Suffering*

The attempt made by Latin American liberation theologians came from the
perspective of the poor, the oppressed, the rejected, and the marginalized people of this
world. Feminist theology and Third World theologies are more examples of the efforts
being made by contemporary theologians to redefine the concept of God from the
perspective of the poor and the marginalized. This idea of God’s preferential option for
the poor is linked to the fact that God is to be encountered in the praxis of love to
neighbor and love to God. In encountering God who loves unconditionally, we come to gain insight into God’s greatness and transcendence. The need to develop theology from the perspective of the poor, the oppressed, the marginalized is of special importance. In this view, the theology of a suffering God should provide hope, trust, and confidence based on divine love and compassion.

We see the expression of divine love and compassion in the mystery of Incarnation. God became human in order to show us how to be truly human and be restored to our true human natures and to give us hope. As the scriptures testify, the “Word became flesh” (John 1:14) so that God who is love could enter into a deeply personal relationship with humanity to empower the weak. Through the process of self-emptying, God took on human nature with all its limitations except sin. He showed us how to be truly human—human beyond the limitations of sin, which is a result of a disconnection from our Creator. This is the root of divine suffering that culminated in the death of Christ. Christian theology, therefore, should seek to approach the mystery of God in relation to both the Trinitarian mystery and the mystery of the Christ-event. It is in Christ’s suffering that Christians continue to rediscover the notion of God as love and their identity with Christ.

*James Cone: Divine Impassibility and the African American Experience*

The suffering of African Americans in the United States of America has prompted a Black theology that considers matters of faith and practice from the Black perspective. There have been attempts to make sense of African Americans’ suffering experience and to explore God’s involvement in it. The history of African Americans in the United States echoes the same question asked by Jews in the concentration camps: “Where is God?” It
is a cry that is heard from all people who are suffering discrimination because of their race or ethnicity around the world. Black theologians have specifically explored the issue of divine suffering in relation to what Black people endured during slavery and later in various forms of racism. The goal of Black theology in addressing the issue of suffering is to help African American believers make sense of their own suffering by identifying themselves with Christ the Crucified. Issues such as slavery, racism, prejudice, discrimination, and longing for equality raise the question as to whether God’s universal love and goodness for all humanity is really universal and inclusive of Black people.

James Cone, an African American theologian, in his book *God of the Oppressed*, has developed a perspective on Black theology by looking directly through the lens of liberation theology with a focus on the African American experience in the United States. Cone relates the Gospel message to the experience of African Americans by raising a vital question of why a good and sovereign God who loves and acts on behalf of the oppressed would allow African Americans to suffer for so long without deliverance. Cone’s answer to this problem takes the African American’s struggle for freedom, equality, and human dignity as its starting point.

Cone develops a Black theology based on social and historical context by taking on the theme of God’s presence in the face of suffering caused by racism and the deprivation of social, political, and economic power. Cone ponders, “If the Christian God is truly the one who liberated Israel from Egypt, if this is the same Jesus who had


compassion for the poor and the marginalized of His time, then why does God not act to eliminate suffering in the world?”¹⁸ In Cone’s opinion, the saving God must be the political God, the protector of the poor, and the establisher of the rights of those who are oppressed. God must be against the oppressor if His activities of liberation should have any meaning at all.¹⁹ This particular view of God informs how deep and painful the wounds of slavery and racism still are in the lives of African Americans. It seems to me that Cone is suggesting an image of God that demands radical revolution in order to bring about healing of the past experiences to the African American people. While a solution to this problem is most likely impossible in the current political and social arena, Black theology of liberation must continue to address the issue of racial reconciliation until the human dignity of all oppressed people is recognized and respected.

However, God can still utilize other means that encourage the rejection of oppression. Cone thinks that God is still able to get the true Christian message through. The Exodus from Egypt provides the foundation for assuming that God is active as a liberator of the oppressed. This God, who reveals Himself in Jesus Christ as the Liberator, must be the helper and the healer of the wounds of Black people. The person of Jesus Christ, therefore, must be the focus of Black liberation theology because Christ is the foundation of the hopes and dreams of African Americans.²⁰

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¹⁸ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 51


The Issue of Racism

Racism is a belief that certain characteristics and abilities can be attributed to people simply on the basis of their race and that some racial groups are superior to others. In Germany, for example, during World War II, institutionalized racism was not considered wrong. The Nazis persecuted and killed millions of Jews and Gypsies in the Holocaust, claiming to purify the human race by eliminating inferior races. This was a slap in the face of God who created all people in His own image. It made the Holocaust the symbol of modern evil. If all people were created equal, why on earth is there still a tendency to look at other people as inferior or second class citizens? For theologians like James Cone, racism is unacceptable. The conviction that God joins the oppressed in their struggle for liberation creates a basis for Cone’s Black liberation theology.

Racism, as a form of discrimination, is a powerful weapon to divide people and to encourage fear and hatred towards other people in times of conflict and war, and even during economic downturns. Racism has fostered inequality for centuries as well as influenced how we relate to other human beings who are not like us. Perhaps the most prominent and notable form of racism in the United States began with the institution of slavery, during which Black Africans were enslaved by Whites and treated as property. Even after slavery was banned in the nineteenth century, slavery continued to be a stigma for African Americans and is a basis for the racism that persists today.

There is historical evidence of discriminatory practices in the Southern states, where the existence of Jim Crow laws\textsuperscript{21} facilitated racial segregation in public schools, 

\textsuperscript{21}Jim Crow laws: The system of laws governing the racial relations between Blacks and Whites. (separate but not equal). See Massey and Denton, \textit{American Apartheid}, 25-28, 40-42, 63, 70, 170.
public places, public transportation, and housing, and prevented adult Black males from exercising their right to vote. This system of White supremacy reinforced stereotypical images of Black inferiority in the popular culture and all walks of life. Blacks were referred to as “niggers” and were reduced to the status of second-class citizens. Even today, the system has not changed much. There are places where people of color and immigrants still face racism. For example, one of my co-workers shared with me her experience of racism in her neighborhood. She woke up one morning to find a large swastika painted on her door together with the words “GO HOME” in capital letters. This person is from Africa and has been a United States citizen for more than twenty years. Since she is originally from Africa, some people think that she doesn’t have the right to live in this country. I believe there are other people who are going through the same experience. Being a foreigner myself, I felt disturbed and upset by the incident. The question, “Can we get along?” kept coming into my mind. The situation is worse for African Americans who have been born and raised here and are still not accepted as human beings.

In theory, “all Black people share in the unique distinction of having their claim to being fully human constantly and systematically refuted.” In other words, while poverty, subjugation, and oppression can manifest themselves in other categories of people, such as women, homosexuals, or other minority groups, Blacks have the distinction of carrying with them a stigma of being an enslaved, lynched, and denigrated

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22 Quoted from the late Rodney King’s cry for unity and harmony among all races in America.

23 Davis, Kontrigh, “Jesus Christ and Black Liberation: Toward a Paradigm of Transcendence,” Journal of Religious Thought 42.1 (Spring/Summer 1985), 53.
category of people in the United States of America. Enduring slavery, hate, and inequality, Black people were treated as less human, often left to pick at the scraps of the dominant mainstream society. But we are all sisters and brothers in Christ obliged to love God and one another.

Unfortunately, Christian theology has failed to address this issue of racism and other injustices that continue to damage the image of God. The image of a “White Christ” as portrayed in traditional Christian art presents a non-diverse concept of God. Black people try to make sense of what Christ, as a white male, should stand for. The painful memories of slavery, racism, and prejudice make it difficult for African Americans to identify themselves with a White Christ. Moreover, the Christian message of love, peace, and brotherhood contrast sharply with Christian bigotry. No one can deny that the pain of racism is real and African Americans and other people of color continue to experience its effects.

Where is God in the midst of racism? The idea of an impassible God taught by traditional Christian theology does not bring any relief to people suffering racism and other social ills. Oppressed people cannot accept the notion of a God who is not involved in their daily suffering. Only the God of love and compassion can heal them. God who became poor, suffering, and defenseless in the person of Jesus Christ will empower not only African Americans, but also all who are suffering racism all over the world with the spirit of reconciliation and enable them to tear down the walls of racism.

_Slavery and Divine Involvement in the Suffering of Black People_

Does slavery continue to affect the lives of African Americans today? Without doubt, slavery is blamed for most of the problems of the African American community.
Problems such as homelessness, drugs, youth violence, and single-parent households are part of their daily struggle. Although slavery ended in 1877, freedom for African slaves was not real. Freed slaves who had spent their lives being told what to do were left on their own to face their so-called “freedom.” As a result, they faced every kind of social ill such as police brutality, Ku Klux Klan hatred, lynching, and segregation.

One can only understand the notion of divine impassibility in Black theology if it is considered from the background of the role of Christianity in the history of Black people’s suffering. They were uprooted involuntarily from their motherland, cut off from their past, stripped of their human dignity, and denied the right to practice their traditional religions. Since they were naturally religious, they adopted Christianity as a substitute for their lost religion in order to keep connected with their Creator. Christianity for them became a welcome medium for the expression of their religious needs. It is in this capacity, only, that Christianity played a positive role in the lives of the Black people at a time when their oppressors were using it as an instrument of oppression. At this stage, churches were the only places where slaves could partly realize their dignity as fully human and develop strategies for motivating the struggle for freedom. Some of the strategies include rituals, storytelling, and songs.

It must be understood that the slaves readily adopted Christianity not only because it was the only religion they were allowed to practice, but they recognized a certain parallel between their slave situation and that of the Israelites in Egypt. They also noticed

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a conceptual affinity between their notion of God and the Old Testament image of God.\(^{25}\)

These factors explain why the slaves cherished the Bible and appropriated it to the extent that they were able to derive the meaning from it that was hidden in the image of their oppressors. Their religious experience helped to ease their suffering and to fire up the desire to search for freedom from slavery and freedom of worship.

After internalizing Christianity, the slaves could not express their Christian faith within the Euro-American church structures as much as they desired. First of all, they were not welcomed to worship in the same places with White Christians. Even as personal freedom became possible for some Blacks in the Northern states, between 1777 and 1818, most Blacks continued to intensify their search for freedom.\(^{26}\) There are three main factors in the search for religious independence among Black people: racism, the moral failure of American Christian churches to confront racism, and the need to uphold African culture in their own Afro-American independent churches. No matter what could be taken as the immediate factor leading to the establishment of their own churches, the desire to be Christians without losing their own identity as Africans was paramount.

Second, there were dissimilarities between the slaves and their masters in the perception of their religious values and in the manner of their religious expressions, such as the divine reality, worship, rituals, prayers, community, good, and evil. The slave’s experience with God in Christ constituted the main source of energy in the struggle for survival in the face of the suffering situations of slavery. For them, it was comforting to

\(^{25}\) Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 60.

know that God suffered in terms of His commitment to save humankind from sin and its effects. Ironically, slave masters in the name of the Christian teachings were defending slavery and racism.  

Through teaching slaves the message of the Bible and the fathers, the slaves could be encouraged to bear the earthly burden in exchange for heavenly rewards later. Slaves could be frightened into believing that disobedience to earthly masters would be perceived by God as disobedience to Him and deserving of punishment. The slaves, however, had already begun to experience the same God taught by Christianity as their most intimate companion in their situations of suffering. The belief that God is involved and present in their suffering is central in the African slaves’ commitment to their Christian faith.

**Divine Impassibility in the Black Theology of Liberation**

The establishment of the African independent churches prepared the ground for the emergence of Black theology. The seed for Black theology was sown as early as the

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27 There was some kind of approval of slavery in Christian teachings. Christianity defended slavery as instituted by God and as being an integral part of the natural order of humanity. The reasoning was supported by the Bible passages quoted below see 1Tim. 6:1-5; Eph. 6: 5-6; Titus 2: 9-10; 1Pet. 2:18-29. In regard to Christianity, the Church was slow to condemn slavery. St Augustine (354-430) wrote in *City of God* 19:15, “that “slavery is no crime in the eyes of God,” since it is part of God’s punishment for sin. Thomas Aquinas wrote, “Slavery among men is natural, for some are naturally slaves (Summa Theologica, “On Justice”). Pope Leo the Great (440-461) forbade admitting former slaves into the priesthood “because of the vileness (vilitas) of their condition,” which, he maintained “would pollute” the sacred profession (taken from Lives of the Saints (Published by John J. New York, NY: Crawley & Co., Inc., 1954). Also Pope Gregory I (540-604), whose church owned a land cultivated by slaves, passed a prohibition of a slave marrying a free Christian (see Epistles 7:1). He also wrote, “Slaves are to be admonished not to despise their masters lest they offend God.” (see the Book of Pastoral Rule, Part III chapter V). In the United States, the Official Act of the Colony of Virginia offered a statement, “All servants not being Christians, imported into this colony by shipping, shall be slaves for their lives.” (Quoted from David Brion Davis, The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1966), 180. In the Statement of the Holy Office of the Vatican, 1866, “Slavery itself . . . is not at all contrary to the natural and divine law.” It is unfortunate to note that the Catholic Church in America did not condemn slavery until 1890. The condemnation came late after slavery was abolished by Rome in 1839 (see Papal Bull of Pope Gregory XVI, “Condemning Slave Trade,” issued on December 3, 1839).
1740s during the establishment of Black independent churches. It germinated, however, in the 1960s during the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. However, the term “Black theology” was not coined until the end of the 1960s.\textsuperscript{28} Most of the ministers in the Black churches continued to be guided by the traditional theology they inherited from the White churches, which could not be reconciled with the horrors of slavery and the struggle for freedom and identity. The formal teachings were based upon love of God and neighbor. But the actions of many members and clergy of these White churches were anything but loving to their Black neighbors, thus presenting a strong contradiction between theology and action.

The contribution of Martin Luther King, Jr., the Black Civil Rights activist and Baptist minister, to the founding of Black theology was significant. He was an early advocate of relating the Christian Gospel to the Black struggle for justice. His religious and charismatic leadership found a positive approach to the nonviolent struggle for justice. Although King’s approach was able to expose the evil of racism in the light of the Gospel, it lacked the radicalism that some Black people wanted to effect total liberation. It brought jail sentences and brutal treatment to the Black people. Ultimately, this led to the formation of two camps in the Civil Rights Movement: those who supported King’s nonviolent approach and those who advocated for the Black Power Movement.\textsuperscript{29} The formation of the Black Power movement was attractive to the radical preachers, but


Black people did not see it as a substitute for Christianity. The only way to maintain the relevancy of Christianity to Black people was to harmonize the approach of Martin Luther King and the Black Power movement. The response to this challenge gave birth to Black theology of liberation.\(^\text{30}\)

**Black Theology of Liberation**

It was in the context of the struggle for freedom, justice, and restoration of Black dignity and the accommodation of Christianity as a Black religion that James Cone wrote his book *Black Theology and Black Power* in 1969.\(^\text{31}\) Cone is a Protestant minister who grew up in Arkansas under the heavy hand of segregation. He observed firsthand the way White Christians treated Blacks, even after desegregation was ordered by the federal government. Christianity did not provide him with meaningful answers to his questions as he tried to reconcile Black people’s suffering and the Christian message of love. For him, the larger issue of justice and oppression remained untreated primarily through the form of racism and discrimination based on the constructed “Black race.” This left a lasting mark in Cone’s mind.

Although Cone’s most obvious target was racism, his message was actually much broader. He also criticized middle-class Black churches and argued that racism was only part of the problem. The much larger issue was the failure of Christianity to properly motivate people to practice Christian love toward each other. Instead of acting on

\(^{30}\)Some theologians dedicated to Black liberation theology besides James Cone are William Jones (see *Is God a White Racist?*); J. Deotis Roberts (see *Black Theology Today, Liberation and Reconciliation*); M. J. Jones (see *The Color of God*).

\(^{31}\) Note: *Black Theology and Black Power* was Cone’s first book on Black theology. He tried to relate the Christian message to the experience of the Black people.
Christian principles of love and charity, they remained isolated in social or cultural groups. Like many other Christian churches around the globe, Christians in America might have preached a message of love, peace, and respect for human dignity, but at every turn they failed to live up to their own words. The existence of segregated denominations and segregated churches proved this fact. There is also a long history of Christianity using religious arguments to defend both slavery and segregation. The question arises, if God is one, the church is one, and Jesus Christ is one, how can the church that Christ founded here on earth continue to have churches based on race?

Black theology attempts to affect the self-understanding and self-affirmation of Black people in light of the God of love and compassion whom they learned of from the Christian Bible. This God is a God of all people, who, as Paul said, has “no partiality.” (Gal 3:21) Black theology, therefore, must help Black people conceive of God in terms of His involvement in the situation of human suffering. As Cone came to realize, “God encounters us in the human condition.”32 For him, there is no truth in Jesus Christ independent of the experiences of the oppressed Black people, their history, and culture. God in Jesus Christ reveals Himself in the situation of the African American struggle for freedom and dignity as human beings.

Black theology of liberation is, therefore, a means to empower African Americans in their struggle against the oppression that destroys their human dignity. Cone’s idea of God is the same as the God of the Bible, who is involved in the history of the people. God chose to suffer out of solidarity with the oppressed. Therefore, for liberation

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theologians to speak about God, they must make their interest in the social situations of
the people and their struggle for freedom and justice their priority. Theology must
address the issue of suffering and the meaning of Jesus in today’s world.

*Cone’s Christological Titles in Black Theology*

Black theology of liberation created a movement that not only dealt with the
issues of the time but also began to permeate the fabric of Black culture in a way that still
plays an important role in contemporary Black theology. We see this fact in Cone’s claim
that Christ is Black. He maintains that neither God nor Christ can remain neutral when
dealing with an oppressed group of individuals. Rather, they take the form of those who
are most oppressed. In order to explore what Cone means by the “Black Christ,” it is
important to introduce another image of Jesus that plays a significant role in the lives of
Black people.

*Christ the Liberator*

Cone maintains that any starting point that ignores God in Christ as the liberator
of the oppressed is inadequate. He claims that the Jesus story is the oppressed person’s
story because God in Christ identifies with the suffering of the people. As Cone puts it,
“God becomes poor and weak in order that the oppressed might become liberated from
poverty and powerlessness.”\(^{33}\) In this light, he identifies Jesus with African Americans in
the sense that Jesus suffers with and in their experiences.

The belief that God intervenes to liberate the oppressed is the foundation for
Cone’s concept of God in Black theology. As Cone writes, “God breaks the chains of

\(^{33}\) Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* 74.
slavery from within the struggle for liberation, taking sides with the Black slaves to such an extent that He makes their liberation His cause of action.”  

Christianity empowered the slaves through Scripture, which gave them not only the spiritual encouragement to withstand their immense humiliation and suffering but also the encouragement to physically seek their freedom. God’s identification with the oppressed, in Cone’s opinion, is limitless and His immersion in the situation of their oppression speaks to the “blackness of God.” This idea of the “blackness of God” suggests that God has made the condition of the oppressed His own condition. God does not see Blacks as being less human but as equal members of the whole body. Accordingly, the main message of the doctrine of creation is the equality of all humanity.

In comparison to Moltmann’s claim that the whole Trinity was involved in the suffering of Christ and, therefore, the people, Cone sees God in the real and tangible experiences of Black people, which include slavery, prejudice, and discrimination. But both Moltmann and Cone see God’s involvement in the human experience of suffering through the Cross of Christ and, I believe, both see God as passible.

The Black Christ

Cone declares that “Jesus is Black.” This Christological title suggests that Jesus has gone through the experience of African Americans and he understands and shares in their daily struggles. In this light, Cone’s interpretation of Christ’s “blackness” is not one of physicality but spiritual identification. Cone wants to demonstrate how African

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34 Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation 56.

35 Cone, God of the Oppressed, 122.
Americans can identify with Christ. That is why the themes of freedom and a God who suffers in Christ run throughout his work. By the expression “Jesus is Black,” Cone wants to show that in Christ God becomes the victim in the place of Blacks and, thus, transforms the historical consequences of slavery into the battleground for the struggle for true freedom and human dignity.

Cone’s conviction that “God is Black” implies that God in the person of Jesus Christ is essentially on the side of oppressed Black people to liberate them from oppression. However, the implication of this conviction is that it can be taken to mean that God is partial. For Cone there can be neither a God of all peoples nor a colorless God. In other words, God cannot be for the oppressed and the oppressors at the same time. As Cone writes, “Either God is identified with the oppressed to the point that their experience becomes God’s experience or God is a God of racism.”

My initial reaction to this Christological title was this: Why should one assign God a title from the physical aspect of somebody’s own skin color. I thought that assigning a certain color to God could lead a theologian who is expected to fight against racism to fall into the same trap of dividing people by race. If God is God for all humanity, how can people assign God their own specific color, thereby ignoring God’s love for all people of different colors? Focusing only on social justice might jeopardize the universal character of Christ the Savior of both the oppressed and the oppressors. In order to address the issue of identity, Cone’s Black theology must address the spiritual aspect of “Christ’s blackness.”

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I believe Christ is a universal figure for all humanity. However, Cone was writing right after the painful experience of slavery, lynching, and discrimination that the Black people went through. He is using this Christological title as a metaphor to illustrate the significance of Christ of Black people. The notion of “Christ’s blackness,” therefore, is not literal, but a powerful symbol of Christ’s identification with the oppressed. The significance of Christ’s blackness is that it has an effect on the imagination of Black people. It supports Black liberation theology, which rejects all kinds of oppression and empowers African Americans to relate to Christ and Christianity in a meaningful way. By following the traditional Christian understanding that God became flesh in the person of Jesus Christ, Cone has developed his Black theology of liberation by emphasizing the concrete historical existence and redemptive character of Jesus as the “oppressed one,” who identified with the oppressed of his time. Jesus was moved by the injustices of his current situation and fought against the status quo. By identifying Himself with the oppressed, Jesus gave hope to those who are oppressed and downtrodden by the mainstream culture. His battle to stand for the oppressed led to his suffering and death.

Yet, the idea of a Black Christ in Black liberation theology does not stop simply with Christ’s identification with the oppressed. Cone argues that Christ’s suffering and death ended with His victory over death through resurrection and glorification. Therefore, the resurrection of Christ allows those who are oppressed to see that they don’t have to live in fear, anger, and insecurity. Jesus is a physical symbol of defeat of the oppressive structures of the system that are designed to oppress. Blacks and other oppressed groups have an iconic figure to look to in order to derive some sort of meaning from their daily life struggles. They have to move beyond their limited perspective of skin color to be able
to benefit from the graces of salvation. The danger of replacing the idea of “a White Christ” with “a Black Christ” is that it can be interpreted as exchanging one evil with the other. The problem can never be solved in this case.

The title of “Black Christ,” therefore, should not focus on an individualistic interpretation of Jesus Christ but on the spiritual and universal nature of Jesus, to heal the wounds of racial divide and to bring hope of good tidings. Overall, the image of Christ has been reconstructed to fit the image that acknowledges the conditions of Black people in the mainstream society, while subsequently rejecting many of the premises set forth by traditional theology. But this is the Christ of all “Blacks” within their context. The “Blackness” of Christ is the identifier of an empathetic God who stands with all oppressed humanity.

What Christ Means for Black People

What does Christ mean to African American Christians? The answer to this question depends upon the life experience that African Americans have gone through and continue to encounter every day of their lives. As Cone speculates, “What has my experience of Christ today to do with the Christ of Nestorius of Constantinople and Cyril of Alexandria?”

Cone also recalls the words of Tertullian who, in trying to state his concern about the primacy of faith in relation to reason, says, “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” Cone’s question “What has Africa to do with Jerusalem?” reflects Tertullian’s and is concerned with the impact Jesus makes on the lives of African Americans. Cone claims that African Americans have a tradition of their own that

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37 Cone, God of the Oppressed, 104.
stretches back to their African heritage. When this is combined with the Christian story they create an African American religious tradition that is unique to North American Black people. Therefore, social context, Scriptures, and tradition operate together to enable African Americans to move actively and reflectively with Christ in the struggle for freedom and the restoration of human dignity.

Consequently, there is hope that sustains people when they are in suffering conditions. This is true in Black liberation theology. Theologians like Cone see eschatological hope in Jesus as the affirmation that oppressed African Americans are not struggling alone. The God of promise who saved the Israelites from slavery is with African Americans in their struggle for freedom and their movement towards full human dignity. In raising the issue of hope, Cone agrees with Moltmann, who holds that a better future should begin with the transformation of the present. This is what the resurrection of Christ and eternal life in glory means, not only to the African American, but to all who believe in Christ. Eternal glory is defined as a life of complete and full human dignity. It does not mean the fullness of life to be realized after this earthly life, but amid this life’s struggle there is a light of hope that presents a reality of Christ’s presence. Christ is that light, and He shows us the way to the promised kingdom of God.

Christ brings salvation into our daily lives and helps us to be more humane and dignified. For a complete understanding of the salvation brought by Jesus, Christology must be based on the biblical portrayal of Jesus and his solidarity with the oppressed. As the Gospels testify, the whole life of Jesus is the testimony for God’s response to the cry

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of the oppressed. The awareness of God’s presence in the worst moments of African American’s suffering is a major theme in Black liberation theology.

**What Is Missing in Ancient Christian Theology?**

Although Cone has blamed the fathers for failing to address the critical questions of human suffering, he understands that these fathers were only accountable for dealing with the issues of their time that related to Jesus. However, Cone maintains that if they failed to deal with the issues of justice, which is crucial to Cone’s Black theology, then their approach to the Gospel of Christ suffers a deficiency. He holds that the Bible is the witness of God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ, and the African American experience of suffering requires that Scripture be a source of Black theology. This is a very important point in Cone’s theology. For if theology does not give room to the understanding of God as the God of the oppressed who is revealed in their struggle, then theology will miss the whole point of salvation. The suffering people need to feel that God is on their side and that His presence in their lives continues as a divine reality.

Thomas Weinandy, the author of *Does God Suffer?*, responds to Cone and other contemporary theologians who claim that traditional theology was the victim of Greek philosophy that influenced their understanding of God as impassible. For him, “Contemporary theologians are also victims of the Enlightenment presuppositions and scientific method on which they rely to approach theological issues as if they were scientific problems to be solved rather than mysteries to be discerned and clarified.”

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40 Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 32.
Weinandy’s mind, the question of divine impassibility or passibility must be in conformity with early church tradition. Unfortunately, Weinandy’s emphasis on conformity minimizes the need to include cultural contexts that contribute to the knowing of the Supreme Being. His perspective limits the possibility of diverse speculations about faith and God.

Anselm of Canterbury writes in his *Proslogion* that theology is faith seeking understanding. As he puts it, “For I do not seek to understand so that I may believe; but I believe so that I may understand.”\(^{41}\) Therefore, faith seeking understanding must help us come to a deeper understanding of the nature of God and God’s revelation. Weinandy’s goal is to demonstrate that the question of divine impassibility is the mystery and, therefore, not a subject of discussion. However, we can’t rely solely on Weinandy’s limited approach to the question of divine impassibility. Based on Anselm’s “faith seeking understanding,” it is incumbent upon us to be open to the evolving story found in our life experiences as we search for God’s involvement in our human history.

**The Mystery of God in Situations of Suffering**

Christian theology has developed two conflicting notions of God: the passible God of the Bible and the impassible God of Hellenistic philosophy. On one hand, the God of the Bible, by virtue of involvement in history, is known as compassionate, loving, and caring. This God is portrayed by the Scriptures with colorful anthropomorphic emotions such as joy, anger, jealousy, mercy, suffering, and so forth. These biblical divine emotions have convinced the defenders of divine passibility to claim that God

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truly suffers. On the other hand, the God of the Hellenistic philosophy is said to be impassible. These two notions of God have created tension since the onset of Christianity. Can the two doctrines be reconciled?

In the twentieth century, there has been a paradigm shift in the way theologians think about God. As Elizabeth Johnson has said, “These theologians are not trying to discover a different God believed by previous generations.” They are trying to draw insights from events of their daily lives and see how these situations can connect them to the divine mystery. The image of an impassible God that has been portrayed in traditional Christian theology does not seem to bring humanity close to the divine mystery. There are glimpses of the divine mystery in human life that people can see and realize the presence of God in their midst. From their own experiences, they can discover a God who empowers them as they fight through life struggles.

Contemporary theologians have realized this human need and are trying to understand how God works within the situations of suffering. With the exception of a few, for example, Thomas Weinandy and Paul Gavrilyuk, contemporary theologians have portrayed God as passible. This God suffers with humanity in order to liberate them from fear of facing life struggles. Moltmann’s view of God, for example, has developed from a vision of a God who suffers with the oppressed to a God of hope and promise. His views originate from his painful wartime experiences. God’s revelation came to him through his encounter with an American Army chaplain, who gave him a Bible, and then through the

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encounter with other people in the Scottish labor camp, where he found God who suffers
with suffering humanity. He writes:

I came to the Story of the passion, and when I read Jesus’ death cry, “My
God, why have you forsaken me?” I knew with certainty: this is someone
who understands you. I began to understand the assailed Christ because I
felt that he understood me: this was the divine brother in distress, who
takes the prisoners with him on his way to resurrection. I began to
summon up the courage to live again, seized by a great hope.43

In this account, Moltmann narrates how he found God in Christ’s God-
forsakenness. The message showed him where God is, where God has been with him in
his life struggles, and where God would be found in the future. He came to find the face
of a God who is involved in the world and its suffering, in the Scriptures and in the
people who accepted the prisoners of war with Christ’s love. In this light, Moltmann feels
the traditional Christian view of God compromises the idea of a loving God of the
Scriptures in favor of the God of Greek philosophy. His basic motivation is to conceive
of a relationship between God and the world in which God is involved in human history
by participating in human suffering.

Like Moltmann, human beings often have moments in life where they discover
the presence of a Supreme Being. My personal experience of God during the time of the
grief of my father’s passing comes to mind as I reflect on Moltmann’s experience of God.
My grief was mixed with anger and frustration due to the poor treatment my father
received before his death. I blamed every situation that contributed to my father’s death. I
did not read the Bible or talk to a spiritual director. I just struggled within myself until I

had a dream of my father telling me to stop crying and that he was okay. Although at that
time I did not interpret my dream theologically, I now think that was my encounter with
the divine through the image of my father. My father came back as one of the ancestors
bringing God’s message of comfort. This reminds me that God’s presence is available to
all who listen not with the ears but with the mind and heart.

**Conclusion**

People develop theologies out of their lived life experiences. The war and other
catastrophes of the twentieth century were occasions for contemporary theologians to
redefine the concept of God. Moltmann and Cone have proposed Christology from their
lived experiences as a better approach to the issue of divine impassibility. They both
made human experience a starting point. They have raised concerns about how the notion
of divine impassibility does not help to bring the mystery of God closer to human
knowledge. They both agree that the question of divine impassibility that was raised in
traditional theology does not help contemporary Christians relate to Christ. Moltman has
chosen Christ’s humanity as his starting point, making the argument that any theology
that begins with Christ’s divinity makes the knowledge of God more paradoxical.

Cone, on the other hand, has developed his Christology out of the experience of
African Americans, who have gone through the painful experience of slavery and
continue to suffer racism. The suffering and struggle for liberation from this kind of
situation has been an impetus for Cone to develop his Black theology of liberation. From
both theologians, we can draw a conclusion that contemporary theology must be directed
to a God, who is in solidarity with the suffering people, who walks with them and shares
their struggle for liberation here and now. Cone maintains that the Christian God must be
the God known from the Bible, who tends to reveal Himself at a point at which social justice is being restored to the poor and the oppressed. Cone identified the story of Jesus with the African American story in which God in the person of Jesus Christ becomes a slave, poor and weak, in order to liberate them from powerlessness. Jesus Christ becomes the unique revelation of a passible God and the content of God’s empowering message for the oppressed, which is liberation. Cone’s view is powerful, inspiring, and encouraging—not only to the Black people but also to all the oppressed.

A theology that seeks to accomplish its task must reflect the reality of God from the perspective of the oppressed. It has to be contextual in the sense of making the social context of oppressed people its passionate concern. The language about God must take, as its starting point, the theme of liberation of the oppressed. It must evolve from the standpoint of history, experience, and social and economic situations of the oppressed.
CHAPTER 4

THE PROBLEM OF DIVINE IMPASSIBILITY IN AN AFRICAN CONTEXT

The African Context

The very essence of the African understanding of a human person is built upon relationships. A person is a person through other persons. The centerpiece of humanity is the community, and the way people organize themselves affects the capacity of an individual to develop a morally righteous character. Such an individual is able to grow as a responsible human person, and from these responsible persons, a responsible human community emerges. By associating with other people in the community, a person achieves fulfillment. Therefore, to be human is not only to belong to a community but also to be in communion with one another, to be available for one another in good and bad times, and to share material and spiritual well-being with one another. It is the sharing in the flow of daily life, which extends to the spirits of the departed whom we call ancestors and to the Creator.

This is why communal life is vital to understanding the concept of God when God is viewed with the aid of the African notion of ontological relationality being a solution to the issue of divine impassibility. The understanding of God as immanent and relational is a significant tool in explaining the mystery of God within the Trinitarian reality. This understanding is not possible unless we enter into a life that depicts Trinitarian love and communion with one another. The issue of divine impassibility is
very important because it occupies the whole foundation of patristic theology, particularly in its reflection on the issue of Christ, the *Logos* made flesh, which created the Christological controversies. It is the foundation of Christian faith that cannot be denied. However, can the impassible God also be passible? Can the relational characteristic of the Trinity affirm that God is passible? 

In this chapter, the focus will be on demonstrating how the issues of divine impassibility and passibility are currently discussed in African theologies. The chapter will analyze African traditional religion in relation to the issue of impassibility. The strengths and limitations of selected African Christian theologies will be evaluated, and suggestions will be made as to how African theology can more adequately reflect the African experience. The immense suffering of the African people, ultimately, calls for a theology grounded in a passible God. A passible God will be considered to be a God who, while not suffering physically, does experience the suffering of humanity. Christ, one in being with God and in His Passion, makes tangible the passibility of God. Christ, as human and divine, connects our human experience with the life of the Trinity. Our adoption into the family of God, through Christ, transforms our suffering. God, as our Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifying Spirit, is present to our suffering and helps us shoulder our burdens because of this adoption. Just as we share our suffering with family in the community, we share it with God the Trinity.

In Chapter 2, I recalled the suffering my family went through during the passing of my father. There are many African people who are going through the same experience or similar kinds of suffering due to poverty, diseases, economic deprivation, or bad government. People are suffering in their homes, in refugee camps, and in city slums.
Most of these people have no voice in order to demand their rights. Moreover, the AIDS pandemic is another tragedy that devastates the continent. AIDS patients and their families feel isolated and abandoned by God and others in their communities. They connect their illness to God’s punishment, and this understanding of their suffering makes their illness worse, and patients suffer not only physically but also spiritually and emotionally. How can theology make suffering meaningful and beneficial to suffering humanity? There is a need to rediscover the image of God within the context of suffering.

When Christianity was introduced to Africa, no effort was made to address the uniquely African context.1 The missionaries’ main concern was to teach Christian doctrine and baptize as many people as possible. Christian faith was not connected to people’s real life experience. In some cases, people were taught that suffering is good for the soul.2 It is hard to reconcile this understanding of suffering with the activity of a loving God. African theologians, therefore, have a responsibility to recognize and address the realities of African experiences so they can be interpreted into God’s saving grace.

This study, therefore, establishes the claim that the theme of a suffering God is of great significance, not only to Africans, but also to the Christian church at large. This claim will challenge the missionary approach that introduced Christianity to Africa. This approach typically favored Western traditions at the expense of African traditions. The

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one-sided affirmation of the image of an impassible God, portrayed by a classical theology, based on the teachings of the fathers, does not provide a satisfactory answer to the issue of divine impassibility. The major problem with this one-sided affirmation of divine impassibility is its steadfast reliance on dogma and philosophical reasoning that limits the search for God’s presence in human experience. There is a voice of God speaking to us in our day-to-day experience. It is thus clear that a meaningful theology of God should never underestimate the need for ongoing consideration of this mystery. It should be impossible for any meaningful theology to embrace only dogmatic statements as formulated by traditional Christian theology and to ignore daily human experiences. To define God as impassible and not allow for any variation on this divine mystery is to limit the scope of God’s love for humanity. As we grow in our understanding and relationship with God, we also must allow for growth in our concept of God.

This dissertation will address the African experience of God, especially in situations of suffering. It will also address how suffering affects a person’s existence, beliefs, and cultural and religious practices within African culture as well as suffering as a spiritual value for African Christology. The question arises: how can we transform suffering and make it meaningful? The experience of Christ must be the basis for the search for the presence of God. For it was His very participation in our suffering that makes our salvation possible. This study is aided by the work of the two schools of contemporary African Christology: inculturation theology, as developed by Charles Nyamiti, and liberation theology, as developed by Laurenti Magesa and Anne Nnasimiyu-Wasike.
Inculturation theology can be defined as “an effort to incarnate the Gospel message in the African cultures on the theological level.”

This means proclaiming the good news to people of a certain culture from within the context of their culture.

Inculturation involves the interpretation of the person of Jesus and the events of His life through the lens of the receiving culture. The meaning of these events for humanity and the God-humanity relationship needs to be presented with an appreciation of the cultural and historical background of the people.

Liberation theology involves the “promotion of awareness of the dignity of the human person as a child of God.”

It is a commitment to solidarity with the poor and those who suffer under oppression and rejection. While the goal of inculturation theology is basically educational, the goal of liberation theology is practical.

That being said, it should be recognized that they complement each other and in some crucial ways need each other. The 1994 African Synod emphasized that the project of inculturation be taken seriously by all churches in Africa. The fathers of the Synod outlined the criteria of inculturation as follows:

a. compatibility with the Christian message, and
b. communion with the universal church.

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Therefore, inculturation must be guided by these two principles. In the light of the mystery of God, inculturation as a project of communion in diversity is rooted in the mystery of the Trinity. The inner-Trinitarian life abides in the solidarity, totality, love, and communion of the divine Persons. The divine activity of giving and receiving life in communion makes God the eternal and supreme source of life. It is out of the fullness of life in the Trinity that God communicates life to humankind. From the African point of view, a solitary being is weak, but being together in communion ushers in strengths. African life follows the same principles as those of the communal life of the Trinity.

The significance of this study, therefore, is the demonstration of how both revelation and experience shape the way African Christians relate to Christ. The African desire to identify with Christ the sufferer and the idea of suffering as atonement that stands as a universal character of Christians in their identification with Christ are key to this discussion.

The Background of Contextual Theology in Africa

During the patristic era, Christianity flourished in North Africa, Nubia, and Ethiopia. It later declined due to the Islamic presence in that area, making it difficult for Christianity to spread to other parts of Africa. It was not until the fifteenth century that Christianity arrived at the Atlantic coasts of Africa through the Portuguese missionaries. Although this was Africa’s second encounter with Christianity, it did not last longer than two centuries before it vanished from the face of sub-Saharan Africa in the seventeenth century.

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century. Why? The main reason for the demise of the Latin Church in North Africa was the lack of contextualization and inculturation of the Gospel message. The missionaries did not take time to learn the African situation. They didn’t recognize that African religious values were worthy of being integrated into Christianity. As a result, the presence of Christianity there didn’t touch the hearts of Africa.

Consequently, in some parts of Africa, Christianity was met by opposition from indigenous people, especially the elders and the chiefs. This was because the Christian missionaries were associated with colonial rule and the tribal leaders feared the Europeans were coming to take their land and power. The indigenous people who accepted Christianity were met with hostility and persecution from the tribal leaders. For example, “in Uganda and Madagascar, over 100 converts suffered persecution and died as martyrs for the sake of Christian faith.” Christianity returned much later at the end of the eighteenth century through the East coast through the efforts of both Catholic and Protestant European missionaries, who followed explorers from their countries of origin. This was the third encounter between Africa and Christianity.

Since then, the history of Christianity in Africa has been unbroken. Christian churches have consistently grown both in number and importance. This is definitely the result of decades of intensive Protestant and Catholic missionary activities in the continent. The spread of Christianity in African has had benefits for the people. The impact of the missionaries on education and healthcare cannot not be underestimated or

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denied. Yet, with the success, one can hardly forget that Christianity in Africa still has one unresolved problem. Despite its growth, Christianity is neither rooted nor assimilated in the hearts of Africans. Even though efforts have been made by contemporary African theologians to integrate the Christian faith into Africa’s cultural heritage, its Western form continues to be foreign to Africans.

The reason behind this situation is that, during the introduction of Christianity in Africa, certain aspects of African culture suffered rejection at the hands of European missionaries. The missionaries were able to assess the African culture only through the lens of their own culture. They only selected familiar cultural elements and suppressed the others. For example, some elements that were left unaddressed were ancestor veneration, African approaches to illness and African traditional medicine, belief in evil spirits, witchcraft, fear of breaking taboos, curses from the offended God or ancestors, African names, diviners, healers, sacrifices, the mystery around death, and the importance of the communal aspect of African people. In this way, a partial integration of Christianity and African culture was achieved, but some important cultural values were repressed and labeled as paganism. The conscious and unconscious efforts on the part of Africans to retain such values and still practice Christianity were bound to create a cultural tension. This was a situation whereby the attempt to be a good Christian meant alienation from one’s own culture.

For many, conversion was a mixed blessing. The convert was caught between the joy of a new religion and the sadness of parting from one’s cherished ways of life,

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spirituality, and identity. The missionaries recruited people known as *Actio Catholica*\(^{10}\) in different villages for policing those Christians who might be practicing both African traditional religion and Christianity. For those caught, the punishment was excommunication from receiving sacraments. Caught in this tension, African Christians have been accused of “syncretism.” Syncretism entails a lack of proper integration of two juxtaposed elements of spirituality.\(^{11}\) It is an indication of the absence of a dialogue between two religions and a sign of unresolved duality whereby a weaker religious tradition gets lost in terms of the stronger.

Syncretism has been given a negative connotation. However, syncretism can have a positive meaning depending on the context. According to Leonardo Boff, syncretism belongs to the universal character of the church.\(^{12}\) He cites Christianity as an example of “One Huge Syncretism,” integrating elements of Jewish, Greek, Egyptian, and European cultures. For African Christians, therefore, the challenge is how to be Christian and African at the same time. This situation calls for the contextualization of theology.

**The Emergence of Contextualization**

As Christianity in sub-Saharan Africa continues to grow, one must wonder why Christianity in North Africa disappeared after about four centuries of fertile existence, during which the church produced such great theologians like Tertullian, Cyprian,

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\(^{10}\) *Actio Catholica* is a Latin name given to lay Catholics who were sent by the Catholic Church authorities to encourage Catholic influence on society. It is called Catholic Action in English. See Pope Pius X’s encyclical *Catholic Action in Italy* promulgated on June 11, 1905.


Augustine, Origen, Clement of Alexandria, Cyril of Alexandria, and Athanasius. Only the Coptic Church survived in parts of Egypt and Ethiopia. Christians in sub-Saharan Africa need to learn from the fateful history of the Latinized church in North Africa. The main reason for the disappearance of Christianity in North Africa was the lack of contextualization.

Contextualization here means communicating the Gospel message in terms appropriate to the target audience. The Roman church in North Africa was Latin, but the natives were Berber and Nubians. Neither the Bible, nor the liturgy, was translated into these languages. Everything was conducted in Latin, a language known only to clergy and theologians. Consequently, the Church in North Africa, despite its high standard in theology, did not develop roots in the native population. Therefore, it was too weak to resist the Islamic conquest and resistance from indigenous people.

Contextualization of theology, therefore, implies an understanding of Christian faith from a specific context. Stephen B. Bevans, a theologian and author of *Models of Contextual Theology*, defines contextualization as an attempt to understand Christian faith in terms of a particular context. He writes:

Contextual theology can be defined as a way of doing theology in which one takes into account the spirit and messages of the Gospel, the tradition of the Christian people, the culture in which one is theologizing, and social change in that culture, whether brought about by western technological process or the grassroots struggle for equality, justice and liberation.14

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The experiences of the past include the Scriptures and tradition as sources that have been preserved. Experiences of the present take into account present human experience that is both personal and communal. This concept of contextual theology allows everyone to participate equally in theology, bringing a balance of various experiences and beliefs into theological development. With greater participation, not only are people empowered in their belief system, but they are able to expand their appreciation and understanding of the mystery of God. As the Spirit moves through the dialogue the resulting theology is healthier and more robust.

For theology to be relevant to an indigenous people, contextual theology must be implemented in order to make the Christian message well understood. The goal is to have a theology that connects the meaning of God’s revelation through Jesus Christ with life issues and the contemporary experience of a local African Christian community. African theologians have realized that African theology based on an African context must be encouraged inasmuch as it works towards effecting structural changes that would end suffering in Africa caused by systemic problems such as poverty, oppression, hunger, national and individual debt, corruption, and discrimination. While these problems appear to be rooted in the challenges of civilization and earthly concerns, the theological dimensions are apparent. The mandate from Christ to love, forgive, and respect all humanity calls for action when confronted by such issues as these. Theology growing from its native soil is more likely to be embraced and find practical empowering solutions to tangible problems. Such a theology expresses the faith of the community living it.

If the fate of Christianity in North Africa is to be avoided, approaches of inculturation and liberation must be developed focusing on integrating Christianity with
appropriate African traditional religion’s beliefs. This needs to be done within the framework of Christian theology, which is founded on the concept of love and community. Inculturation and liberation are the two main types of approaches that are currently employed by African Christian theology to address the issues of religion and other social issues that are of great concern relative to the African experience. According to Nyamiti, “Inculturation involves an effort to incarnate Christian teaching in African cultures on the level of theology or Christology.”

This approach supports the restoration of the African Christian identity, which was lost during the introduction of Christianity to Africa.

Nyamiti also defines the African liberation approach as “emancipation from other forms of oppression such as cultural alienation, disease, poverty, hunger, ignorance, and the subjugation of women.” It seeks to promote awareness of the dignity of the human person as a child of God. This awareness provides the major motivation for the emergence of various forms of liberation theologies, which makes the liberation, not only of Africans but of all oppressed humanity, from all types of social ills possible. However, historically theology has been used sometimes to facilitate oppression, even validate it. The support of slavery, the oppression of women, the backing of unfair economic systems, and the repression of scientific study are all examples of the incorrect use of theology throughout recent history.

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16 Nyamiti, Contemporary African Christologies 66.
In the current discussion, it must be made clear that theology is viewed as a powerful tool in the fight for social justice and the building of the Kingdom of God here on earth. A well-constructed and valid theology can lead to the empowerment of the people of God by giving them a voice, filling them with a sense of self-respect, strengthening their faith, and enhancing their empathy for both their neighbor and their enemy.

**The Hermeneutics of African Christian Theology**

The term “African Christian theology” was coined to represent the cluster of theologies reflecting both Christian and African lived experiences. The African experience includes diversity of the African people, traditions, customs, religious beliefs, languages, and ongoing changes in the African culture. African Christian theology addresses the Christian tradition and the African reality from the African perspective. It also aims to retrieve the African context that was suppressed by missionary evangelization.

As Mbiti points out, “Missionaries assumed that cultural translation was so easy that one could, for example, simply identify the Creator-God of the African religion with God the Father of Christian tradition.”\(^\text{17}\) They were wrong. There are doctrines and beliefs in Christianity that cannot be traced in African traditional religions. For example, the notions of God as Triune, and Father or God having a Son who is also God, have no place in the African context. These were new ideas for Africans. Openness to Christian and African realities is an essential characteristic of this discussion. In discussing African Christian theology, I will consider the situation in sub-Saharan Africa, leaving aside the

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Coptic tradition in Ethiopia and Egypt. I will lay special emphasis on the cultural heritage and current reality, such as poverty, disease, war, and natural catastrophes.

Early African theologians tended to believe that African theology was legitimately African only if it made the cultural aspects of non-White Africans its concern. This assumption was based on John Mbiti’s much criticized claim that South African Black theology was not a legitimate African theology because it lacked native African cultural realities. Mbiti’s claim was based upon his opinion that South African theology closely reflected African American Black theology, which emerged from a different cultural context than African theology.

John Mbiti is well known as the father of African theology and is widely respected. However, his claim has drawn reactions from other African theologians in defense of the legitimacy and relevance of South African Black theology to African Theology. Desmond Tutu, the author of Black Theology and African Theology, criticizes Mbiti for being divisive. Like Tutu, I don’t agree with Mbiti on this issue. My argument is that if Africa is one, why should we select some nations to recognize their theology as African and deny others the right to be legitimately considered Africans? Granted, the history of South Africa and apartheid is unique to the country and, in some aspects, reflects similar racism and struggles found in the African American experience. The people of South Africa, however, are grounded in an African value system. Based on African values of family and community, African theology must be inclusive. Of course,


there are similarities and differences, which we find when we consider the beliefs about
God from all over the African continent. The single criterion for judging the Africanness
of a Christian theology in Africa should be adequate contextualization.

In view of this fact, the urgency for contextualization in African theology has led
to the multiplication of theologies, collectively referred to as African theology. This
collective name is preferred in order to differentiate the African contextual theology from
Western and other Third World theologies. But, when we speak of African theologies in
the plural, we do that to characterize the richness of diversity in trends of theological
reflections in Africa. When one considers the African concept of God, for example, it is
interesting to see how the concept is colored by geographical, social, cultural, and even
the political background of each nation. For example, in areas where people are farmers,
God’s name is associated with the sun, while in areas of nomads, God is known as
Shepherd and Protector. These different religious images provide religious meanings to
the people of a specific location. In that sense, inculturation and liberation theologies are
distinctive forms of one African Christian theology that can assist in explaining how
Africans can be truly Christian without being accused of syncretism in the most negative
context of that term.

The hermeneutics of African Christian theology, therefore, must embrace the
question of sources and methodologies. African Christian theology takes its materials
from the Christian sources that include Scriptures and tradition as well as the African oral

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20 It should be understood here that the sun by itself is not considered to be a “god.” As Mbiti
noted, “There is no concrete indication that the sun is considered to be God, or God considered to be the
sun, however closely these may be associated.” See John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (New
tradition, which includes local African beliefs, religious symbols, language about God, stories, religious ceremonies, customs, and moral values. As Mbiti points out, “These are easy to remember and pass on to other generations since there are no sacred writings in traditional African societies.”

Principal elements of African traditional religions and culture are as follows:

a. *The concept of a Supreme Being*: God is viewed as Creator and Sustainer of life. This God can be thought of as both transcendent and immanent. God’s transcendence is safeguarded by God’s distance from the created order. Contact with God is maintained through the mediation of the spirits.

b. *Spirits*: There are two kinds of spirits; nonhuman spirits and human spirits. African Christians see a strong parallel between the notion of the spirits of the ancestors and the belief in the communion of saints.

c. *The veneration of the ancestors*: Ancestors are the spirits of dead relatives who mediate between the Supreme Being and their descendants. Veneration is the act of showing reverence and respect through ritual practices such as libation and prayer.

d. *The concept of good and evil*: There are good spirits and evil spirits. People do bad things because they are affected by bad spirits, which are bad relatives who have died.

e. *The concept of life*: Life is a gift from the Supreme Being. When a new child arrives it is literally considered a gift from the Supreme Being.

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f. *The concept of humanity:* Humanity is a communal and relational concept. A human being is fully human only when in community.

g. *African spirituality:* African spirituality is based upon the relationship between the community and the Supreme Being.

h. *African cosmology:* African cosmology consists of the Supreme Being at the top followed by the ancestors and nonhuman spiritual forces, with the next level being humanity, and the lowest level is other creation, such as trees, rocks, and nonhuman animals.

When African theologians make use of these sources, they do so in the belief that divine revelation is possible within African culture. Revelation here is an ongoing phenomenon that is possible in every culture in the whole world. For Africans, revelation is not limited to the Scriptures and Christian tradition. Revelation can also come from human experience. In this sense, the African concept of God begins with daily experience and finds its continuity in the Christian image of God. The concept of the Supreme Being is significant in this discussion, given that the focus is on divine involvement in the lives of individuals.

**The Concept of a Supreme Being in African Traditional Religion**

It is common for Africans to perceive of God in terms of certain assumptions they inherited from their traditional religious views. For Africans, every cultural expression affirms divine presence, for example, languages, names, songs, proverbs, stories, and art. Even if there are no written materials that show that God was prevalent in Africa before the influence of foreign cultures, it is obvious that Africans have always had knowledge of God. For example, Mbiti has done comparative research based on different tribal
groups in Africa. He was able to delineate common attributes of God, namely, immutability, impassibility, omnipotence, omniscience, transcendence, and immanence.22 According to him, there is also a common belief among Africans that God is invisible, incomprehensible, infinite, and mysterious.

While all the above mentioned attributes are common to Christianity, a flaw in Mbiti’s research is the prevalence of Western theological terminology. Maybe Mbiti translated whatever he found in African traditional religion through the lens of Christian language. But how are the attributes of God expressed in traditional Africa? Can we find traces of such attributes enumerated above in African traditional religion? There is one common thread among Africans. In his research in different countries, Mbiti confirmed that “all Africans consider God to be “the Creator, the Original Source, the Beginning of all Things.”23 God is also said to be transcendent and immanent at the same time, attributes that explain how God can be both impassible and passible.

The concept of God in Africa is that there is one Supreme Being, but there are also minor deities/spirits with spiritual force who occupy various positions in the hierarchy of spiritual beings. As S. N. Ezeanya, a West African theologian states, “God created these spirits and assigned them their special responsibilities and areas of jurisdiction.”24 Each of them is designated to monitor a particular domain of creation and aspect of human affairs. For example, there are spirits of rain, spirits of harvests, spirits

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of good fortune, spirits of good health, and spirits of life and death. The Supreme Being occupies the highest position in the hierarchy. This Being could be called the Creator God, who created the universe and who is served by many created spiritual beings known as ancestors.

The ancestors are intermediaries of God who mediate between God and human beings. They receive sacrifices and prayers to offer them to the Supreme God. This is a vision of God that might leave outsiders wondering whether Africans are monotheists or polytheists. What one needs to understand is that ancestors are not gods. Ancestors are intermediaries and occupy a special position in the order of beings and have both natural and supernatural status. As is apparent from the description of these deities and the role they fill in daily life, there is a strong similarity with the Christian concept of the Communion of Saints.

While one can find shrines for the veneration of ancestors, shrines dedicated to the Supreme God are rare. Why is this? For Africans, God is not confined to one place. God is everywhere. Among the Bantu people of East Africa, for instance, the Supreme Being is supposed to be everywhere and behind everything. Places of worship for a Supreme Being are found in some tribes in East Africa. For example, in Tanzania, the Chagga people used to worship the Supreme Being facing Mount Kilimanjaro.

Kilimanjaro was known to the natives as *Kilima kya Ruwa*, which means the Mountain of God. It was renamed Mount Kilimanjaro by the colonialists, who failed to pronounce correctly the local name *Kilima kya Ruwa*. When a child is born into the family, the child is said to be brought from the mountain. But in the Northwestern part of Tanzania, the Bahaya people looked into the sun and saw the glory of God. They know
that behind this sun there is a Being that is greater than all creation in the universe. They
called this creator *Ruhanga Amazooba*, which means *Creator of the Suns*. This creator of
the suns is the origin of all living and nonliving things. This God is said to be all-
powerful (almighty), all-wise and kind, and is believed to be everywhere (omnipresent).

The concept of God as Creator is expressed through different tribal stories. While
there are some tribes that have no creation myths as such, they believe that God created
the universe out of nothing. Other names express how people relate to God during
different kinds of life experiences. For example, in times of distress, sorrow, affliction,
trouble, or other forms of discomfort, God is addressed as Protector, Comforter,
Consoler, and Healer. Although there is a lot of suffering in Africa, Africans believe that
“God is not held directly or indirectly responsible for the evil that happens in the world.
All the agents of evil are known as ‘evil spirits.’”25 The evil spirits are not hidden to God,
and God intervenes to help people and to counteract the evil. Interestingly, Mbiti’s
research in *Concepts of God in Africa* described one tribe in Uganda, the Baluba, who
“have a name for God which means The Suffering One.”26 For them, God is not only
Protector, Comforter, and Healer, but is also present to the suffering of the people.

All these views of God provide the explanation for the idea of God as impassible
but also passible in the African context. They reveal the relationship between the idea of
divine transcendence and immanence. These two attributes are important in
understanding the concept of God in Africa.

God as Transcendent and Immanent

In the African religious view, God is not supposed to be anywhere outside His earthly domain. For the African Christian, as one faces human suffering, God is there to intervene in the person of Jesus Christ. As Mbiti points out, “God is immanent in the world, but being transcendent He is beyond the natural world.”27 The intermediaries are supposed to be nearer to human beings and they are, for that reason, the immediate partners in communication. This does not mean, however, that God is remote. God is not believed to be distant from the human sphere. In reality, Africans feel God’s presence and active role in their daily lives.

The consciousness of God’s presence and nearness accompanies them all through life. For example, among the Bantu people of East Africa, there is a custom to pray to God on every occasion or before starting work or public ceremonies such as initiation, marriage, welcoming home of a newborn, naming a child, blessing of a new home, harvest festivals, and death of a family member. African people turn to God at any time and whenever the need arises. Although Africans believe that the transcendent God is invisible like all other spirits, they are also aware that God’s domain is not far from this world. It is perhaps for this reason that, unlike Western Christians, Africans have no clear concept of Heaven as a specific domain as opposed to the world. God’s domain is located anywhere in this world among the people.

In worship, for example, the two attributes, transcendence and immanence, are connected. During invocation, the names attributed to God are signs of divine

transcendence. As a spiritual Being, God’s name is invoked as *Ruhanga, Omutanzi*, or *Katonda*, which means Creator.\(^{28}\) God, the Supreme Being, is all-encompassing as creator and protector from all evil spirits. This transcendental reality in which we live and move is not taken for granted by African people. They know that there is an invisible “spiritual force” in the universe that is supporting all human activities and thought. There is an experience of a sacred reality that is incomprehensible. The concern is how to make sense of this experience and to ensure that it is meaningful to them as human beings as well as Africans. For example, when faced with the mystery of suffering for which there is no explanation, they tend to attribute this experience to the invisible reality. In East Africa, they will respond to suffering by using phrases such as “only the Creator knows why this is happening,” and they will call upon God for help.

The outcome of the journey of life depends on how successful and beneficial the relationships are between the visible and invisible worlds. The invisible is what cannot be perceived by the human senses. In essence, the invisible is what is beyond the range of ordinary perception. As Mbiti puts it, “The nature of God escapes human comprehension.”\(^{29}\) The only way to approach this invisible reality is through rituals, prayers, and sacrifices. Ordinary people cannot perform these practices. There are elders and diviners among them who play the role of officiating rituals and sacrifices. These practices clearly show that African people regard the Supreme Being as beyond comprehension, yet approachable.


But God’s activities in the world are also visible and they reveal God’s presence. According to Mbiti, “The belief in the immanence of God explains the careful choice of the symbolic language adopted by Africans in the description of the concept of God.”

Due to the diversity of cultures in Africa, the concept of God is approached differently from one tribe to the other. For example, among the Haya tribe of Northwestern Tanzania, the immanent God is addressed as Rugaba, which means the Giver and Sustainer, who is present here and now to ensure their well-being. God is thought of as Life-giving to all creation. God is the most powerful Being, whose presence is realized and recognized in many events and phenomena surrounding humanity. For example, when disease and misery strike, the source must be rooted out. The people approach the situation by trying to determine the cause as well as by petitioning for God’s intervention. Most of those situations are common individual or community misfortunes, such as disease, sterility, miscarriage, or natural catastrophes.

In West Africa, the immanent God is pre-eminently great and supreme. God is addressed by Igbo people of Nigeria as Chineke. Chineke means the Source of Being who creates all things. God is the source of life and could, for that reason, also be called Chukwu or Chi-ukwu, which means Creator. They have a third name, Osebuluwa, for Supreme Being. In South Africa, the Zulu name for God is Unkulunkulu, which means the Great-great-One, who carries and sustains the universe. This name carries with it the

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31 Mbiti, African Religions and Philosophy, 34.
sense of greatness in God, and it points to the direction of divine transcendence and impassibility.

The fact that God is invisible leads to the visualization of God as spiritual Being rather than physical Being. However invisible God may be, people tend to turn to Him in times of difficulties when all else fails. They will instinctively approach God in prayers, asking for their concrete needs such as fertility, prosperity, safety, and the well-being of each individual and the community. These prayers are meant to draw the attention of God to their needs. For example, when my father was dying, my mother was quietly calling God’s name, Rugaba, to help us. Even if my father didn’t make it, we were able to receive the grace to cope with his absence. This is my personal affirmation of divine participation in human history, the fact that makes Him passible.

Thus, the presence of God is so obvious in Africans’ daily life that one does not have to convince people of it. Rather, it is a special type of presence that is invisible and it operates through mediation. This mediation is served by two classes of spiritual beings. The first are the spiritual forces that are nonhuman. It is believed that there are good and bad spirits. They both have powers to act on the human mind and spirit. As Ezeanya puts it, “They, unlike the Supreme Being, can sometimes disappoint [humans]; this is why success and failure are attributed to them and not to the Supreme Being. They can make a person angry, jealous, revengeful, proud, and lustful.”

The second class is the ancestral spirits, which are human. In the African world view, the ancestors are the spirits of the dead. They occupy a special position in the order

32 Ezeanya, “God, Spirits and Spirit World,” 42.
of beings. They have both natural and supernatural status. According to Charles Nyamiti, one of the pioneers of African theology and well known as the father of inculturation, “The ancestor is believed to have the right or title to regular sacred communication with ‘his’ earthly kin and through regular prayers and rituals.”

Through death, which is understood as a passage into a new life, the dead relatives who led good moral lives acquire a status that places them in an unbroken relationship with the living and also in communication with the invisible God. Ancestors are, therefore, primarily venerated as models of behavior and sources of wisdom for the living and, thus, as mediators in the relationship between God and the living.

Nyamiti has made it clear that the ancestors are supposed to “be benevolent to their earthly kin.” For him, it is not the ancestors who upset human beings, but it is when the living relatives forget or neglect their ancestors that the communication between them gets broken. It is assumed that this attitude makes the ancestors angry. Their anger can then be appeased through prayer and rituals, such as libation. Ancestral rituals are performed during special family events, such as weddings, funerals, birthing rituals, rite of passage, conflict resolution, and naming of a child.

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34 Charles Nyamiti *Jesus Christ, the Ancestor of Humankind: Methodological and Trinitarian Foundations* (Nairobi, Kenya: CUEA, 2005), 68-69.


God as the Great Ancestor

How can God be an ancestor? In the African worldview, life is a participation in the life-giving principle that sustains all life. The Supreme Being is the life-giving principle that transmits life through the ancestors and through blood relationships. As Nyamiti points out, “The ancestral status of the African ancestors is founded on consanguineous ties with their living relatives.”

Blood establishes both the spiritual and corporeal link between ancestors and descendants. This same link continues, in a mystical form, even after death. It is maintained through the performance of certain rituals, such as libation.

Besides refreshing the minds of the living about their dead relatives, such rituals have the additional function of maintaining the connection with God, the source of life. The abandonment of these rituals would result in breaking off from this channel of life.

The community of ancestors is the channel through which life is communicated to the living relatives. Being in relationship with parents, whether living or dead, amounts to being in relationship with the principle of life, the Supreme Being. This explains why, for Africans, blood symbolizes life from God. Therefore, for Africans, death does not destroy the parental link between the ancestors and their descendants. Cut off from the Supreme Being, the individual ceases to exist. It is through the community of ancestors that the human community maintains a link to the Supreme Being.

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37 Nyamiti, Jesus Christ, the Ancestor of Humankind: An Essay on African Christology, 9.

38 Libation is a religious ritual of pouring out a liquid as an offering to God or to a spirit or in memory of those who have died. According to Mbiti, “The acts of pouring out libation (of beer, milk, or water) are symbols of communion, fellowship and remembrance. They are the mystical ties that bind the invisible world to the visible one.” See John Mbiti, African Religions and Philosophy, 25.
What Mbiti wrote in connection with this African communal value indicates how important relationship is to all Africans in their relationship to their Creator. Mbiti’s philosophy of a human being differs from that of the Western thought. Whereas Rene Descartes spoke for individualistic Western civilization when he said *cogito ergo sum*, “I think therefore I am,” Mbiti’s datum goes *cognatus sum, ergo sumus*, “I am because we are, and since we are therefore I am” 39 This means that “to be” is to participate in the life of the community, the life that God transmits through the ancestors to their descendants.

An African family, therefore, is the basic unit that consists of the living, the dead, and the yet to be born. This link is seen in real terms as a continuing flow of the same life. The life of the present generation is a carryover from those who preceded them. In all respects, the present generation owes their lives to their ancestors, and they cannot understand their identity unless they relate to their ancestors. This is why there are traditions that include customs, taboos, instructions, and directives that ensure continuity of tradition from one generation to the other.

Thus, family relationships determine the status of each individual and participating in the life of the community guarantees life, continuity, and relationship with the ancestors and, through them, with the Ultimate Principle of life, who is God. Since God is the ultimate source of life, He must be the Great Ancestor. All life comes from God and goes back to God after death to join the community of the ancestors. In that capacity, God is our Great Ancestor.

There is a claim among African theologians that Christianity has not introduced a new God to the Africans, but the same God their ancestors had always worshipped.\textsuperscript{40} As Mbiti points out, “God is no stranger to African peoples . . . everybody knows of God’s existence almost by instinct.”\textsuperscript{41} Therefore, the awareness of the presence of God among Africans was not new to Africans when they encountered Christianity during the missionary era. What was new to them was the experience of God in Jesus Christ. Is there any connection between Christianity and traditional African religion? How do we determine the continuity between African traditional religion and Christianity? Are there elements in African traditional religion that can be integrated into Christianity?

With the sense of assurance that there is a continuity in revelation and in the experience of God, African Christians must feel justified in echoing the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews: “Long ago, God spoke to our Ancestors in many and various ways, . . . but in these days He has spoken to us by a Son” (Heb.1:1-2). This awareness of continuity in religious experience is today accompanied by a consciousness of the relevance of religious expressions in African traditions relative to Christian teachings. For example, the attributes of God as transcendent, compassionate, Sustainer, Healer, and Protector are also found in Christianity. Given that Africans have no written doctrines as in Christianity, religious teachings are passed on orally from one generation to another. As Mbiti puts it, “African knowledge of God is expressed in proverbs, short statements,


\textsuperscript{41} Mbiti, \textit{African Religions and Philosophy}, 29.
songs, prayers, names, myths, stories, and religious ceremonies. All these are easy to remember and pass on to other people”\textsuperscript{42} In reality, they are the foundation of African traditional religion’s morality and beliefs.

Unfortunately, the early African Christians were persuaded by the missionaries to abandon their traditions in order to encounter what they call “the true God” in Jesus Christ. Laurenti Magesa, an African theologian, writes in his critique of missionary activity in Africa, “They [missionaries] failed to see authentic inspiration in African Religion and its importance for humanity in search for God.”\textsuperscript{43} I agree with Magesa on this point. Religious truths are relational, not exclusive. Had the missionaries taken time to view the African traditional religion from its own context, they would have discovered common ground with Christianity. One can become a Christian without having to break away from his or her traditions. What Jesus said to the Jews applies to Africans also, “I have not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it” (Matt. 5:17).

Therefore, accessing the tradition as a means of conveying the message of God in Jesus Christ must be a criterion for African Christian theology today. The Christ-event, his tangible life among humanity, must be the ultimate point of departure. Christology from the perspective of the African experience is not only central to the concept of God, but also the starting point for a Trinitarian doctrine of God applicable to Africans. Only through Christology can we identify what is new about the Christian concept of God in African Christian theology. For an African Christian, the person and life of Jesus Christ

\textsuperscript{42} Mbiti, \textit{African Religions and Philosophy}, 29.

constitute the new content of faith. Moreover, it is God the Creator and Sustainer they know from their childhood, the only one who can intervene in human affairs in the person of Jesus Christ. For it is in Jesus’ person, life, and deeds that the liberating dimension of the idea of African ancestorship finds its fulfillment.

Where is the link between the old and the new? The logic of Christ’s passion, death on the Cross, burial, and resurrection introduces something new and different to African Christians. The message of the Cross contradicts the religious philosophy of traditional African religion. In the face of God’s revelation of power in weakness, the African Christian will have to struggle to reconcile the image of a crucified God with the inherited image of God as transcendent and immanent. Immanence for Africans does not mean weakness on the part of God, but presence and active involvement in their daily lives. The Cross is seen in the light of the African philosophy of relations, where the African’s daily struggles can be related to the suffering of Jesus. In Jesus, therefore, African Christians will discover the image of a God who suffers with and for the people. This implies that the Christ-event must be the link and basis for relating the African traditional religion to Christianity.

Only through Christology can African Christians identify what is new about the concept of God they previously had from inherited African traditional beliefs. The idea that God, out of love for humanity, became human makes Jesus Christ one of the ancestors. As Nyamiti puts it, “Christ’s divine human nature is important in determining his ancestorship to humanity.”

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through his becoming human, suffering, dying, rising, and being glorified. The death of Christ was, for Nyamiti, not only a necessary initiation into the status of an ancestor, but also a vital part of the Son of God being human. This means that Christ would not be considered ancestor, in an African context if he did not taste death. To be an ancestor, one must pass from life through death into new life.

Christ is called Brother-Ancestor for relational reasons. For him to qualify as an ancestor, the reason should be not only his passing through death into new life, but also the Trinitarian reality. Both the Father and the Son relate to each other in a mutual giving of the Spirit, who is a gift of divine love and life between them. Both the Father and the Son extend the ancestral relationship, exemplified in the Trinity, to us through the Holy Spirit. The Spirit “makes us cry Abba, Father” (Gal. 4:6) and also confirms our privilege of participating in the divine life as adopted daughters and sons of God. This privilege makes us descendants of God, and we dare to call God our Great Ancestor and Christ our Brother-Ancestor. But Christ being our Brother Ancestor does not take away His divinity. Christ remains in His status as Son of God and Second Person of the Trinity. The brotherhood comes to us through adoption.

As previously stated, the predominant Western view of society is as individuals first and a community second. Reflecting this understanding, God is often considered a singular entity, an individual God, not part of a community of Three Persons, which make up the Trinity. Stemming from African traditional religion’s emphasis on the priority of the community, the concept of communion predominate articulation of what it means to be human for Africans. Therefore, from the perspective of relatedness, all three Persons of the Trinity carried the suffering of Christ. God, as Father, Son, and
Spirit, knows human suffering and is actively present to the individual and community suffering today.

**God as Liberator**

The image of God as a liberator is central to contemporary African theology. In the Christian world, liberation is primarily liberation from sin. Although this type of liberation is believed to have originated through the events of the paschal mystery, that is, the passion, death, and resurrection, it takes priority over the liberation from oppressive aspects of life including cultural, socio-political, and economic oppressive structures. However, for Africa and other Third World countries that have been under the yoke of oppression, liberation means more than salvation from sin. It is a process of empowering people to be able to come to the realization of the need to overcome social ills, which prevent them from having their own voices heard in matters of religion, culture, and politics. In a valid Christian life, the concern for the spiritual cannot be separated from concern for the physical. African traditional religion has no such distinction and any African theology that does not reflect this “whole cloth” approach cannot adequately address the needs of Africans.

In Africa, women experience a disproportionate amount of suffering, and their needs cry out for more attention. An African woman needs to be empowered and enabled to stand on her own feet and speak for herself in matters concerning a woman’s life, her rights, as well as the society in which she lives. Anne Nasimiyu-Wasike, a feminist theologian from East Africa, wrote, “Women are always marginalized and given an
inferior status.”

But women are the backbone of the African continent. They work an average of sixteen hours a day to provide for the family. Despite their hard work, they have no control over anything they produce. The husband controls the family wealth. Worse still, they have no control over their own bodies. Women are raped in their own homes and many are forced to continue bearing as many children as possible, even if their health does not allow it. The image of God as a Liberator is the most relevant to the suffering African women and all women around the world.

An important aspect of seeing God as a Liberator is God’s identification with those who suffer. God, in the person of Jesus Christ, experienced firsthand the plight of the ordinary people in his own village of Nazareth and in the towns and villages He visited throughout Palestine. As human, God knows the frustrations and suffering of the people, not only in Africa but also in other parts of the world. In Africa, for example, people live in poverty and fear of tribal wars and witchcraft. These people look at the circumstances of Jesus in the Gospels as parallel to their own situations and feel that God knows their plight. They know how He reached out to people with compassion, concern, and healing. They are convinced that they can expect the same kind of support in their own suffering situations.

Christ, while in communion with the Father and the Spirit in the Trinity, is also present in the human community as a human ancestor. As both God and human, Christ continues to experience firsthand the plight of ordinary people and share in their

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suffering. As one of the Trinitarian “community” Christ, shares that suffering with the Father and the Spirit.

**Divine Impassibility in Situations of Suffering: The African Experience**

A culturally and theologically relevant theology can contain the idea of divine passibility, thus allowing for a possible solution to the previously articulated limitation of divine impassibility. When God is presented as solely impassible, the truth of Christianity is denied. Christ stated very clearly that God, our Father, is present to us and cares for us and “the birds of the field (Mt: 6:26).” The enormity of suffering in the world makes it difficult for humans to understand the concept of God being apathetically disengaged from the world’s struggles. The world does not acknowledge an impassible God who seems able but unwilling to intervene in the face of socially and politically driven injustices.

Looking from my own experience as a daughter of a continent that has been ravaged by war, famine, diseases, oppression, domestic violence, corruption, and fear of the presence of evil spirits, I believe that Africans are longing for deliverance. From where will this deliverance come? The recent events of violence in East Africa’s Kenya and Zimbabwe; massacres after presidential elections; the long-term suffering of the people in Darfur, which continues even after their independence; the Rwandan genocide of 1994; and oppression of women by African cultures are examples of such injustices.

Sudan, for example, has been going through a major civil conflict that has left thousands of innocent people homeless and dead. The conflicts have been propelled by an expansionist as well as a racist agenda that seeks to change the course of history by systematically eliminating the Black Sudanese from Sudan. The government pays
nomadic Arabs to rampage through the villages of Black Sudanese and destroy everything they encounter. They slaughter especially the males in order to wipe out the possibility of progeny, and then drive out of Sudan any elements of blackness left in those villages. This is simply an obvious strategy that would allow the Arabs to expand and inherit that which does not belong to them. Where is Justice? Can God save? Where is God?

The same cry is heard within sub-Saharan Africa. Can God save the suffering minority people? The suspicion of assumed superiority of certain ethnic populations continues to fuel extreme injustice. In Rwanda, for example, in 1994 there were disagreements between the majority Hutus and minority Tutsis. While historically there had been animosity between them, it had grown substantially since the colonial period in the mid-nineteenth century. The mid-nineteenth century was the time that the Christian faith was introduced to Africa. The two ethnic groups are actually similar—they speak the same language, inhabit the same areas, follow the same traditions and, above all, they are both Christian. The challenge for the missionaries was to find a deeper and more fundamental identity with Jesus Christ in order to bridge the gap between the two ethnic groups. The goal was to build a faith community in which there is neither Jew nor Greek (Gal. 3:28), neither Hutu nor Tutsi, neither Black nor White. The divisive hate among some African communities today raises the question: how deeply has the Gospel message been internalized by individuals and the culture of the African people?

The above examples show how hard it is to experience God’s presence in times of turmoil. Yet, traditional theology teaches that God, through the person of Jesus, came into our world and shared our human experiences. According to the New Testament, he
took our human nature, was born of a woman, lived an ordinary human life, and suffered and died for the sake of humanity. This same Jesus Christ was preached to all nations by missionaries, who fulfilled Jesus’ mandate as it is written in Matthew 28: 16-20.

However, the perspective from which we view and relate to Christ largely determines what we see in Christ’s person. While both Western and African Christian theology develop their Christology based on the biblical revelation of the transcendental God, African Christology develops a contrast between revelation and experience of God and how these two elements shape the way Africans relate to Christ. How then are we to interpret African experience and its role in modern African Christology?

African theologians have developed a response to this question. They argue that any theology that does not start with the people’s experience is inadequate. They claim that contemporary Christians are longing to interact with the God who created them. They long for a dynamic, personal relationship with God. But how can they interact with an impassible God who seems to be so aloof and silent when they suffer? Such a God seems to be in contrast to what Christian Africans are longing for in their hearts. Therefore, the doctrine of divine passibility comes as a comfort for those who suffer and gives theological meaning to a faith grounded in a God who is love. They can relate their sufferings to the Crucified God, who has assumed their humanity and shared their human experiences.

Some African theologians believe that God reveals Himself through experiential and practical terms rather than in a mystical manner. As Mbiti observes, “In Africa, the knowledge of God is not found in creedal formulations, theological statements, and
mystical experiences, but in day-to-day encounter with the challenges of life." The tormenting question, “Where is God?” plunges people into search for a God whom their religious traditions have not necessarily always presented. They look for a God found in living contacts, in concrete situations and experiences. Thus, African theologians have opted to operate from the experience of suffering as they attempt to make Christ relevant to the African people.

**Divine Impassibility and Passibility as Metaphorical Attributes**

God, by becoming human in the person of Jesus Christ, has allowed Himself to be described in human metaphors. Metaphorical language in theology helps one conceive of the mysteries of God. One basic fact is that we cannot know the nature of God except when God chooses to reveal Himself to us. God will always remain a mystery whose profundity is not fathomable by human intelligibility. That we cannot know what God is is one of the evident truths of negative theology. But when negative theology goes further to define what God is not, it is making a claim that lies beyond human cognitive capacity. For example, metaphors such as love, compassion, mercy, and goodness say something about the reality of God, even though they must not be taken literally. Most important for this study is that they suggest the suffering of God.

The question is not whether God suffers, but how God suffers. This question can be answered within the scope of metaphorical language. God suffers in a divine way. For example, when we say that God suffers for humanity, it means that God’s suffering is an

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expression of divine love, compassion, mercy, and goodness for humanity. God does not suffer like creatures do out of limitations of their nature, but out of free will. God chooses to suffer but does so differently. Whereas human beings suffer due to deficiencies inherent in their human nature, God suffers freely and solely out of, and in the fullness of, love.

Returning to the value of metaphorical language, the question that remains is how we can differentiate worthy from unworthy God-language. It must be noted that any theological metaphor as an expression of our inability to find a language suitable to talk about God is also an expression of the liveliness of faith in a personal God. All people of all faiths can now claim the right to talk about God from their own context. There is no doubt that this claim can support the idea that even in African religions one can find some elements that are compatible to Christianity in relation to the language about God. It should be stated that such language, which addresses a fuller concept of God, is appropriate for people of all nationalities. Therefore, every anthropomorphic metaphor can then become an authentic God metaphor provided that it says something about the reality of God as revealed in the history of salvation.

**Conclusion**

Having situated the African view of the Christian God within the approach of contextualization, I have come to realize that some elements of belief embodied in the notion of God in African traditional religions are the same as in Christianity. Such elements are transcendence, immanence, omnipresence, and the ancestorship of God. This view of reality influences the African notion of a Christian God especially where the category of ancestorship becomes a paradigm for discussing Christology and the mystery
of God. For an African Christian, the person and life of Jesus Christ constitute the new
ccontent of faith. This makes a difference between the African experience of God and that
of an African who is not a Christian.

The strong understanding of community as the primary framework of life in the
African worldview defines a person in relation to his or her community. Similarly, the
understanding of the person in the context of community helps in the Christian
understanding of God as Trinity. In conclusion, African traditional religion should be
systematically examined in order to detect more traces of Christian teachings and how
such teachings have been inculturated in African contexts.
CHAPTER 5
RECONSTRUCTING AFRICAN CHRISTOLOGY VIA THE DOCTRINE OF
INCULTURATION AND LIBERATION

Introduction

Can the image of an impassible God ever be compatible with the image of the passible God? Can the reality of the Christ-event reveal any glimpses of divine passibility? If God is passible, as the Christ-event suggests, how can this passibility translate into divine perfection? If God is impassible, as the logic of philosophy suggests, how can the idea of divine involvement in human history be explained? A shift of emphasis in the approach to the problem of divine impassibility affects almost every issue in the mystery of God. Some contemporary theologians have focused on the passibility of God as a signal for a solution to the problem. It is precisely from this point of view that the issue of divine passibility is well received by Third World liberation theologians, who are ready to stand for theories that support the idea of divine involvement in situations of suffering.

In this light, this chapter will summarize the inadequacy of the concept of divine impassibility and present a reconstructed theology proclaiming God as passible based on both the communal aspect of the doctrine of the Trinity and the Christ-event. Two basic
criteria have to be taken into account: the compatibility of the Gospel values to African traditional religion’s values and the communion with the universal Church of Christ. Through the integration of African communal values into Christianity, Africans will be able to translate the treasures of their heritage into their Christian faith and identity. This reconstructed Christology will make the claim that the affirmation of divine passibility is implicit, not only in the communal structure of African theology, but also in the Christian community at large.

Divine revelation and human experience are the foundation stones upon which theology rests. Human experience includes, but is not limited to, suffering of mind, body, and spirit. While there is much joy in the human condition, the daily challenges for humanity call for a God who is present in all aspects of life. This calls for reconstruction of theology. This uniquely reconstructed African Christology, while reflecting the African experience, will maintain the universal nature of Christ that calls for the wisdom, enrichment, diversity, and beauty from various identities of different cultures.

As the African Synod of 1994 stated, Christian theology has “yet to unveil the beauty of the church . . . in all its colors and cultures.” Christian theology needs to find ways to better accommodate a diversity of cultures. This implies the affirmation of cultural identities of all people within the universal church and the need to empower these voiceless people to enable them to interpret and express Christian faith in their own way.

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The challenge for African theologians is how to select cultural values from African traditional religion that can be integrated into, or with, Christianity. African traditional religion is rich in cultural heritage, symbols, and history. If these are properly integrated into Christianity, they will enable African Christians to genuinely celebrate their Christian faith and to build strong African Christian communities.

**Reconstructive Theology: Definition**

Robert A. Ludwig, in his book *Reconstructing Catholicism: For a New Generation*, has defined the term reconstruction as “the effort to put meaning back together through the discovery of new patterns of coherence.”

The reconstructing of African Christology, which I am presenting in this chapter, seeks to retrieve spiritual elements from African traditional religion’s heritage, integrate them into Christianity, and restore and renew the meaning of Christ to the African people. The goal is to transform key elements of African traditional religion into a constructive Christian theology relevant to African Christians. While drawing on many insights from African traditions and life experiences, this theology will also focus on retrieving some Euro-American Christian values, such as an emphasis on human rights and individual initiative along with an acceptance of the need for law and order. These values hold the religious life of Christians together in order to give it meaning, purpose, and direction for the African people. Without any meaningful connection to their own life experiences and the issues

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they struggle with, African Christians have no authentic experiential connection to the Christian tradition.

Should I be more concerned about engaging theology attentive to the suffering people in the whole world and from there formulate a theology that is relevant to the lives of the African people? Or should I focus on a theology relevant to the African situation? I have elected to focus on the African situation because the disconnection between Christian faith and the African heritage is unique to my homeland. There is a need to build a bridge between Christianity and African traditional religion that will connect Christ to the hearts of the African Christians in order to satisfy their hunger for Christian identity. A similar reconstruction could be developed for the numerous other Christian communities throughout the world, depending on their specific context.

This chapter, therefore, will reconstruct a Christology that will provide the meaning of the Christian faith to the African people and empower them to be able to articulate their own understanding of God and their relationship to God. The task of this reconstruction is to give meaning to the existing Christian theology by integrating wisdom from African traditional religion through ongoing articulation of both human experience and the legacy of faith inherited from the African people’s ancestors. Christianity will no longer be a foreign religion to the Africans, but authentically African with lived experiences.

We cannot overlook the fact that such reconstruction has been constant in the history of Christian thought. As I mentioned in Chapter 2, there have been many formulations by individual theologians from the second century to the present. The
development of Christology went through a painful process regarding the nature of God and the divinity and humanity of Christ when these controversial issues were addressed by early church fathers. The climax came with the Council of Chalcedon, when it was established that Christ is truly divine and truly human. However, this was not a complete answer to the mystery of God. Many questions were left unanswered, including the problem of divine impassibility and the nature of the mystery of the Incarnation.

In an effort to understand the nature of God in the contemporary world, theologians have set out to reclaim the contemporary Christian understanding of God and Christ as the image of a suffering God. After revisiting the early church fathers’ theology, I came to realize that the Christian message of salvation has always been central to the Christian tradition. The mission of the universal Christian community was to invite all into communion with Christ. It wasn’t until Vatican II that the recognition of religious pluralism and the need for respectful dialogue between Christianity and other religions was introduced.

Although Christianity was introduced to Africa before Vatican II, the Council did not recognize African traditional religion. African Christians who wish to translate their faith into Christian life find themselves at the crossroads with one leg in Christian religion and another in African traditional religion.\(^{193}\) There is a missing piece in the way Christianity was introduced to Africa and how African Christians live their Christian

lives. The missing piece is the wisdom of African values present in African Christians’ spirituality, traditions, and daily lives that can serve as a resource in making Christianity meaningful to them and in developing an authentic African Christology. That is why there is a need for a reconstruction of African Christology. However, due to the universality of Christ, this should be done in a manner that suits the needs not only of Africans but also of the Christian world at large.

In his book *The Analogical Imagination*, David Tracy suggests a hermeneutics of retrieval as the way of understanding past experiences of particular traditions and of interpreting them into the meaning that can be understood by the present generation. Tracy has introduced the notion of the classic as a resource that can help to offer new meanings out of experiences of a particular identity to the universal understanding of religious truths. Examples of classics can be an event, an object, a story, a piece of art, or a religious belief. This hermeneutical model opens up the door for the possibility of studying, understanding, and interpreting the classics by giving them a new meaning that is both particular and universal. Such an understanding of the classics, if applied to the understanding of the African traditional religion, would help to articulate a new understanding of God appropriate to the current pluralistic context.

I agree with Tracy that we cannot expect to have only one meaning of a certain religious belief that cannot be interpreted into a new understanding in order to be accepted as a universal human experience of the truth of the reality of God. This would

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deprive other religious traditions of a right to understand or to relate to their creator from their own perspective. The notion of a classic, therefore, offers the freedom of retrieving experience that is particular to an individual cultural context as well as being universal to the whole Christian community. The more we open our minds to learn from past experience, the more we discover the limitlessness of God’s inner life that overflows not only to Christians, but also to non-Christians.

There is meaning within a particular person and in the universe. Unless we experience some connection to the Greater Whole, we feel that something is missing. The encounter between African traditional religion and Christianity needs to lead to a sincere integration of both their religious values guided by respect, careful dialogue, appreciation, cooperation, and understanding. For example, the truths about the Christ–event, when considered without connecting it to the inner-Trinitarian event, can be meaningless to Africans. However, taken together, they can be a genuine resource for inspiration for African Christians, challenging them to move beyond their particular to the universal understanding of God.

The Need for Reconstruction

In Chapter 2, I argued that suffering is a universal human problem. While human beings of different nationalities may experience suffering within different contexts, the general human conditions that lead to human suffering are the same. These include, among many causes, poverty, hate, racism, inequality, ignorance, and violence against women. All these are symptoms of a dysfunctional world that calls for a reconstructed
theology. The reconstructed African Christology presented here is a microcosm of the larger theological reconstruction that is needed for a global Christology.

During the 1994 African Synod that took place in Rome, there were discussions about the history of Christianity in Africa and its impact on the African people. Many issues were raised. These included marriage, the AIDS pandemic, corruption, female circumcision, polygamy, poverty, foreign debt, traditional healing, traditional religion, and ethnic conflicts.\textsuperscript{195} The conversations focused on finding solutions to these problems by attending to the factors of instability to the fullest extent possible by the African church. Africa as a continent can be compared to the man in the Gospel who was travelling from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell into the arms of the robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and departed, leaving him at the side of the road to die alone (Lk. 10:30-37). African people are examples of a man from Jerusalem, lying on the side of the road, sick, injured, disabled, marginalized, abandoned by the unfair global economic rules, and their cultures rejected by Christian evangelizers. They are in dire need of a Good Samaritan.

Christ and Christianity came as Good News to Africa. They were meant to renew the lives and cultures of the African people. However, African Christians have never experienced a full connection to Christ and their newfound Christian faith. They long for spiritual meaning, connectedness, Christian identity, and genuine Christian community.

In his apostolic letter to Africa, *Africae Terrarum*, Pope Paul VI writes in recognition of the importance of African traditional religion:

> Evangelization loses much of its force and effectiveness if it does not take into consideration the actual people to whom it is addressed, if it does not use their language, their signs, their symbols, if it does not answer the questions they ask and if it does not have an impact on their concrete life.\(^{196}\)

This was a positive and optimistic statement from the Catholic Church authorities that called for dialogue between Christianity and African traditional religion.

From the beginning of missionary activity in Africa, the missionaries’ concern was to expand the Christian empire through mass baptisms, leaving behind millions of newly baptized Africans who didn’t have sufficient knowledge of their new religion. These poor people were left in confusion, given that their former African traditional religion was regarded as “animism.” Paul VI corrects this misrepresentation of African traditional religion as animistic and declares that African people do have a religion that is uniquely African. His declaration was much in the spirit of the changed climate of Vatican II, with its theological openness toward non-Christian people and their religions in particular.\(^{197}\) Even if African traditional religion was not mentioned by the Council in particular, it was a positive attitude by the Catholic Church towards non-Christian religions.

As outlined in Chapter 4, it is apparent that Christianity has not adequately addressed African Christian struggles for identity, meaning, value, hopes, and aspirations.


for a transformed African Christian community and the world at large. The reality of the African religious heritage needs to be brought into the light of the Gospel for the enrichment of the universal church. This may include the concept of the Supreme Being, whose immanence and transcendence are equally emphasized; the veneration of the ancestors; life after death; human dignity; the concept of being human, which is both relational and communal; rituals; and morality. Central to the rationale for this reconstructed Christology are the efforts to retrieve these precious elements from African traditional religion and utilize them as the basis for African Christian theology. This would be a great contribution to Christianity and a way of finding an effective response not only to the crisis of Christian identity among African Christians today, but also to the issue of divine impassibility as it continues to be debated in Christian theology.

**The Need for Inculturation and Liberation Theologies**

Inculturation is an approach that promotes the restoration of African cultural identity in Christianity. According to Charles Nyamiti, it “involves an effort to incarnate Christian teaching in African cultures on the level of theology or Christology.”\(^\text{198}\) It seeks to incarnate Christian values into the African cultural context in two ways: identifying useful elements in African traditional religion and correcting the weak points in the encounter between Christianity and African traditional religion. An adequate African Christology can only be illuminated by the light of African traditional religion and culture. It is common for Africans to perceive God from the perspective of certain

assumptions they inherited from traditional religious views. The reality of God is affirmed in every cultural expression. For example, the names of people, places, and objects often reflect the relationship with God. In my family, my sister’s name is *bin’Omutonzi*, which means God Has Everything. The name is meant to encourage the family to look to God for everything they need. Such beliefs and values lead African people to be open to the fullness of revelation in Jesus Christ through the proclamation of the Gospel.

As I mentioned in Chapter 4, Christianity in Africa is characterized by deep historical roots, dynamic growth, a vibrant spirituality, and creativity. From the middle of the first century, Christianity flourished in North Africa and in the Horn of Africa. African popes, theologians, ascetics, and committed lay Christians contributed to the development of the Christian religion in Africa. Later, Christianity spread to other parts of Africa with the coming of European missionaries. Today, the African Christian community is the fastest growing in the world.

However, there has been concern about how deeply Christianity has been inserted into the hearts of the African people. While many Africans go to church, they still hold onto their traditional beliefs, for example, the African sacrificial system, belief in spirits, and witchcraft. During the 1994 African Synod, there were concerns that “missionary work in the past did not pay adequate attention to the important role of African culture in the process of evangelization.”¹⁹⁹ Within African traditional religion there are elements

¹⁹⁹Browne (Ed.), *African Synod: Documents, Reflections, Perspectives*, 17.
that are compatible with the Gospel values and can form the basis for an authentic African Christian life, such as the respect for human dignity, a sense of community, and the awareness of the presence of the sacred in all aspects of life. In this view, a theology of inculturation requires dedicated research into African traditional religion in order to identify resources that can help to develop African Christology.

While the inculturation approach is concerned with integrating the Gospel into African traditional religion, liberation theology focuses on social justice and the empowerment of the people. The importance of liberation theology is its ability to raise awareness about social evils in light of the Gospel message. Liberation theology presents God as the Liberator, and from this foundation the theology leads to action for promoting social justice to eradicate injustices that have been exerting pressure on the less privileged of society, such as women and children.

Although the culture is changing rapidly, women are still underrepresented in decision making and leadership in the church and society. A major limitation is the lack of women’s voice in African theology. In African societies, women play a vital role in the social and ritual aspects of the life of the community. However, women have no power to change those customs that are oppressive to them. These oppressive customs include female circumcision, polygamous marriages, women trafficking, poverty, and inequality. It is surprising to see how difficult it is for a male-dominated African theology

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to make room for the indispensable role of women as members of Christ’s body.

Unfortunately, the inculturation approach does not make room for such advocacy because it does not include the input of women. For example, during the 1994 African Synod, it was emphasized that the process of inculturation must be given priority among other issues that needed research and experimentation. The whole issue was handed to the African priests as experts appropriate for this task. The Synod insisted that “Priests have a most important role to play in this. . . . Priests are expected to be in forefront to this research and experimentation . . . then they are to help the lay faithful to follow their example.” 201 At this time and age, Christian believers in their churches are not expected to follow but to participate. The church in Africa has yet to trust that lay faithful can also have something to contribute to their church. Women are part of the lay faithful expected to follow the priest. They were not assigned a distinctive role to play in implementing the process of inculturation. The Circle of African Women Theologians has already condemned the discrimination of women in the African church. As Bernadette Mbuy-Beya points out, “The group has been working tirelessly so that a woman might be recognized as a child of God sharing equally in human dignity.” 202

Action for social justice is a constitutive element of the ministry of Jesus (Lk. 4:16-1). Jesus declared that he came to set the oppressed free and to proclaim the Lord’s year of favor. This entails sharing our common heritage, namely, the bounties of God


found in nature and people’s traditions on the basis of mutual acceptance of one another as co-heirs in Christ. In this view, social justice implies mutual respect, acceptance, fellowship, and inclusion. These elements are also found in traditional African religion. It is also evident that liberation theology’s concept of social justice has strengthened efforts to liberate humanity and to enhance the awareness of human rights as Jesus did. The very strong focus on social justice indicates a growing awareness of the social evils that oppress women and all marginalized people in African society. Liberation theology has revealed the need for radical changes in how the Christian message can be proclaimed and lived. There is thus a need to affirm the understanding of Jesus Christ within the African cultural context in order to develop a more adequate Christology.

Although there are differences between inculturation and liberation theologies, these two approaches complement each other. Both inculturation and liberation theologies have a responsibility to evangelize the parts of African traditional religion that do not seem to emphasize morality as a central aspect of divine holiness. Holiness means divine opposition to what is evil. Social evils are often the root cause of human suffering, not only in Africa but in the whole world. How can we make this human suffering positive and redemptive? Suffering is not a desirable thing, not even when conceived as a means for perfection by mystical theology. For example, St. Thérèse of Lisieux saw “suffering not as loss but as coin for spiritual nourishment.”203 But for a Christian, suffering can only be positive when interpreted in the spirit of Christ, the spirit of love.

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Christ accepted suffering willingly for the sake of love and solidarity with humanity.

Rahner, saw salvation as God’s presence and involvement in human experience:

God [H]imself as the abiding and holy mystery, as the incomprehensible ground of [humanity’s] transcendent existence is not only the God of infinite distance, but also wants to be the God of absolute closeness in a true self-communication and [He] is present in this way in the spiritual depth of our existence as well as in the concreteness of our corporeal history.  

For Rahner, the redemptive quality of suffering is nothing other than God Himself, present to us in unsurpassable nearness. Suffering only then becomes grace when it arises out of God’s preference for the oppressed, to the fight against social evils, and for the sake of divine love and love of neighbor. God is recognized standing by the sufferer not as a judge, but as a defender. God lets Himself be affected by human suffering, and in this way God identifies Himself with the sufferer within the human situation of suffering. Together with the sinners, the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalized, God suffers injustices, violence, and prejudices.

Nyamiti, however, does not agree with any theology that implies suffering in the divinity. In his view, the belief in divine passibility would make God the same as creatures. This approach differs from that of liberation theology. Nyamiti, however, agrees with the liberation approach only if it operates within the realm of his inculturation approach and, specifically, his vision of God as a Great Ancestor. He understands liberation as an essential characteristic of God and sees the history of salvation as a


history of liberation from sin. Nyamiti brings in divine life, power, glory, and holiness to create a divine image of God as a liberator from sin. This inculturation approach, in my judgment, is more theoretical and does not address the root causes of Africa’s sufferings.

This concept of liberation from sin is taken from the events of the paschal mystery where the suffering of Christ on the Cross, His death, and resurrection were intended to turn humanity away from its selfishness back to Him who is love. For Africans, the concept of the power of God is communal and sharing. Power is shared and nurtured by participation of all in the community. This is the case with every culture in Africa. Just as Africans believe that power depends on communal life, they also assume that the whole cosmos derives its force through participation in the communion of beings. This communal aspect is what holds together all creation in existence through their participation in divine power.

However, Nyamiti’s inculturation approach alone is not complete because it ignores the social aspect of a human person. According to Laurenti Magesa, liberation is crucial to African theology since it is primarily the work of salvation through Jesus Christ and His life that was dedicated to the promotion and awareness of human dignity. A human being is both body and soul and any theology that takes care of one at the expense of the other is inadequate. Both inculturation and liberation theologies must develop ways to deal with both spiritual and physical suffering and how these can receive their meaning.

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from God’s salvific act as Liberator. African Christian theology, therefore, must be immersed in the struggle to transform human situations of suffering into a grace that nurtures human relationships with God and humanity.

The Mystery of God and the Relevance of Christ to Africans

As I mentioned earlier in Chapter 4, for an African, the person and life of Jesus Christ constitutes the new content of faith to the African people. This marks the difference between an African Christian’s experience of God of and the experience of an African who is not a Christian or who still has traditional beliefs. For the African Christian, faith in God has moved to another level at which the understanding of God is viewed in the person of Jesus Christ. The Christ-event, therefore, becomes the ultimate point of differentiation between the African Christian image of God and the traditional African notion of God. The road that leads to the specifically African concept of the Christian God inevitably passes through Christology.

If we believe that Jesus Christ is the fundamental revelation of God, it would be difficult to deny that God suffered with Him. That the activities of the Son affect the Father personally is sufficiently testified to in the Scriptures, where the real and personal unity between the Father and the Son is indicated. Jesus told his disciples, “Whoever has seen me, has seen the Father” (Jn 14:9). Since we cannot know the exact nature of God except as God reveals Himself in the person of Jesus Christ, God remains a mystery that is incomprehensible to our human minds. The incomprehensibility of the divine nature that is inherent in the divine mystery reflects both the human religious need for a living God who is involved in their daily lives and the transcendental aspect of divine reality.
Elizabeth Johnson puts it very well: The incomprehensibility of God “does not make God remain forever remote but draws near in radical proximity to the world.” As human beings, we come to know and to relate to the Mystery in our daily human activities. It is here, in our thinking, our loving, our sharing, our hoping, and our creating that we encounter the presence of God. This is especially true in our suffering situations. As God was there on the Cross when Jesus was dying, God is there in our lives when we suffer.

Therefore, the reality of God becomes the unquestionable presupposition in African Christian theology. Of course, faced with the absurdities of colonialism, racism and the seemingly unending suffering of African people, questions about God’s role in the Africans’ situations of suffering become crucial. How could the people who brought Christianity to Africa to preach the Gospel of love be the ones who were supporting the presence of colonialism and its oppressive systems in Africa? What kind of God were they preaching? Is that the real Christian God? Even if colonialism is over now, there are other forms of institutionalized oppression, not only in Africa, but also in other parts of the world. These come in the face of what is now called neo-colonialism. People of different nations still suffer racism, classism, tribalism, sexism, and all kinds of social-economic evils. Due to this reality, there is an awareness of a need for African theologies to identify with liberation theologies all over the Christian world. God reveals Himself in the acts of liberation, which is the measure of authenticity of a concept of God that was claimed by Christians.

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Yet, there is no doubt about God’s presence among the African people. Instances of atheism in Africa are virtually nonexistent. That explains why it is not difficult for an African to accept Jesus. Retrieving the story of Jesus, whose life and teachings unleashed an explosion of spiritual energy during and after His time, will eventually become a source of energy for African Christians. The relational aspects of the Trinity are based on the love and life exchanged among the three Persons. The energy from this relationship overflows to all humanity, and it is within the context of Jesus’ life and passion that God’s passibility is revealed to humanity.

**Transformation of African Traditional Religion**

Every African living in a village can tell an almost endless number of stories about God. Africans know that the universe has a power or force that moves it and all that lives in it. Every African who has grown up in a traditional environment knows something about this mystical power, which often is experienced or manifested in mysterious phenomena. It is difficult to know exactly what it is or how it works. Some powers are good, but there are some that are meant to harm people. I will illustrate this with few stories from different parts of Africa.

When I was young, I used to accompany my mother to the field. We used to encounter snakes while we were working. My mother would send me to go find a stick so we could kill the snake, or if the snake was too big for us to kill, she would ask me to run to the village to get someone to help us kill it. While she was watching the snake, she would be holding her left breast. I asked her why the snakes do not escape. She said she is holding the snake through the powers of her ancestors (she will call the names of her ancestors).
ancestors for protection). In Christianity, this may be called superstition, but to those who believe in mystical powers it is part of their belief and it works.

In West Africa, there is strong belief in mystical powers well known as Ju-Ju. Ju-Ju, in other words, is witchcraft. Witchcraft has both negative and positive outcomes. It is said to be used either to protect or to harm people. On the positive side, it is a means by which tensions in families or between communities can be brought into the open and relieved or solved. It is also believed to cure or prevent diseases and other natural catastrophes, or to bring good luck, good health, fertility, and prosperity to the family. The community accepts this kind of witchcraft. The negative side of it is that witchcraft can be used to harm or destroy a person or someone’s property out of envy, hate, fear, suspicion, ignorance, or false accusation. People constantly live in fear of witches and lead their lives in terror.

However, when Christianity is properly integrated into the society, the Gospel message of love and justice will prevail. It will take the prophetic role of theologians to bring into the light the secrecy and harm of witchcraft within the community. This is not easy. However, theologians need prudence and courage to be able to address this issue. They need to take time to study and understand the secret behind witchcraft, what is wrong about it, and how to evangelize those individuals who believe and practice witchcraft. Christians who believe in witchcraft need to be helped to recover their unique identity as African Christians rather than to live a dualistic life with one foot in African traditions and the other in Christianity.

Africans link social problems to divine action. They seek to solve their problems
in the course of seeking to counter divine manifestation. In such situations, African
diviners and traditional healers are used to bring peace, order, and good health to the
community. They may examine the situation, discover the cause, and suggest the rituals
to perform in order to ease the situation. As Mbiti points out, “They have mystical
powers both as individuals and by virtue of their professions or offices.” The
challenge for African theology is how to transform these energies into positive and
culturally appropriate use. Here Gospel values can be useful in providing insights and
appropriate directions that African theologians might integrate when developing African
Christian theology and Christology. Gospel values are Jesus’ words and deeds. These
values are found in respect for human dignity, sharing, justice, peace, love, compassion,
forgiveness, community, and trust in God.

Here, the inculturation approach must be a tool to venture into African traditional
Religion, into the lives of the African people, so that their voice may be raised to
harmonize with the other voices in the universal Christian church. There is a need to
examine African traditions and practices with openness and humility, thus seeking to
uncover the signs of divine presence in the lives of the African people. This divine
presence is found among the community when it can articulate the love and justice
needed to alleviate suffering. The possible God is among us always, within the traditions
and rituals, the stories and dreams of the people. Christ stated he would “be with [us]
always, even until the end of the world” (Matthew 28:20).

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209 Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann International Literature and
Textbooks, 1970), 192.
Rituals

Rituals are a body of ceremonies or rites. Religious rituals involve in putting a person or a community in touch with a Supreme Being. There are two main components of African rituals: prayers and sacrifice or offerings. According to Mbiti, “Sacrifices and offerings constitute one of the commonest acts of worship among African peoples.” Only animals are used as sacrifices, and the food items and beverages are offerings. Rituals must be carried out by certain people in the presence of certain other people. Once the ritual has been carried out, for example, in the case of community misfortune, the motivation for the misfortune would be counteracted.

Most sacrifices in African traditional religion involve the taking of the life of an animal or the offering of drinks, such as milk, beer, water and wine, or food items such as grain, vegetables, fruits, and nuts. Common sacrificial animals are chicken, goats, and, in rare cases, cows. Throughout the continent, the blood of the sacrificed animal is either poured as a libation or smeared onto the beneficiary of the sacrifice and onto the symbols of the spiritual world, whatever they may be. The point is that the smearing of blood, as a symbol of life, establishes a contact between the spiritual world and the beneficiary of the sacrifice. At the completion of the ritual, some parts of the sacrifice are completely burnt and the rest is consumed by the community that has benefited from the specific ritual in question. The ingestion of the ritual sacrifice is believed to bring about reconciliation or solidarity with God and the community.

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Sacrifices and offerings are made directly to the Supreme Being. These occur at times of birth, naming of the child, circumcision, rites of passage, reconciliation, healing, weddings, death, funerals, and harvest time. There are also rituals of purification as well as punitive measures that try to curb the tendency to deviate from the community norms of acceptable behavior and also to induce respect for other human beings. These rituals are means of keeping in touch with the spiritual reality. They can be means of asking for blessings from the Supreme Being, for reconciliation, or for protection from bad spirits. They can also be directed to the ancestors as a symbol of fellowship, recognition that the departed are still members of the human community, or to appease the ancestors in case people feel they are offended by bad behavior of one member of the community. Here we can make a parallel comparison to the sacrifices and offerings made in the Old Testament (Exodus 40:29-30). According to Christian teachings, these were replaced by the Highest Sacrifice, who is Christ the sacrificial Lamb of God. How can this claim be made appealing to the minds of African Christians?

If the sacrificing of animals was accepted in the Old Testament and fulfilled in the New Testament by the Christ-event, why are the traditions of Africans and non-Christian people interpreted as “animism” or “paganism” and, therefore, unacceptable? African churches have realized that missionaries misled African people and that there is a need to go back to traditions to retrieve valuable elements that can be used to nourish their Christian faith.

Christians are being encouraged to continue to make their offerings on special occasions, such as major feast days in the Christian Calendar, the receiving of any
sacrament of initiation, wedding ceremonies, funeral services, ordinations to priesthood, and dedication to religious life. The same items that were used in traditional religion are allowed to be offered with special intentions during Christian services accompanied by singing and dancing. The encounter between African traditional religion and Christianity presents a challenging question on how to integrate them without losing the specific values each one holds dear.

Although Africans perform rituals as a habit, there is always a philosophy behind these practices. There is a belief in the presence and activity of the mystic powers in which they put their trust. There is something in worship that explains their attitude towards their spiritual world. It is certainly a deeper understanding of their relationship with their Creator, their ancestors, and with one another. It is a means by which a human soul finds a link with a Living Spirit who is God. This same idea should be part of the Christian way of worshipping.

**Prayers**

Prayer is another aspect of the human-divine relationship. According to Mbiti, “there are no sacrifices without prayers.” Every ritual act is primarily directed to the Supreme Being through prayer. Prayers play an important role in the promotion of the sense of community. Most of the prayers are communitarian in content. Whether offered by the individual person or by the entire congregation, prayers contain references to the community. They are made for different reasons, for example, for the well-being of the

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community, for good health, for fertility, for protection from evil spirits and natural calamities, for happiness, for prosperity, and for the elimination of evildoers from the community.

The names of the ancestors are invoked asking them to convey the prayers of the assembly to God. Every member of the family participates in daily prayers, which include the pouring of libation as an offering to the ancestors and the spirits who are intermediaries between God and humanity. The elder of the family begins the day by offering prayer and supplications on behalf of the whole community. The elder will pray for the family, their properties, and for the entire clan. This reflects the structure of their social and political life in which elders play an important role.

The order of the words is hierarchical. God is mentioned first in every prayer and the spirits and ancestors can follow as intermediaries. For example, they may start each prayer in the form of “Creator God, let us be at peace . . .”; “God of our Ancestors . . .”; “God our Sustainer . . .”; God my Healer . . .”; ”God our Protector. . . .” From the above examples of prayers, it is evident that African people communicate with God through prayer at any time and in any place. They reflect the reality that African people consider God to be constantly close to them and ready to respond to their needs.

**Divine Passibility and Relational Ontology: A Paradigm Shift in God-Talk**

The affirmation of divine passibility has ushered in a new way of approaching the mystery of God. The enormity of the Holocaust crimes left thinkers and theologians struggling to deal with the question of God. The question was not why suffering happens to good people, but where is God when we suffer. The answer is: God is there suffering
with the victims. This question and answer have influenced the whole issue of divine passibility in contemporary Christian thought. Contrary to patristic and medieval thought, many contemporary theologians are focused on issues of divine presence and divine action in the world as opposed to the question of divine nature. Divine reality tends to be measured more in terms of relatedness and interconnectedness than in terms of impassibility and immutability. The shift away from the axiom of divine impassibility to divine passibility, therefore, reflects a shift in the understanding of God as a relational Being.

In African traditional religion there is a tendency to define a being in terms of relatedness. Being a person implies being in relation, that is, going out of oneself to the other. An understanding of divine passibility seems to mirror an understanding of God in terms of relationality. An affirmation of divine passibility reflects the high regard for community in African traditional religion that contributes to the paradigm shift to the relational approach.

If the economy of salvation is understood in terms of God’s solidarity with humanity, one can argue that by virtue of the Christ-event, God reveals to us His presence and how to overcome suffering by emptying ourselves for love’s sake (Phil. 2:7). By emptying Himself for our sake, God calls us to do the same for God’s sake and for our neighbor. *Kenosis* is the means by which God chose to reveal Himself to the world. God goes into kenotic solidarity with humanity in suffering situations, liberating them through His salvific grace without giving up His transcendence. This means, in effect, that Jesus revealed the mystery of God in His own person and He lived it
concretely throughout His life. In His parables, for example, Jesus depicts the sovereignty of God in terms of divine love and compassion that go beyond the limits of human understanding (Lk. 11:11-24). This means that God loves us unconditionally and is to be encountered in the least of our sisters and brothers (Matthew 20:1-16).

Thus, love is the essence of God. The divine act of becoming human demonstrates this reality about God and makes humankind the privileged sphere for divine love. This love begins eternally in the Trinity and goes beyond the Trinitarian life to reach us in our own human weakness. God’s free self-giving to the world is an act of Trinitarian love that explains the Christian understanding of the nature of God. In this context, the detailed explanation of David Tracy in his book *On Naming the Present: Reflections on God, Hermeneutics and Church*, affirms the significance of the Trinitarian understanding of God:

>The Trinitarian understanding of God is the fullest Christian theological understanding of the radical, relational, loving, kenotic God who revealed God-self in and through the Incarnation, the ministry (healing, preaching, actions), the name “Abba” for God and the parables on “Reign of God,” the fate of the cross and the vindication of the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth and the disclosure of this Jesus as the Christ through the power and activity of the Spirit.212

Tracy’s views about the Trinity make sense to Africans. The relationality of God’s nature corresponds to the relationality of African communities. The African concept of community serves as the foundation upon which the concept of the individual person is built, and it gives that individual a framework in which one exists. A person is defined as

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a relational being whose gifts are brought together to create a humane community that satisfies the aspirations all members of the community.

Following Tracy’s Trinitarian understanding of God, I argue that there is no conflict between Christianity and African traditional religion. Understanding God as a relational Being leads one to reflect upon God’s suffering love. It also helps African people accept a Trinitarian God as relevant to what they already know from their concept of community. Therefore, the reality of God’s personal relationship with humanity as revealed in the Bible, when expressed in relational and anthropomorphic metaphors, appeals to the hearts of Africans more than when God is viewed as an individual entity. The attempt to interpret the issue of divine impassibility in relational terms exemplifies the inner nature of God, especially when it is interpreted in terms of the doctrine of the Trinity. Since a Trinitarian interpretation is essentially relational, it attains its validity when the relational categories are integrated.

This is the good news Christian faith has to communicate to African people and other religious traditions that do not share the Western idea of God as an individual entity. With this message, Christianity can inspire people of faith to embrace Jesus and His message of love. Christ was focused on God as the source of love and compassion. He confirmed the importance of this message by reaching out to the sick, the possessed, the downtrodden, the outcast, the sinners and by engaging in symbolic actions (e.g., confronted the authority of conventional power structure) necessitating a response. His message was that the criterion for salvation was not fidelity to the Law. It was His solidarity with the weak that brought to them empowering liberation.
All that Christian tradition has held about Jesus revealing God to the world is captured in the Gospels. People were left to see His deeds and hear His message calling them to join the His company and find rest. (Mt. 11: 28-30). Jesus Himself lived the transcendent love where neither conflict nor rejection and death on the Cross were able to set limits to the divine option for humankind. Jon Sobrino, in his book *Christology at the Crossroads*, articulates that the primary message of the Cross is not salvation, but the truth that God is in solidarity with humankind. This revolutionary image of God on the Cross is the symbol of the incomprehensible love of God. God did not become human and die on the cross solely to save us from sin as Christian tradition claims, but to reveal His solidarity with humanity through the person of Christ.

The mystery of Christ, therefore, is the union of God and humanity. We human beings came to know Jesus Christ in history through faith. God manifested His presence and involvement in the world by way of self-emptying. This *kenosis* is, of course, an expression of divine love for humanity. It is the love that overflows from the Godhead to all creatures. This kenosis is not the last of God’s acts, and we must assume it is not the first act either in the inner Trinitarian relationship. The responsive relationship of the Trinitarian Persons among themselves is initiated by eternal love, which has the relational effect on the Godhead. This union of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit guarantees the relational presence of God in the World. The Trinitarian God, therefore, is the God of relationship who, thought by ancient Christianity to be impassible, imposes

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limitations and weakness on Himself by taking upon Himself the risk of entering into relationship with weak human partners. This mystery of divine love provides the basis for divine passibility.

Not only does God reveal Himself in His actions in the world, but God also continues to show that revelation is an ongoing process in the history of the world. The significance of the inner-Trinitarian procession for divine passibility shows up fully when it is interpreted in terms of the African sense of community. The understanding of being as relational is one of the major contributions African theology makes to Christian Theology.

**Heirloom Christology**

African traditional religion sees the concept of relationality as the basic category for the interpretation of the mystery of God and human suffering. As human beings, Africans know their spiritual role is to harmonize their relationship with their Creator; their fellow human beings, living and dead; and with the nature. Although there is a great deal of diversity of cultures in Africa, Africans share some common belief systems. These include the belief in the Supreme Being who is their Creator and Sustainer, the belief in the nonhuman spirits (good and bad), life after death, ancestral spirits, religious practices, and a system of moral teachings. These beliefs were considered by the missionaries who introduced Christianity to Africa as animism or paganism.

Pope Paul VI was the first to recognize the need to study African traditional religion rather than to rely on misrepresentations that have blinded the Church to the richness of African cultural values. In his encyclical *Africae Terrarum*, Pope Paul VI
issued the following statement:

Many customs and rites, once considered to be strange are seen today in the light of ethnological science, as integral parts of various social systems, worth of study and commanding respect. In this regard, we think it profitable to dwell on some general ideas which typify ancient African religious cultures because we think their moral and religious values deserve attentive consideration.  

In the Pope’s view, these traditions are not animistic, as often labeled. He recognized that there is meaning in the African religious heritage that deserves considerable study and respect. When he visited Africa, the first Pope to do so, he challenged African Christians to “have an African Christianity based on African human values and characteristic forms of culture.” He urged Africans to retrieve treasures of African traditions for the enrichment of Christianity. He realized that Africans are religious by nature. There is no section of life that is not touched by religion, but their religious experience was rejected and distorted by the propagators of Christianity. After African traditional religion was recognized by Pope Paul VI, John Paul II continued to move it into the light where it could be seen among other world religions.

During the 1996 African Synod, the representatives of the former European missionaries to Africa wrote a letter to the African bishops to acknowledge the mistakes they made in their missionary activity to introduce Christianity to Africa. The letter stated that:

As Europeans, we have reason to turn to you. In grief and pain we acknowledge

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the countless wrongs inflicted on African people. We are ready to identify ourselves with the sins of our ancestors. We have begun to examine the ways up to this day [that] have taken part in the oppression of and contempt for your dignity . . . We confess having both individually and communally contributed in various ways to existing social structures as well as to ecclesial paternalism. We regret not always having played our part to undo such injustice. . . . We dare ask for your forgiveness of ourselves and of our ancestors only before God and His Son Jesus Christ who reconciled us to Himself and to one another through His own suffering and death.216

With all the efforts of the African Synods to bridge the gap between Christian faith and African heritage, African traditional religion continues to be practiced by non-Christian Africans as well as some individuals who claim to be Christians. The problem is that this precious African heritage was treated as a thing of the past not only by the missionaries but also by African converts. This is not a thing of the past, but an “heirloom” that connects a spiritual message from the past African generation to the present. It is a religion that resulted from the sustaining faith held by African ancestors and that continues to be practiced today in various forms by Africans. I say various forms because Africa is a large continent with different nations, languages, dialects, and complex cultures. In spite of all these differences, there are basic similarities in the religious system. Everywhere there is a concept of one Supreme Being known by different names. There is also a concept of nonhuman spirits as well as belief in the spirits of the ancestors. Every locality has its own way of worshipping through the performance of rituals, prayers, and festivals.

With the introduction of Christianity and modernity, changes in the African ways

of life are inevitable. African people are responding to these changes for the sake of spiritual stability. According to Mbiti, there are elements in African traditional religion that are similar to some religious elements in Christianity. These include the concept of God as Creator, Sustainer, and Protector. Other elements are prayer and rituals as means of communicating with the spiritual realm. Given these similarities, it should not be surprising that Africans accepted the introduction of Christianity. However, one doctrine needs a different approach in explaining who Christ is. This is the doctrine of the Trinity. If this is explained using the African sense of community, the Christian concept of God and the person of Jesus Christ will make more sense and African Christians will be able to identify themselves within the larger Christian community. Eventually, they will begin to appreciate and recognize Christianity as they discover on their own similarities between the two religions.

**Conclusion**

Reconstructive Christology must begin with the assumption that Christology is the unfinished business. From its earliest centuries to the present, theologians have tried to articulate the doctrine of God and the Christ-event. The main problem was how to explain the mystery of the Incarnation. Some views emphasized the divinity of Christ at the expense of His humanity. God was explained through metaphysical terms, making Him an impassible and incomprehensible mystery. Contemporary approaches to Christology have brought the reality of God closer to the people’s lives. People can relate to the Trinity as a communal God of love and compassion. However, for African people who have received Christianity at the expense of their culture, there is a desire to identify
with Christ.

A close study of Christianity in Africa has shown that African traditional religion still exerts influence upon individual Africans and communities. Even if they no longer practice or hold on to its beliefs, see it as their final source of reference, or identify themselves as such, African Christians still respect their traditions. To enable Africans to be truly Africans and truly Christians, there is a need to reconstruct Christology. This is what is called the theology of reconstruction. It will help African Christians to open their hearts and minds to the Christian message and enable them to identify themselves with Christ. This theological approach will only be realized on the basis of retrieving compatible elements from African traditional religion and reinterpreting them in terms of the Christian Gospels. These African values include sharing, respect, a sense of belonging, and a sense of community. These will help to inform ancient Christian ways of thinking about the divine reality and the unending work of the Holy Spirit with insights drawn from the African traditional religion context. My views of this reconstruction are summarized as follows:

(a) The relational notion of a human person should inform the whole approach to the mystery of God. It provides the meaning.

(b) The relations of the Persons in the inner-Trinitarian life should be taken as the basis of the claim of the concept divine of passibility. This passibility was revealed to us through the image of the suffering God in the person of Jesus Christ.

The theological significance of interpreting the issue of divine passibility in terms
of the Trinity makes sense since it is compatible with the African concept of relationality. It also affirms and confirms the idea of divine passibility, which is not only revealed in the Christ-event, but also in the Trinitarian event. This Trinitarian interpretation of the passible God provides validity to the relational approach as one major contribution that African traditional religion can offer to Christian theology.
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